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# Dispositional Religiosity: Religion in the Context of Life Narratives

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DISPOSITIONAL RELIGIOSITY:  
RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFE NARRATIVES

by

SUZANNE DEGNATS

Under the Direction of Dr. Kathryn McClymond

ABSTRACT

In loosely structured narrative interviews, individuals discussed their personal religious life stories in the context of their lives, from childhood to the present. They ended up creating coherent narratives that encompassed much more than their religious traditions. The coherency of their stories was through the use of dispositions. Dispositions are the common themes, people, or other narrative schema which the narrator used consistently throughout the story, and are identified by narrative elements that repeat and anchor the narrative. Dispositions found in interviews for the Religious Life Stories Project by the GSU Religious Studies Department include familial, outlier, socioeconomic, contributive, influential, obedient, somatic, and traveler. Analysis of the dispositions in the context of these narratives illuminates the variety of ways traditional religion manifests in individuals' lives. Furthermore, dispositions provide a theoretical basis for studying individual religion comparatively across doctrinal religious traditions.

INDEX WORDS: Religious identity, Narrative identity, Religious narratology, Dispositions, Coherence, Lived religion, Religious lives, Familial, Outlier, Comparative religion

DISPOSITIONAL RELIGIOSITY: RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFE NARRATIVES

by

SUZANNE DEGNATS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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2013

DISPOSITIONAL RELIGIOSITY: RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFE NARRATIVES

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Georgia State University

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## DEDICATION

My interest in religious studies originated with my mother, a cradle to grave Catholic. I remember her attending weekly and Holy Day masses and praying daily, especially to her special saint Mother Mary. My mother was excommunicated by the church for marrying my father, a previously-divorced atheist who refused to raise his children as Catholics. In my mind, her excommunication made her steadfast commitment to Catholicism even more impressive. In 1988, my father passed away in their home, after my mother nursed him through a three-year bout with cancer. She went to his room in the middle of the night and found he had died peacefully. She later explained to me that she had always feared the moment she would find him dead. She was afraid of her reaction, that she would not be able to handle it, and that the scene would terrify her. But when that moment came, she told me that she sat with his body for a while, and then, in her words, "I calmly walked up the stairs to call your brother. And in that moment, I knew there was a God; I knew God was real, because I could feel him there with me, I could feel him giving me strength to stay calm." And then she said, "Because, you know, they teach you all this God stuff from the time that you are little and, you know, you never really *believe* it, I mean it's all so fantastic. But in *that* moment, I knew there was a God, and that He was with me." Her words stunned me. I thought, *you* never really *believed* it? I had assumed that she had unflinching belief in God based on my observations of her prayers, church attendance, and rituals over the years. However, all my observations became unraveled when she divulged her personal understanding to me. My mother's disarming honesty and her commitment to Catholicism in light of her expressed doubt made a lasting impression on me. This paper is dedicated to her.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Billy, Torin, and Alec who encouraged and supported my journey back into academia, and who were always more than willing to keep my feet to the fire.

Thank you to Dr. Kathryn McClymond, whose vision and direction created the Religious Life Stories Project, and who patiently and brilliantly guided me through the thesis process.

Thank you to Dr. David Bell & Dr. Molly Bassett for your insight and wisdom. Thank you to all of those who have worked on the Religious Life Stories Project team as interviewers, transcribers, researchers, and analysts. Thank you to the Religious Studies Department at GSU, especially Claire Kooy, Felicia Thomas, and Ellen Logan, who always make it such a pleasure to get off the elevator. Thank you to the entire amazing Religious Studies faculty who stretched my knowledge and understanding about religion and forced me to defend and explain myself.

Finally, thank you to all of the individuals that I have had the great honor and pleasure of interviewing as part of the Religious Life Stories Project. Your honesty, graciousness, and openness were enlightening and humbling. I hope that my analysis and treatment of your stories is consistent with your intent.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is based on interviews from the Religious Life Stories Pilot Project (the Project). This ongoing research project was initiated by two GSU Religious Studies Department faculty members in order to understand more about the role of religion in the lives of individuals and to create an archive of personal religious narratives for use by academia. These oral history interviews were designed to encourage a person to tell her religious life story in a narrative format, taking her through her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and finishing by reflecting on the perceptions of herself and her religion in relationship to society. While being guided through loosely structured interviews, the narrators were able to choose how to express themselves in the framework of a ninety minute interview designed to elicit their "religious life stories." As the narrators told stories of their religiosity within the context of their unique life experiences, the narratives became more about the individuals, and less about descriptions of their religious communities, practices and beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis presents my analysis of how the individuals constructed coherent stories about their personal religious lives during the course of interviews from the pilot study of the Project. The narratives were not random collections of memories and experiences. They were all coherent stories unto themselves with unifying narrative elements that cohesively structured the stories. Identifying and analyzing these unifying elements results in a classification system of the religious life stories based on how they were structured. The research presented in this thesis shows how this classification system offers insight into how these individuals related to, expressed, and made sense of their religious lives in their stories.

These unifying elements were not unique to and did not depend on the narrator's reli-

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<sup>1</sup> "Narrators" is the preferred terminology of the Oral History Association of America referring to the subject of oral history interviews, and will be used in this paper to refer to the individuals interviewed in the pilot study.

gious tradition.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, these narrative elements were not blatantly or explicitly religious elements. For example, Christian interviewees did not only describe their baptisms, religious teachings, and crises of faith. Many focused primarily on other elements of their lives such as travel or socioeconomic status, *even in direct response to questions explicitly asking about their religious experiences*. It is widely recognized in academia that doctrinal religious teachings do not translate directly into individual practice and belief in the lives of practitioners. Many scholars study "lived religion" to understand how religion is practiced at the congregational and individual level. For example, the Pluralism Project at Harvard University states that its "mission is to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources."<sup>3</sup> Studies such as the Pluralism Project investigate how practitioners incorporate religious tradition into their lives. However, much of the research in lived religion is focused on religious congregations. In this thesis, I am focusing on the stories that individuals tell about themselves in regard to their religious lives, which may or may not include references to their religious congregations or religious traditions. Additionally, they may or may not reflect the religious practice of the individual as it would be observed by an outsider.

My analysis of these individual religious life narratives is not designed to explicate the *truth* of how religion occupies a space in an individual life. The narratives convey the constructed memories of each individual. As such, the stories cannot and need not be considered absolute fact. What the stories *do* reveal is how the individual sees himself, how he wants his audience to see him, and how he has made sense of the events in his life. As the individual narrates his story, he structures his words in a way that creates meaning for the events and memories that he shares.

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<sup>2</sup> The term "religious tradition" will be used to indicate the tenets, practices, and doctrines of the traditional religious community which the individual has associated with; i.e. Muslim, Hindu, Christian.

<sup>3</sup> The Pluralism Project at Harvard University. June 21, 2013. <http://pluralism.org/about/mission> (accessed April 19, 2013).

Wade Clark Roof says, "Practically speaking, human beings are story-telling animals. Who we are and what we are are tied up with is stories."<sup>4</sup> In the process of telling stories, people create coherence and meaning and put together elements of their lives in a cohesive whole; they interpret the events of their lives through specific lenses. Jens Brockmeier discusses some hallmarks of personal narration when he says, "It seems that the openness and uncertainty of one's future, the hallmark of late modernity, is complemented by a similar openness and uncertainty of one's past.... Autobiographical remembering, in one word, is not finding but making. It is a process of selecting, interpreting, and (re)inventing, and much of this follows the pathways of the narrative imagination."<sup>5</sup> Personal narration of one's life is a process of creating connections and developing meaning. These narratives are not descriptions of religious beliefs and practices, but individual life maps that show how religion is remembered and integrated into life stories in very personal and unique ways by each individual.

An untold number of experiences, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions occur in the lives of individuals. How do individuals choose, among the countless possibilities, what to include in the context of their religious life stories?<sup>6</sup> The narrator chooses the events and stories that she is compelled to express to create the story of herself she wants the interviewer to hear. These events and stories, expressed with specific narrative elements, reveal the narrator's orientation toward her personal religiosity in the overall context of her life story.

The religious life stories, though oftentimes incongruous with traditional religious narratives, are, unto themselves, coherent stories. Their coherence lies in overarching narrative ele-

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<sup>4</sup> Roof, Wade Clark. "Religion and Narrative." *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 1993, 298.

<sup>5</sup> Brockmeier, Jens. "Lifetime and Eternity." In *Autobiography and the Psychological Study of Religious Lives*, by Jacob. A. Beltzen & Antoon Geels (Amsterdam:Rodopi),21.

<sup>6</sup> When I say that people "choose" what to discuss in the narratives, I am not defining, or am I able to define at this point in the research, whether the course of their narrative is a conscious or an unconscious choice. Nevertheless, they are making decisions about what to include and what to omit within the boundaries that are set by the format of the interview.

ments that frame and organize the stories, or what I call "dispositions."<sup>7</sup> The dispositions do not define individual religiosity, but show how individuals are oriented towards their religiosity. The narrators echo these dispositions repeatedly and consistently throughout their stories. The dispositions move the stories along through space and time. They provide the framework that links discrete events and characters of the narratives, which in turn make the story coherent. The dispositions provide an architectural framework for the story. By appearing repeatedly in the self-chosen narrative, an individual narrates his remembered and constructed relationship to his religion.

The dispositions reveal ways in which an individual creates meaning in his narrative life and show how religion contributes to that meaning-making. For instance, dispositions can show whether a person expresses that he depends primarily on his religion to support his mental health or if his religious affiliation is primarily tied to his socioeconomic status. Dispositions reveal how family relationships contribute to the individual's cultural stock of stories that he incorporates into his narrative, as well as influence the individual's personal religiosity throughout his life as he attempts to make sense of these relationships. Dispositions illuminate how travel and adventure can be linked to the narrative creation of one's identity, which can shed light on why and how a person chooses to affiliate with a particular religious congregation.

During the interviews, the narrators told about themselves. In a sense, they also told *on* themselves. They did not explicitly describe how they related to their religion through the dispositions. I have interpreted the narratives and determined various common dispositions based on narrative methodology.<sup>8</sup> I identify the dispositions by the structures, ideas, words, and themes

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<sup>7</sup> McAdams, Dan P. "A New Big Five: Fundamental Principles for an Integrative Science of Personality." *American Psychologist*, (April 2006): 204-217. McAdams proposes five big principles that conceptualize the whole person. One of these is dispositional traits, or the most common states that a person experiences over his or her lifetime.

<sup>8</sup> This methodology will be described in the Qualitative Analysis & Methodology section of this paper.

that dominated the narratives. The narrators were preoccupied with these elements, without necessarily being aware of their importance and they referred to them repeatedly and consistently as they narrated their religious life stories.

Because the dispositions cross the boundaries of religious affiliation, they provide a theoretical basis for the comparative study of individual religiosity. Dispositions offer language for discussing individual lived religion comparatively. There are eight prominent dispositions in the twenty-one interviews. All of the dispositions are found in each of the three religious traditions (Hinduism, Islam, and Baptist Christianity) although there were a variety of ways the dispositions were expressed. For example, many of the interviewees exhibit strong socioeconomic dispositions. For some of the Christians, this means that they stated that God had given them lives of wealth and success in response to their prayers. For one Muslim man, it means that he would narrate his religious life story in terms of personal influence and status (he described his father's religious identity in a similar vein, as a wealthy contributor to and leader of his own Orthodox church). Similarly, a Hindu woman narrated her religious life story in terms of her Brahmin caste, noting its socioeconomic privileges. In all three religious life stories, socioeconomic status is a prominent aspect of their religious narratives, although the narrators link it into their distinct religious traditions in various ways.

Dispositional categories, which reflect how individuals construct the stories of their personal religiosity, illustrate how a religious person sees herself in relation to other elements of her lived experience. The dispositions do more than show how an individual *modifies* his religious tradition to fit into his life or modifies his life to fit into his religious tradition. They illustrate how the individual makes sense of her life experiences and integrates them within her religious life story. Dispositional religiosity illuminates how discreet aspects of an individual's narrative

intertwine with his religiosity. The exclusive use of traditional sectarian categories (Hindu, Christian, and Muslim) to categorize individual religion can insinuate that the most important aspect of an individual's personal religious narrative is his religious tradition. This analysis will show that, in these self-constructed religious narratives, other aspects of life and experience are just as prominent, if not more prominent, in the individual's expression of his religious life story than his religious tradition.

## 2 THE RELIGIOUS LIFE STORIES PROJECT

*"It's my story and I'm sticking to it." Mansour Ansari, Project narrator.*

The interviews presented in this thesis were obtained from the pilot study of the Religious Life Stories Project conducted by the Religious Studies Department at Georgia State University. Begun in 2011, the purpose of this ongoing project is to gather religious oral histories of individuals and generate a database of the narratives for use by scholars in their research.<sup>9</sup> The team for the pilot study consisted of Dr. Kathryn McClymond, Dr. David Bell, and me. For the 2011 pilot study, I personally conducted interviews with twenty-one Atlantans who self-identified as long-standing members of their respective religious communities. I conducted the interviews in places that were convenient for each participant and that afforded a high level of privacy, free from outside noise and distractions. Most of the interviews took place in the interviewees' homes, but a few were held in their places of worship and one in a private office. The participants ranged in age from thirty-three to ninety years old, with the average age being sixty-three and the median sixty-two. The study included eight men and thirteen women. The racial breakdown was eight Caucasians born in the United States, eight African-Americans, seven Caucasians born in India, and one Caucasian born in Pakistan. Finally, seven identified as Hindus, seven as Christians, and seven as Muslim.

The interviewer asked the narrators to describe religious memories from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood and encouraged them to recall specific events and memories from their

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<sup>9</sup> The interviews will be housed by Special Collections at the GSU library and available to interested parties.

lives.<sup>10</sup> During the last part of the interview the interviewer engaged them in questions of pluralism, where they were asked to discuss experiences with people or practices from religious traditions other than their own and to reflect on how they regarded themselves in comparison with others in their traditional religious communities and how their religious communities are viewed by outsiders. The interviews were designed to last about ninety minutes and were loosely structured to be open-ended and fluid, allowing for extended personal reflection. The interviews were digitally recorded. No follow-up was conducted, and the interviewees were not privy to the guidelines before the interview. After all of the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed (either by me or by a student research assistant). Each interview was read, coded, and analyzed by the two principal investigators (PI) and me. Each week, the three project members met to discuss their findings in detail.

The narrators were encouraged to tell *stories* and experiences in a narrative mode, as opposed to providing yes/no answers to a questionnaire. Cognitively, psychologically, and socially, people are inclined to speak of their lives in a narrative modality, constructing connections between various aspects of their lives that naturally progress, build, and change over a lifetime. Many of the participants anticipated my questions before they were asked, automatically transitioning to the next phase of their lives without prompting. By using a loosely structured, interviewee-driven narrative format, the interviews focused on the individual narrators as opposed to their religious communities, histories, or traditions. The narrators were given the space and time to elaborate on life events that they felt reflected their personal religiosity. Although asked to recall specific life experiences, if possible, the narrators were not directed to focus on traditional religious experiences such as religious training, conversion, de-conversions, practices and peak

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix I for Interview Guidelines. The narrators were asked what terminology they felt comfortable using, and this terminology was used by the interviewee throughout the interview. Some people substituted "spirituality" or "way of life" for religion. For the purposes of this paper, I am using the term "religion."



experiences.<sup>11</sup> They often did bring up these experiences, but always within the context of their broader life stories.

Additionally, the religious life stories did not focus on how the individuals practiced Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, or on their religious communities. The stories focused on important events, ideas, and people in each interviewee's life, constructed coherently to become a narrative that reflected the relationship of the individual to his or her respective traditional religion, and to his or her own understanding of larger concepts of religion. The participants were asked about *their* own religious stories, and, therefore, they were assigned agency; they were the protagonists of the narrative they were constructing. In the context of this agency, the individuals ended up describing some of the doctrines and practices of their traditional religious communities, but their narratives were by no means miniature renditions of their communities' religious histories and traditions. These findings echo the work of other scholars who focus on lived religion. For example, in "Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life," Meredith McQuire encourages scholars to re-examine assumptions about individual religious experience and focus on the individual first, before the traditional religion. McQuire says, "When this happens, we find that each individual's biographical narrative is not a simple a microcosm of the grand narrative of some official religion."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, we find that the personal narratives forge unexpected connections between religious traditions and other aspects of individuals' lives.

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<sup>11</sup> The first question of the interview is: "What is your earliest memory of religion in your childhood, and can you recall a specific moment or event?"

<sup>12</sup> McQuire, Meredith B. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* ( New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008),.12

### 3 PROJECT QUALIFICATIONS

Before describing the methodology for the analysis of the interviews, I want to acknowledge some inherent limitations and biases of these interviews and the Project methodology. The pilot study was limited to twenty-one interviews, so any findings from the data cannot be construed to be representative of any population, religious or otherwise. Oral historians have determined that people who agree to be interviewed are generally the most articulate and self-assured of any group, so they present a biased sample.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the participants who responded to our requests for interviews were sometimes public representatives of their respective traditional religious communities, and no attempt was made to find a statistically representative sample in such a small population. Likewise, I did not vet the participants who volunteered to be interviewed except for having an initial conversation with them to determine that they were physically and mentally able to participate.

According to Valerie Yow, any oral history interview is a collaboration between the interviewer and the interviewee.<sup>14</sup> As the pilot study involved only one interviewer (myself), comparison between interviews is more consistent than if there had been other interviewers. The interviews took the form of a narrative conversation, defined here by Dan McAdams: "In the narrative mode of thought, we seek to *explain* [emphasis mine] events in terms of human actors striving to do things over time."<sup>15</sup> Because of the chronological and open-ended design of the interview, the participants responded in a storytelling mode, reflecting a narrative mode of thought as opposed to a yes/no type of response. The questions were intentionally designed to elicit a narrative response structure. Additionally, as the interviewer I specifically attempted to use conversa-

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<sup>13</sup> Shopes, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/oral.pdf>, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Yow, Valerie, *Recording Oral History* (Lanhan, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>15</sup> McAdams, Dan P., *The Stories We live By: Personal Myths and the Making of Self* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 1993), 30.

tional and non-verbal strategies to make the interviewees feel comfortable telling long and detailed stories, including interrupting them as little as possible. Each interview, however, must be understood as a collaboration of the interviewer and the interviewee at that specific place and moment in time.<sup>16</sup> These interviews are a reflection of the participants' lives, but would differ to some degree depending on who the interviewer was and how she asked the questions.

Finally, no attempt has been made to observe the participants in their religious practices or to verify in any other way the truthfulness or validity of their statements. Narrators recalled their lives through lenses that may contain intentional or unintentional biases. Historiographer Allesandro Portelli states, "What is really important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge."<sup>17</sup> Additionally, "[Oral history] tells us less about *events* and more about *meaning*."<sup>18</sup> Other oral historians, narratologists, and religious studies scholars share this view. Dan McAdams says, "Lying somewhere between pure fantasy and slavish chronology, life stories are psychosocial constructions that aim to spell out personal truths- narrative explanations for life-in-time that are believable, followable, even compelling."<sup>19</sup> These narratives, like all oral histories, offer the opportunity to study what the individual expresses is important to him and show how an individual creates meaning from circumstances in his life, as opposed to an accurate portrayal of his past. Understanding these qualifications, I will now describe the methodology used to analyze the interviews.

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<sup>16</sup> I liken the narrative to a picture of a moving train-the picture will always be somewhat out of focus and you will never get the same picture twice.

<sup>17</sup> Portelli,37.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>19</sup> McAdams, Dan P. "Personality, Modernity, and the Storied Self: A Contemporary Framework for Studying Persons." *Psychological Inquiry* Vol. 7, No. 4, (1996): 307.

#### 4 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS: METHODOLOGY & THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Storytelling comes naturally to human beings, as does the tendency to create a sense of coherence and meaning through our dialogue. Narratologists have found that individual narratives, no matter what the topic, follow similar paths, based on a shared human psychology and cognition, and a shared cultural stock of stories which in some cases are universal (we all have parents) to more culturally specific (one is specifically situated in a caste system in India).<sup>20</sup> Although the cultural stock of stories and language capabilities which an individual can draw from are limited, he still has many choices related to which experiences he will share in his personal narrative, as well as how to tell his story. These choices- events, feelings, memories - are important enough to the individuals that they do remember them, they can recall them, and that they have the ability to speak about them spontaneously and coherently. Additionally, they situate the events, feelings, and memories that they talk about in the larger context of their lives and of their worlds. By doing this, they create narratives that are stories of integration. Roof and other scholars talk about narratives as being integrations of experience. Narratives allow a person to bring various aspects of her life together in a coherent whole. "By imposing order and meaning on life's sequence of events, narrative forces questions of interpretation. The attempt to order time is an attempt to discover something other than crises or chaos."<sup>21</sup>

My qualitative analysis involved analyzing how the narrators used narrative elements to construct coherent stories. Christian Smith has argued that people cannot be reduced to the sum of their constituent parts.<sup>22</sup> Smith uses Monet's paintings as a metaphor, saying, "Particularly arranged dabs of paint (have) the ability to evoke certain emotions in people who view the paint-

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<sup>20</sup> Hanninen, Vilma. "A Model of Narrative Circulation." *Narrative Inquiry*, 14, (2004): 73.

<sup>21</sup> Roof, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, Christian. *What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life and the Moral Good from the Person Up*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 36.

ing, such as warmth or serenity. Neither the recognizable and meaningful picture nor the capacity to evoke emotions is present in the dabs of paint."<sup>23</sup> He likens Monet's artwork to the person, in which the whole is *greater* than the sum of the parts. Although I identify and highlight particular markers in the narratives, my intent is not to distill or to reduce individual religious life stories to distinct component elements, but to highlight how the narrators arranged and used these elements to make their narratives into unique, coherent stories that relayed those aspects of their lives they felt were important enough to include. Roof states, "Narrative sheds light on the unity of the experience. Its strength lies in its coherence. Unlike most of our research methods which abstract dimensions, sort out variables, name factors, narrative works the other way pulling seemingly disparate things together."<sup>24</sup> Narrative is motivated and propelled by a desire for coherence, whether it is the narrative we tell ourselves or the narrative that we tell others. The focus of my analysis is to find the elements in the narratives that provide the foundation for this coherence. These elements were the strongest, most repeated, and most consistent elements in the story and by deduction show what the individual expressed were the most meaningful connections and events in their narrative.

I have analyzed the interviews as stories with beginnings, middles, and endings, characters and themes. My method has been to identify and analyze distinct narrative elements regardless of whether they were couched in orthodox religious language or not. I did not bracket or divide the narratives into "religious parts" and "everything else." By placing importance on everything a person said, and analyzing the stories holistically, the stories read as descriptions of how religion interacts with other aspects of a person's life story. Some people used traditional religious language, others did not. In a few of the narratives, traditional religious tropes were a con-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Roof, 4.

sistent theme, but not in the majority. By identifying the most pertinent elements, analysis of the narratives show what parts of the narrators' lives are affected and influenced by their religiosity. Participants construct coherent narratives with their choice of words, events, themes, etc. Analysis of these choices reveals what aspects of a person's life narrative are important to her religious story. This methodology is in contrast to identifying traditionally religious language and experiences, and illustrates how an individual fits into a traditional religious community.

In "A Model of Narrative Circulation," Vilma Hanninen postulates that three types of narratives play out in an individual's life. These narratives reinforce and influence each other: lived narratives (the real life of the individual played out externally), inner narratives (how an individual interprets his or her life inside the mind), and told narratives (the narrative that the individual chooses to share with others).<sup>25</sup> Narratives are told using components drawn from a personal stock of stories, a cultural stock of stories, and life situations. Hanninen stresses that people are only "relatively free" of being mere products of their culture. As an example, she cites interviews she conducted with people who had lost their jobs during a recession. She notes that the interviewees resisted the macro-economic model explanation in favor of personalized explanations.<sup>26</sup> Hanninen concluded that her narrators expressed their desire for personal agency. To this end, they explained their unemployment in their own terms, as they wanted to see themselves as having some control over their lives as opposed to being a mere product of some overarching social mechanism such as the economy.

Similarly, the Project narrators were given an opportunity to express personal agency through the design of the interview and were made the primary focus of the interview (as opposed to their religious tradition). By personalizing their narratives and not focusing on the meta-

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<sup>25</sup> Hanninen,76. Hanninen recognizes that the "inner" narrative cannot be proven empirically.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,77

narrative of their religious tradition, they were able to express a sense of personal religious agency and autonomy. Just as Hanninen's narrators rejected a macro-economic model for their personal economic reality, narrators from the Project generally did not construct their religious narrative identity primarily by using the elements from the narratives of their religious tradition. Elements from their religious traditions were present in the narratives, but always within a context of other elements that the narrators were emphasizing.

In my analysis, I incorporate methodology from various scholars and theorists.<sup>27</sup> However, I am primarily drawing from the work of Dan McAdams, who specializes in narrative theory and identity.<sup>28</sup> McAdams has identified narrative elements that help researchers analyze and understand the structure and content of individuals through their narratives.<sup>29</sup> I used five of these elements in my analysis. First, "narrative tone" is the emotional attitude of the story; some people are negative, some positive, some people make a lot of jokes, other people are very serious. Differences in narrative tone often correspond to a shift in the speech patterns of the narrator. For instance, he can transition from talking in first person or third person or start using phrases rather than complete sentences. These shifts often indicate passages of particular relevance to the narrator. "Imagery" involves the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that the individual refers to through descriptive phrases and poetic devices. A particularly emotive or descriptive passage can signify an important or strong memory of the narrator. For example, one narrator started to cry when she

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<sup>27</sup> There are many different types of narrative analysis, from a Labovian model which rates narratives on the presence of certain elements to a Foucaultian model which analyzes the societal placement of the narrative. For the purposes of this paper, I used an experience-centered approach to narratives identified by Molly Andrews in *Doing Narrative Research*. This overall methodology focuses on the story as a means of human sense-making, as opposed to an analysis of the structure. Specific analytic methods were also found in this book, and in *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*, by Mary Jo Maynes et al. These include determination of narrative conflict, word counts, identification of themes, motifs, and boundaries, and returning to the starting place in some form or fashion.

<sup>28</sup> McAdams, as well as other identity theorists, believes that individuals create their identity through their narratives. Internally, we remember certain events, and then explain the events to ourselves thereby creating meaning for these events. In the process, we are reinforcing certain parts of our identity and ignoring others. Identity is created by the stories we tell ourselves most often and most consistently.

<sup>29</sup> McAdams, *Personality, Modernity, and the Storied Self*, 308-309.

described a teacher as the first female who had ever been kind to her. The narrator grew up to help children, as she had been helped, and this early passage was the first indication of a continuing contributive disposition (a reinforcing theme of giving back to society) in her narrative.

"Imagoes" are the "personified and idealized concept of the self."<sup>30</sup> In these narratives, the imagoes are reflections of the important characters in a person's life that they feel compelled to include in their story, such as a teacher, a mother, or even an historic figure that they admire. Most of the important characters and imagoes have salient and distinct traits that indicate longstanding issues and themes in the narrator's story. Next, the "nuclear episodes" are scenes that the narrator recounts during the narratives. These scenes are, of course, based on the constructed memory of the narrator. Although these scenes may not reflect the historic facts of the situation, they portray how the narrator constructs the memory of the situation within the context of his life story. The fact that individuals recount certain specific episodes and omit others is a valuable tool of narrative analysis as it highlights which events the narrator wants the listener to know and which events carry weight for the narrator. Furthermore, many of the things people talk about are in general terms, but they place emphasis on specific ideas and stories by illuminating them with elaborate and photographic descriptions.

The next element is "endings." At the end of the narrative, an interviewee will wrap up his thoughts and impose some kind of meaning or message for the story that integrates his story into a narrative whole. Endings, along with nuclear episodes, provide "touchstones" that frame the narrative.<sup>31</sup> McAdams states, "Narrative identity is indeed the story the person tries to keep going-an internalized and evolving narrative of the self that incorporates the reconstructed past

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>31</sup> The beginnings and endings almost always created a well-defined "arc" in the story as most narrators began and ended on the same or similar subjects or memories, bringing the story to a logical conclusion and signifying the dominant disposition, the thing that the person most wanted people to remember about their story.



and the imagined future into a more or less coherent whole in order to provide the person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning."<sup>32</sup>

Another predominant narrative element in the religious life stories is the soliloquy, a passage where the narrator speaks at length, without interruption, regarding a particular life event. The soliloquies can be visually identified in the transcription as the points where the interviewer does not comment, often for pages at a time. The tone of the soliloquy is usually different than the rest of the interview. The interviewee appears more thoughtful and reminiscent, the time frame shortens, and the cadence of the interview slows down. The soliloquies reflect specific episodes that the narrator particularly wants to express within his story, and can therefore define a person, place, or event that is of great meaning to him.

For my analysis, I listened to and read each interview multiple times. I coded specific words that dominated each interview. I then identified narrative tones, imagery, imagoes, nuclear episodes, beginning points, ending points, and soliloquies in the narratives. A structure emerged for each narrative whereby one or more common motifs or ideas dominated the story. Although these interviews are about individual religious lives, these predominant ideas and motifs were usually not couched in traditional religious language or about traditional religious practices. For instance, some narrators repeatedly mentioned travel or the importance of service. The narrators built cohesion into their stories by the repeated and consistent use of these ideas and motifs throughout their narratives. The narrators constructed stories about some specific idea, person, or theme that had some impact on or relationship to religion in their lives. They emphasized and fore-fronted certain ideas and motifs while either ignoring or not emphasizing others. Governing predominant ideas and motifs, which influenced the structure, content, and self-interpretation

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 209.

of life events, emerged from the twenty-one interviews which I refer to as dispositions.<sup>33</sup> Dispositions unify the people, ideas, and motifs that are repeatedly and predominantly referenced throughout each narrative, thus serving to give the narrative coherence.

Another way to look at the dispositions is to simply ask, what is this story about? How is it structured? What does the narrator consistently and repeatedly refer to in order to make meaning in her narrative? The narrators were asked to tell a story about religion within their lives. The dispositions that emerged from these stories illuminate the areas of the narrator's life that intersect with his religious tradition. The dispositions also illustrate areas of the narrator's life that had a religious connotation to the narrator, whether they were "religious" in a traditional sense or not. The dispositions pinpoint areas of life that either influence the narrator's religiosity or are influenced by the narrator's religiosity. As narration is a meaning making activity, the dispositions are worldviews and foundational orientations that create coherence in the narrators' stories in reference to their religiosity. These dispositions determine which ideas, people, and life motifs appear in the content and influence the direction of the narrative. They may not be construed as traditionally "religious," but they are clearly determinative for the individual religiosity of the narrator. As such, they offer a way of understanding religion in an individual's life.

After identifying the predominant disposition for each narrative, I analyzed all of the narratives to determine if there were dispositions common to all of the stories and if there was any relationship between the dispositions and the traditional religion of the interviewees. In the twenty-one interviews, I identified eight predominant dispositions. Each of the dispositions was found

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<sup>33</sup> McAdams and other narratologists offer a variety of ways to categorize narrative identity, from themes to archetypes. However, the elements in these interviews that provided the architectural structure to the stories were not always the same type of narrative element. In other words, sometimes they would be themes, sometimes they would be imagoes (important persons), and sometimes they would be tone or imagery. The structuring elements in the narratives did not fit into the categories that McAdams and other scholars devised. So, to categorize the religious life stories in terms of their constructive narrative elements, I have used the terminology "dispositions," taken from McAdams' identification of dispositional traits being the most common states that an individual experiences over his lifetime.

in at least three of the interviews. Importantly, the dispositions crossed the lines of sectarian religious affiliations of the narrators. Categorizing individuals by their narrative dispositions provides a way to study aspects of individual religiosity comparatively across the lines of different religious communities. Studying the various dispositions that present in the narratives of different doctrinal religions illuminates dominant motivations and orientations of individuals towards their religious traditions, regardless of their religious affiliation. In these narratives, narrators conveyed how religion operates within the context of their lives. The dispositions illuminate similarities between people of different religious traditions on the basis of fundamental orientation of the narrators in their life stories.

In order to illustrate how the dispositions function to structure the narratives, I will present a detailed analysis of two of the dispositions, Outlier and Familial. In each of these analyses, I will predominantly cite an interview with a Muslim, a Hindu, and a Christian in order to highlight how the dispositions cross the boundaries of traditional religions and how people of different traditions can narrate religious life stories which contain many similarities.

## 5 THE DISPOSITIONS

*“But if you’re not content at the end of life, it seems pretty pitiful.”-  
Claire Frahler, Project Narrator*

Each narrator has a specific way to say, "I am, and this is my story." However, regardless of the specificity of each narrative, certain common organizing structures appeared within the narratives. In the twenty-one narratives from the pilot study, I identified eight prominent dispositions which all crossed the lines of religious affiliation. The dispositions are Somatic, Outlier, Familial, Traveler, Influential, Socioeconomic, Contributive, and Compliant. Given such a small population, I do not know how many other orienting dispositions could be found in the context of religious life stories.<sup>34</sup> Due to limitations in the scope and length of this thesis, I am only able to present my analysis of two of the dispositions in detail, Outlier and Familial. Following is a brief description of the other prominent dispositions identified in the narratives. Although I will not be able to explore them fully in this thesis, I hope to develop them in future scholarship.<sup>35</sup>

Somatic Disposition: Some people are thoughtful and live their lives through their intellect. In many of the interviews, the narrators speak of their thoughts and beliefs, and did not reference their physical bodies, their physical pains or bodily circumstances. In some of the narratives, however, the narrators express their religious story predominantly through references to their physicality. Like all of the dispositions, somatic disposition to their narratives crossed the bounds of religious traditions. For example, a Muslim woman who became paralyzed in high

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<sup>34</sup> Since the pilot study, we have conducted over 50 more interviews. Most of these interviews contained the dispositions presented here, especially the narratives of persons aged 40 or older.

<sup>35</sup> The dispositions encompass nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Other scholarly classification methods often use similar types of words for their categories, but the dispositions I found in these narratives did not neatly fit into one category.

school frames her religious life story in terms of her body. Her narrative includes a long soliloquy about learning forgiveness and love for her caregivers, who were of different races and religions, and for her sister, who caused her accident. In her story she explains that her strong faith was a direct result of this injury. To this day, her physical situation is integral to her religious story. For example, she is a leader in an inter-faith community of people with disabilities. Another man, a Christian, talks about illness he and his family experienced because of a mold problem in his home. He states that his faith is inextricably linked to religious practices that healed him of his maladies. Again, physical health or illness is integral to his religious life story. However, somatic religiosity is not just tied to illness or physical trauma. One Hindu woman is a master at Kuchipudi Indian dance. She equates dance with her religion, saying directly that "dance *is my* religion." For some people, therefore, their somatic existence is inextricably woven into their religious narrative.

Traveler Disposition: Some of the religious life stories read like travelogues, where the narrators told stories rich in detail of their overseas adventures. The circumstances of this travel vary. Some people had to move every year or every few years as a result of familial or vocational commitments. For some, travel is a dominant motif and organizing disposition. Structuring a life story in relationship to physical location is very natural, as frequent geographic change cognitively facilitates remembrance. For narrators with a strong traveler disposition, frequent traveling often equates to pivotal moments in their religiosity. For some of the narrators, a change in location provided the opportunity to learn about and embrace a new religion or a new version of their same religion. Either way, they narrated an expansion of their religious understanding that was inextricably woven to their travel. Other narrators suggested that traveling tried their patience and resources, and their faith was put to the test. In this way, their faith or religion was strength-

ened. To be clear, just because a person travels a lot does not mean that travel is a strong disposition in her narrative. In two of the narratives, told by one Christian woman and one Christian man, travel was barely mentioned although they each had vocations which necessitated moving every few years. This is an example of a life experience that, although prominent, is not used by the narrator to frame her story. In fact, in these two narratives, references to travel were almost omitted completely. This illustrates that what people find important to tell about their own lives is not necessarily what an interviewer would assume to be of major importance.

Influential Disposition: Some of the narrators tell stories in which they directly and repeatedly link their religiosity to a desire or an ability to have influence over other people. This disposition presents a variety of ways. For a Muslim woman, it is a desire to teach others in an academic setting. For a few of the narrators, influential religiosity manifests in a desire to mentor younger workers or to become influential within the workplace. People with strong influential dispositions also tend to focus on leadership roles they play in their religious communities. For instance, one of the Hindu interviewees, a university professor, stated that his motivation for studying and learning the Hindu scriptures was so he could teach it to his students who were expressing an interest in Hinduism. Further research into this particular disposition can foster a greater understanding of religious leadership and the dynamics between congregations and their leaders. Some people entering religious vocations state that they are answering a call. These interviews indicate that some people are pre-disposed with a desire to influence others, and their religion provides a vehicle for this activity.

Contributive Disposition: Some of the narrators structured their stories around strong desires to help others. This impulse was constant through their lives, and was often a practice that was modeled by the narrator's family from a young age. A Muslim man serves as a prison chap-

lain and works with troubled youth of all religious backgrounds. He remembers his immediate family performing acts of service in his community. Sometimes, the narrators were themselves recipients of good works in childhood and grew up to provide for others. A Muslim woman talks about her troubled family life, and the teacher who always was kind to her and became a role model for positive behavior. This narrator grows up to be a teacher. In her narrative, she repeatedly expresses her desire to help children and others in the community have a better life, as she had been helped. Service is a valued practice in most religions, and in the United States religious institutions perform much of the volunteer and charity work. However, studying the entire religious story as narrated by the individual can shed light on the motivation of giving. Does the individual perform charity because his church encourages it? Or does he join a congregation because of the opportunities for and recognition of public service? This question can be asked about many of the dispositions: what comes first, the requirements of the religion, or the personal nature of the congregant?

Compliant Disposition: Some of the narrators structure their stories around a pressing need to do the right thing, to be a good person, or to obey their elders. They articulate, in very clear language, the difference between right and wrong, and this orientation dominates their narratives. Often, when the narrator was young, a compliant religiosity manifested originally in a compliance with the rules set out by her parents. The youngest Hindu interviewee expressed this disposition, stating that Ram was her favorite God because he was the "perfect" son. A Christian woman is obsessed with the fact that she was *not* obedient and was very emotive during the interview, oftentimes describing herself as a "bad child." At a later point in the narrations, the axis of authority is often transferred to the religious institution, but the disposition itself continues to dominate the individual's religious life story. Followers of traditional religious doctrines have

sometimes been criticized for blindly following the tenets of their religion. The presence of this compliant disposition in the narratives shows that some people may simply be disposed to being obedient, and are drawn to religious behavior that reinforces their natural tendencies.

Socioeconomic Disposition: Many of the narrators—Hindus, Christians, and Muslims alike—hinge their stories around a certain social and/or economic status. Oftentimes, a narrative that has a strong socioeconomic disposition is one where the narrator came from a prominent family, and he later finds himself trying to fit into the same mold. High social status is sometimes invoked as proof that prayer works; it is sometimes used a vehicle for the individual to position himself as an authority figure within the institutional religion, and it sometimes weaves together with other dispositions. For instance, high social status is often linked with contributive disposition. Some of these interviewees express a need to pay back society for their good fortune, as taught by their religions. Other times, socioeconomic religiosity dominates narratives that also exhibited influential religiosity. The individual uses her religious affiliation to express these strong attributes in her stories.



## 6 OUTLIER DISPOSTION

*"I don't frustrate myself with compliance issues as long as my soul is comfortable."-  
Khayriah Faiz, Project Narrator*

Each narrator in the pilot study constructed a unique story of a unique religious life. Although there were many similarities and basis for comparison among the narratives, there was still a strong sense of individuality in each of them. Many of the narrators stated, before, after, or during their interviews, that their stories were very different from other stories. Some people wanted confirmation of their uniqueness after the interview, and re-iterated this point. In terms of their religious traditions, most of the “outlier” narrators emphasized their personal differences with the orthodox practices and beliefs of their religious community, rather than discussing the parts of their religious tradition they agreed with. Their reflective observations and self-analysis illustrates how they situated themselves towards their religious tradition. Also, many of the narrators presented a variation of Chaves' incongruence theory, whereby people do not always act consistently or congruently with the beliefs, tenets, or practices of their religious tradition.<sup>36</sup> By drawing attention to their differences from other members of their respective religious communities, the narrators imply that other members of their religious tradition *do* have a story which is congruent with the teachings of the tradition. However, the narrators characterize their *own* stories as being incongruent with other people within their same religious tradition, or in contrast to the tradition itself, *while still maintaining their identity in the group*. The narrators do not express anxiety about this dualism; moreover, their willingness to share this personal analysis with a stranger would suggest they are comfortable or even prefer this incongruence.

In his book, *The Believing Brain*, Michael Shermer discusses various cognitive biases

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<sup>36</sup> Chaves, Mark. "Rain Dances in the Dry Season: Overcoming the Religious Congruence Fallacy." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49, 2010, 2.

that have been recognized by cognitive scientists. One is the "attribution bias," defined as a "tendency to attribute different causes for our own beliefs and actions than that of others."<sup>37</sup> This would help explain why the narrators were willing and comfortable to discuss their personal differences from their congregations, and to assert their own sense of agency. According to Shermer, human beings are simply hard wired to do this. Additionally, ascription bias theorizes that "there is a tendency for people to assess their own personality, behavior, and beliefs as more variable and less dogmatic than those of others."<sup>38</sup> This theory is borne out by the interviews. Most of the narrators express their religiosity in terms of a deviance from practices and beliefs prescribed by their religious traditions. It is beyond the time and space limitations of this thesis to explore all of the cognitive science theories that are relevant to individual religiosity. I have used these two examples, rather, to support my observation that during the interviews that the narrators were comfortable characterizing their own experiences as incongruent with others in their religious traditions. According to cognitive science, this is normal and expected behavior.

Although each narrator told a unique religious life story in *some* of the interviews, this sense of uniqueness and incongruency with a religious tradition was more than a passing reference. In these stories, the narrators presented a strong outlier motif that provided an architectural structure for their narratives. These narrators consistently, descriptively, and repeatedly refer to themselves as outliers with respect to their own religious tradition. The dictionary defines outlier as "someone who stands apart from others of his own group, as by differing actions, beliefs, religious practices, etc."<sup>39</sup> Eight out of the twenty-one narratives exhibit strong outlier dispositions. I will focus on three of these interviews in detail, using the narratives of a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Christian with strong outlier dispositions to illustrate how they constructed their narrative iden-

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<sup>37</sup> Shermer, Michael. *The Believing Brain*. (New York, NY: Time Books-Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 263.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 276.

<sup>39</sup> Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com. , 2013. <http://dictionary.reference.com/> (accessed February 15, 2013).

tity and also to show how a dispositional approach illuminates similarities in their religious life stories that cross religious traditions.

Dr. Doyle Hamilton (Hamilton) is a Baptist pastoral counselor, and a licensed marriage and family therapist who lives and practices in the Atlanta suburbs. His grandfather was once president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and his father was a deacon of the church. For many generations, his family was steeped in Baptist tradition. We met in his office, and he made it a point to show me his grandfather's doctoral robes, which hung on the back of his door. Hamilton was very self-reflective, and due to the nature of his work in psychotherapy, he understood and eloquently conveyed a deep understanding of his own inner life and inner conflicts. He spoke admirably and lovingly about his parents and family. However, he still narrated his religious life story with strong references to being an outlier, and he did this consistently through his narrative. Hamilton's first reference to being an outlier was in relation to his family. The first two pages of his transcribed narrative include background into his family and self-reflection about the differences between his faith in his childhood and in his adulthood. He talked about his baptism, and the symbolism of being "raised to walk in the newness of life," but he ended his description by saying, "I was eight, so it was a... it was faith of an eight year old." In this statement, he quotes a Bible verse as a reflection of his religious tradition, but then immediately gives a statement as to why the first statement did not fully apply to him. He structured his story by describing his family of origin and placing them squarely in the middle of the Baptist church. After he had defined himself and his family as influential insiders in the Baptist tradition, he positioned himself as an outlier with respect to that same tradition. His family was very wealthy. "We did grow up with what I would consider a lot of excess-a lot of non-essential fluff," and he expressed guilt about that. He was "pressured to go to private school, but I didn't want to do that,

I wanted to stay at public school." When it was time for him to choose a vocation, Hamilton said, "My father was a physician. And it was kind of the expectation in my family that I would be a physician. So, but I decided my freshman year in college that I wanted to do something that was faith related in my work." His decision to turn away from the family business was very difficult for Hamilton's father. Hamilton's mentor was his grandfather, whom he describes as a wise, well-educated leader.<sup>40</sup> Hamilton explained in his narrative that this professional decision was part of his individuation process, or the process of distancing himself from his family of origin. By intentionally referencing individuation, he emphasized his outlier status to his family of origin.

At ninety minutes, the interviews are long enough to allow the participants to share some stories and history, but not long enough for them to tell *everything*. Due to this time limitation, it is apparent when a narrator mentions the same theme or idea repeatedly, and it is also apparent when he does *not* mention anticipated predominant areas of his life. In Hamilton's case, although he set up his story by speaking about his family of origin, he did not continue narrating his story through a strong familial disposition. Hamilton spoke very little about his wife or daughter, although he did show me a picture of the two of them that he carries in his wallet. He went into great detail regarding his and his wife's struggle with infertility. He says, "And, as a pastor, as a young student, I was in my early thirties; I had a hard time making sense out of that. So, my way of dealing with my grief, I went back to school, and got another degree and my emphasis was on pastoral counseling with couples dealing with infertility." He said that most Christian churches do not address the one in six couples who deal with infertility, and that the Old Testament way of thinking about barrenness (infertility) is that you are cursed by God. Hamilton expressed his outlier status by his disagreement and disillusionment with this belief, which he says is prevalent in

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<sup>40</sup> Like many of the narrators, Hamilton's adult life emulates the person he most admired, as he becomes well-educated by pursuing advanced degrees and further becomes a role model to his clients.

the church today. He went further by specializing in treating infertile couples, mostly couples who belong to his same religious tradition. Even in his practice, though, his therapies are not always congruent with his religious tradition. He uses spirituality, psychotherapy, "whatever works" in his practice, and he is big fan of Jewish author and family therapist John Gottman. He also positions himself outside of his traditional community when he critiques the most quoted Biblical references on infertility and Christian counselors who do not avail themselves of effective secular counseling methodologies.

Hamilton talks a lot about "change" as a dominant element in his religious life story. He is very aware of his own personal religiosity changing; he says that he "used to be more idealistic, but maybe just about life in general." He attributes part of this to the fact that "people don't come here when things are going well. You know, divorce, or internet pornography, or addiction, or death in the family, or whatever. That's usually the entree for people that come talk to me." As he witnessed more suffering in his life, his personal religiosity changed. He mentions different aspects of his narrative identity that weave in and out of each other. Hamilton is a Baptist minister, but he is also a family counselor, and his occupation was highly influenced by his personal experience with infertility. He does not separate his religious narrative identity from other aspects of his narrative identity.<sup>41</sup> Hamilton's psychology training gives him the tools to explain the changes he goes through during his religious life and exemplifies incongruence. His use of the outlier disposition continues to the end of his story, when he describes how he feels about himself in relation to the traditional Baptist religion.

Hamilton's feelings about the Baptist church are ambivalent, as expressed in one of his

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<sup>41</sup> Read, Jen'nan and David Eagle. "Intersecting Identities as a Source of Religious Incongruence." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50 (1), (2001): 116-132. Sociologists Jen'nan Read and David Eagle observe this phenomenon in of the relationship of intersecting identities to incongruence. They say, "Intersecting social identities are a primary source of incongruence. It is the intersection and competition of these multiple identities that result in incongruence. As contexts change, the salience of different identities and subsequent behaviors change with them."

soliloquies. On one hand, it grieves him that the Baptist church is in a state of turmoil. He feels that young people today have no loyalty to any denomination, and he has "mixed feelings about that, because what does that say about the theology of that particular group? And there's a value in the faith traditions, there's a value in that." Importantly, he *knows* he is ambivalent as he describes his "mixed feelings." And yet, "I know some in the Baptist tradition, when they are marketing their congregation, they leave out the word Baptist as a way to appeal to more people, and some of that might be because of the bad connotation that some have of the word Baptist." So, on one hand, he expresses a great love and concern for his denomination, which corresponds to feelings of unity with the Baptist tradition. Yet, on the other hand, he says, "Well, Baptists.. we are kind of known as being judgmental and conservative and preachy."<sup>42</sup> I don't see myself as that. By the way, sometimes I am embarrassed to say that I am a Baptist, because of the stereotypical way that we are portrayed." He reconciles this by saying, "*I think in some ways I'm different from those that call themselves Baptists, and yet, that's my home, that's my family of origin in terms of my faith.*" In this statement, Hamilton clearly defines himself as an outlier- someone who stands apart from his own group, while still being a part of that group.

Hamilton's outlier disposition, expressed in relationship to his childhood, his vocation, and his feelings about his church reflects his ambivalence about being entrenched within a family of origin and church tradition that he cannot completely relate to. In his religious life story, he weaves together themes of family, the Baptist religion, and altruism with outlier religiosity. In his narration, we also find that Hamilton's outlier disposition and ambivalence towards his traditional Baptist religion are presented as the result of long and careful reflection and deep personal introspection. Twice during the interview, he told the story of how he and his wife were able to conceive and give birth to a healthy child after years of infertility. He sees this as a gift from

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<sup>42</sup> A few times during the interview, he stopped and asked me if he was being too preachy.

God, but he struggles with calling it a miracle, saying, "I think of it as a blessing of God, but I am reluctant to say that because does it mean the couple that does not have a child- are they cursed by God?" Similarly, when discussing the salvation of non-Christians, he says "I wrestle with that as a Christian. What does the Hindu believe, or the Jewish faith, who say the Messiah is yet to come?" His language is clearly ambivalent. He states his case as a Christian, but then illustrates that he has thought about and grappled with inconsistencies of that religion. In this way, he defines himself as someone who is part of a social group, yet apart from it: an outlier.

Hamilton begins his narrative by explicitly characterizing himself as an outlier to his family's wealth and expectations. Similarly, he identifies himself as an outlier to his religion as evidenced by his expression of his ambivalent feelings towards his church. He distances himself from his religious tradition by not wanting to be classified with what he sees as a "stereotypical" Baptist. Using an outlier disposition, however, was not always in *reaction* to the dictates and practices of traditional religiosity.

Some of the narrators referred more strongly to being an outlier, period, and brought this disposition to their religiosity, as exemplified by the next narrator. A few synonyms for outlier are non-conformist, maverick, and bohemian.<sup>43</sup> These adjectives describe our next narrator, Tayyibah Taylor. Taylor is a Muslim woman and the editor-in-chief and publisher of *Azizah Magazine*. She is an experienced speaker and communicator, and has been interviewed on many occasions because of her vocation and her high profile within the Atlanta Muslim community. At the beginning of the interview, Taylor sets herself apart from the norm as a non-conformist and maverick by giving a very long introduction of herself in response to being asked her first religious memory. Here is an excerpt: "I was born in the Caribbean, in Trinidad. Both of my parents were from Barbados. And when I was four, my father was a chemist for Texaco; he was trans-

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<sup>43</sup> —. Thesaurus.com. 2013. <http://thesaurus.com/> (accessed February 15, 2013).

ferred to Texaco of Canada. We were not able to all go with him at that time, my siblings and my mother and I went back to Barbados, where her parents were, and we stayed there. And then when I was seven we all moved up to Canada. And so when we got there, we stayed with a friend of my father's until we could get into our own home. And so my first religious memory was going to church, but it wasn't an edifice. It wasn't a church building, it was a home. My parents were practicing Christians, who believed that since Jesus didn't build a building or call himself by any name, these were the no-name Christians, who met at an un-building building." According to narrative theory, the beginning of a story is very important, as the interviewee is conveying information to set up the rest of the story. Taylor jumps right into her story using language that portrays her childhood religion as different from the norm and unique, defining her church community as "no-name Christians" meeting in an "un-building." She continues with this language throughout her narrative. Additionally, she gives rich, detailed background information and many specific facts about her childhood in her many nuclear episodes. She immediately describes where she was born, where she moved to and why, her father's occupation and employer, and details about her childhood church. By giving all of this information so quickly, Taylor is implying that her story is in need of a lot of "set-up" because it is a unique story. For Taylor, the person listening to this story will not be able to understand her narration without explanatory background information that only she is privy to. In this way she sets herself up as an outlier from the start.

The content of the narrative, like the structure, also positions Taylor as an outlier. In the beginning of her narrative, Taylor talks about the Unseen, the "Spirits" and "Jumbies" in the Caribbean that are an accepted part of the landscape. She describes herself as "a free spirit that loved to explore everything." At one point in her childhood, she started to chase and kill frogs, and this



activity led to hallucinations that there were frogs everywhere. She explains, "I woke up and the whole house was covered with frogs, and for three nights this happened." Furthermore, she was astounded that her mother could not see the frogs. Her mother told her she needed to stop killing the real frogs because this was the cause of her hallucinations. Taylor stopped, and she claims this cured her of her hallucinations. Although she has already identified as a "Christian," she narrates a story that references a more metaphysical world outlook. She continues by narrating the outlier status of her church community. She describes the non-denominational church in Canada that her family attended. The church was distinct from other Christian churches, an "un-church" where the women wore simple clothes and no makeup, and the families did not observe holidays or watch TV. So, even though she attended a Christian church, it was an outlier, fringe Christian church. Furthermore, even though she attended church with her parents, Taylor describes her relationship to the church in terms of being an outlier. She says, "Even when we went to church I didn't associate with the people at the church, girls at the church, except when we went to conventions or meetings." Taylor continues by arguing that her racial identity set her apart from her community. Her family was "people of color in a church that was predominantly white, in a neighborhood that was predominately white, in a country that was predominately white." These expressions of being an outlier are consistent with her descriptions of her early family, religious and community life. Furthermore, she does not feel solidarity with her church community; rather, she positions herself as different from all of them. Even though she narratively creates distance from her community, Taylor does not convey any sense of unhappiness or loneliness. She seems to embrace the uniqueness of her story and her individuality. This language of separation and being an outlier as well as her comfort with this language continues throughout her narrative.

Taylor cites her parents as the most influential people in her religious life as a child. She

says, "I think my parents were the most influential in my life, my father, he had the very wry sense of humor. And that they were the only people in their families who were practicing the religion (un-church Christianity) so they had to maintain a sense of integrity, their religious integrity when they were with my aunts and uncles who were into different lifestyles. And I think watching them do that, was very.... profound for me to watch that interaction. You know, being able to embrace their family, but maintain their religious integrity, *seamlessly*, without a lot of negative juxtaposition." Taylor expresses comfort and security in her role and her family's role as the "different" ones in regard to their race and faith, in contrast to Hamilton's angst and conscious distancing of himself from his parents' status. She not only is comfortable constructing unique roles, but she seems to relish depicting herself as the outlier, emphasized by the fact that she laughed easily, comfortably, and frequently throughout the interview, creating a casual and self-secure tone in the narrative. Her parents were able to maintain strong familial relationships while still holding onto their religious integrity, and Taylor argues that this had a profound influence on her religious life, as she would come to emulate the people that, by her own acknowledgment, shaped her the most.

Her story continued with this same tone as she proceeded to talk about religion in her adolescence and young adulthood. As a teenager, Taylor had an intellectual bent. She describes giving a lot of thought to the Christian tenets she was taught, and she expresses frustration with her inability to reconcile the Christian concept of the Trinity. Taylor initially decided that she had to create her own religion, one that "has to be true from the beginning to the end, it can't have any stops and starts, and it has to make logical sense." Instead, while still in high school, she heard about Islam. She states that the doctrine that "God is one" made sense to her; Islam stood up to a "certain intellectual integrity." However, she did not immediately become a Mus-

lim. Again contrasting herself with other people who might say that they found God in church or in prayer, Taylor proudly says that she "found God in the microbiology lab." She later she states that "lying on the beach in a leopard skin bikini I had a spiritual epiphany." Her narrative is full of rich descriptions of these experiences, including a soliloquy where she describes her exploration of Islam, and her vacillation between her religious quest and being "wild and crazy and partying and doing all of this stuff." Finally, she committed to Islam, which she describes here: "So I left Toronto in a pair of hot pants and this huge Afro, and these go-go boots, do you remember go-go boots? And came back in this long skirt with my hair wrapped, so this transformation was really unsettling to a lot of people of course. Praying five times a day, not drinking, not smoking. I had been one of those kids who had been so volatile, in and out of so much stuff, my parents said she is going through another one of her phases, it's okay, we just have to wait, wait to exhale, and this too shall pass. They saw me, ok, it's been a few months now, she's still praying and covering, she's not going out partying. So part of them could acknowledge the positive changes, but part of them was unsettled, because I was practicing a religion that wasn't theirs, and was to them foreign, and not authentic; and so that, they had some difficulty with that."

When asked if the transition to Islam was difficult for *her*, she answers, "I was very accustomed to being the odd one out, either intellectually or culturally. I was the only black in my class for almost all my life. One of very few people of color... And sometimes I made the purposeful intention of being the odd one out. When everyone was wearing miniskirts I wore maxi skirts, and when they wore maxi skirts I wore miniskirts. I kind of like being out there, just being different, I was already different, so I made a spectacle of being different."

She continued to position herself as the outlier as she described her adult life. However, for the first time she expressed some discomfort with this characterization while living for years

at a time between the United States and Saudi Arabia, now married with five children. She explains, "Because for years, when I was in Jeddah I would say this is so difficult, it was difficult physically, because I couldn't drive, I had to have a driver, or I had to arrange with my husband, plus learning the language was difficult. The cultural nuances were all very different. So I found that difficult. So the first couple of years I would complain about being there, then when I got home, here I am the only Muslim, people are staring at me cause I am covered, and this is so difficult, back in Jeddah everyone knows religion, I can't find any Halal food, then I would complain about being here. And then I realized that it was... my sense of peace couldn't be contingent on where I am, or whom I'm with or my circumstances." Another experience that she described as being very important to her was being invited into a group of Muslim women who explained to her that there are varying interpretations of the Qur'an. Taylor says, "The fact that this woman who was so conservative in certain aspects, had this liberal interpretation of this verse that other people like 'No, you can't touch the Qur'an unless you have your wadu.' The fact that you can have this juxtaposition of the two in one person was astounding and profound to me. And then the fact that there can be these many shades of interpretation and meaning for one verse was also profound to me." Again, as throughout her narrative, Taylor focuses on dichotomies and differences between members of the same group, and she determines how to reconcile these differences within her story.

Recently, Taylor has enjoyed attention and success with her magazine, and she has made it a point to include "all different ethnicities, all different levels of religiosity, all different schools of religious thought." Sometimes, controversy ensues, which she does not back down from. When asked how Muslims are viewed by non-Muslims, she said, "I would say that there have been many cultural adulterations that have been woven into the practice of Islam in Muslim

majority countries, and passed off as its fabric, and people can't tell the difference of what is culture and what is religion, what is tribal tradition, where one starts and one stops. Even some Muslims can't tell the difference." She characterizes Islam as a tradition that is sometimes difficult to understand from the perspective of insiders and outsiders. She describes what she sees as a conflation between culture and religion, and defines this as the reason for misunderstanding.

Taylor's narrative is rich in detail and information. Time and time again, she positioned herself as an outlier, but kept a good amount of self-deprecating humor in her story. Like many people, she begins and ends her narrative with similar themes, in her case her country of origin and examples of the unseen. She says, "I have to go through well, I was born in Trinidad, my parents were from Barbados, I grew up in Toronto, now I live in the United states... Keeping that Macro and Micro. That we are these beings in a universe that is pretty fantastic, when we think about the electromagnetic spectrum and how little of it we can acknowledge with our own senses, and how much there is, it's like trying to comprehend infinity again."

In Hamilton's story, the outlier disposition is presented as a response to inconsistencies between personal convictions and stereotypical portrayals of conservative Southern Baptists, a community he admits that he is a member of. Taylor's story reflects an outlier disposition in her self-description as a maverick, a unique individual in all areas of her life. Lakshmi Rao's narrative presents an outlier disposition that is a combination of the result of incongruency with her Hindu community and also a reflection of her sense of being different and unique since she was a child. Rao was born in Kumardar India (in Ander Pradash) in 1938. Rao was married to the late Dr. P. Venugopala Rao, a physicist at Emory University and prominent member of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta. I interviewed both of them at their home in Decatur, Georgia, which was filled with Dr. Rao's paintings and sculptures and Hindu artwork and religious icons. Dr. Rao

spoke first. Dr. Rao was dynamic and a self-described spokesperson for Hinduism who was happy and eager to be interviewed. By contrast, Mrs. Rao had more trepidation about the interview, and she initially insisted that she did not really have anything interesting to say. She is an educated woman, a retired accountant who worked at Bellsouth for many years, and she is a mother of two children. Her interview ran shorter than most, just under fifty minutes, the shortest interview in the pilot study. Although she was not as loquacious as the other narrators and her answers were, for the most part, shorter and less descriptive, she *did* have a lot to say, and her narrative reflected an outlier disposition from the beginning.

Prior to their interviews, she told me that I should interview her husband, that *he* was the one who knew about Hinduism, not her. This statement created a sense that the interviewer should not expect a lot from her, and that her knowledge of her own religion was limited. Her attitude towards the interview was the first indication of an outlier status in her narrative, as she feigned ignorance of its practices and tenets. She was, in fact, very knowledgeable about the tenets and practices of Hinduism, and her husband repeatedly insisted that she was the family keeper and transmitter of their religious tradition. Nevertheless, the way she presented herself reminded me of an unwilling participant at a school dance: standing on the sideline, watching and judging her cohorts on the dance floor. Although the tone of the initial contact may be interpreted as her desire for privacy about her religious tradition, she continued to express herself as an outlier in her story, even as she graciously and happily answered the questions. The tone of the interview itself was very upbeat; she laughed often at her own stories. I found this true in many of the narrators with the outlier disposition; they were able to see joy and humor in their religiosity.

At the beginning of the interview, when asked about her earliest memories concerning religion, Rao talked about how she and her brothers had to travel five miles to the nearest high school. She said, "I grew up with boys." Additionally, she said that her four brothers were "Communists" (and then she laughed). She did not elaborate on this, even though I encouraged her to. Out of all the things that she could say about her childhood, she chose to state a fact about her brothers that on the surface had more to do with politics than Hinduism. Perhaps, in her mind, she conflated politics and religion, and this was a verbal way of blurring her definitions of Hinduism.<sup>44</sup> In any case, this statement, like the ones that followed, expressed her uniqueness and independence. She more explicitly describes her non-conformist status when she talks about her father and says, "This is why I appreciate my father, he's not really orthodox. So a long time ago, if you want to go to high school, first thing you have to do is ride a bike (presumably because the high school was far from her house). And for a girl to ride a bike in those days-quite a no-no." Rao's father allowed her to ride a bike to school, which allowed her to get an education but also to be considered a renegade by her community. The person that she most admired was her father, who exemplified and encouraged this renegade behavior. Later, when discussing her arranged marriage, she states that her father asked her if she liked the man, and if she had said no, "he wouldn't have gone forward. So I had some independence." Rao narrates her story in terms of independence, with a sense of pride. Independence was very important to her father and valued in her family. Rao embraced this value, and narrated her story in terms of it. Like Taylor, she describes herself more as an individual than as a member of a group. Taylor, however, voiced that she enjoyed the reactions she received when being viewed as an outlier. Conversely, Rao does not give any indication in her narrative that she cared one way or the other how people

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<sup>44</sup> Many of the narrators conflated of religion and politics or religion and other social identity issues in their interviews.

viewed her. The language, demeanor, and the structure of her narrative point to a person who values independent thinking because the situation calls for it, not to bring attention to herself.

Rao's outlier status with regards to Hinduism is constructed by the way she describes religious traditions in her childhood. She said, "So, we didn't practice that much. My mother used to, and my grandmother used to do some pujas once in a while for big occasions. But, other than that, we didn't practice too much." She later talked about going to festivals during high school and college because "that's a very fun and fun-loving thing to do" but "there's no depth to it." Here, she is expressing that *she* did not experience any personal religious significance or meaning in the rituals and festivals other than the enjoyment factor. It is unclear whether she thinks that other Hindus have found this depth in their religion, because at this point in the interview she was mainly talking about herself. In these examples, Rao's outlier disposition is very much like Taylor's. She is bringing a self-described unorthodox, renegade nature to her religiosity.

However, like Hamilton, Rao's self-characterization as an outlier is also a reaction *to* her Hinduism. In the middle of the interview, Rao was asked if there were times when religion became more important in her life. She responded in the affirmative, saying that as she has grown older, "I am now more interested in religion. I started reading, and listening to lectures. I learned a lot." However, she continues to insist on her independence, stating, "I think religion is a private thing; everybody has their own way of doing it." Now that she is retired, she is enjoying participating in the traditional Hindu practices and learning about her religion, which keeps her from "getting any bad thoughts" and keeps her busy. By emphasizing the personal side of her religiosity, she is de-emphasizing the importance of the group endeavor. She also dismisses any importance of adherence to orthodox Hinduism in a group setting. She says that she and her husband mainly go to the temple to socialize, about once a month.



Her outlier style is emphasized later in the interview when she expresses consternation with other Hindus, especially with younger Hindus at her temple. When she and her husband came to the United States from India, they were friends with people from many religions, and to this day they are involved with inter-faith activities in Atlanta. In her words, "We had so much diversity and we enjoyed meeting people so much. But now the number (of Indian Hindus in Atlanta) has increased and we... and everybody is staying to themselves and I feel, sad." When asked to elaborate, she says that the young people "never had experiences like I had" in terms of the opportunities to go out and meet people and socialize with colleagues of different faiths. Here, she is directly verbalizing her generational outlier status as a person with different experiences and opportunities, even though these younger Hindus may very well have the same opportunities. This is an example of a person who expresses a strong sense of her own agency; she calls it as she sees it. She narrates her story by distancing herself from religious insider status and from those who are just "clinging to their own people." In the last section on pluralism, when asked if she thinks that people understand Hinduism, she again asserts her independence by saying, "Well, that's their problem! (*laughs*) It's not mine. And that's what I mean when I say we have to respect each other's' religions." Her narrative describes a laissez-faire outlook on religiosity and an emphasis on individuality.<sup>45</sup> Her outlier status is a mixture of an individualized perspective and a reaction to what she sees as religion becoming more orthodox and polarizing.

Similarly to Taylor and Hamilton, Rao describes herself as a person who would be considered an active participant of her religious tradition. Rao wears a tilak on her forehead, a Hindu symbol. She has many, many statues and altars with Hindu deities in her home; these are the

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<sup>45</sup> All of the Hindu interviewees expressed that Hinduism is a religious tradition with a great amount of diversity of religious practice. However, most of the other Hindu narrators used language that suggested their desire to be included in their religious community; Rao stood out because her language intimated her distance from the community and her comfort in this positioning.

prominent items one first notices upon entering. She is a member of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta, and attends regularly (if not often), and physically and financially supports the organization with her time, money and resources. She continues to observe Hindu festivals and holidays, and reminds her daughters of these occasions. She says, "But now, here today, whenever there is a big festival comes I call my daughters and tell them the festival is coming, and they do whatever, you know, they have Ganesh statue, and they go and put the flower, and they make my grandson put a flower (laughs)... simple things . But, ah, we .... we just do anything we like... we like to do it at home. We attend festivals at the temple, but we are private people." However, she expresses a distance from other Hindus that belies these physical reflections. She consistently structures her narrative as an outlier to the traditional religion of Hinduism, and she expresses displeasure with Hindus whom she describes as isolated and less pluralistic.

So, what can the outlier disposition reflected in the religious life stories tell us about individual religiosity? All of the narrators structure their narratives to create a coherent story of their religious lives. Each creates narrative coherence by discussing certain topics repeatedly throughout the narrative, tying in these topics to different time periods of his life and to different aspects of her religious life and reflections. Each narrator expresses her own uniqueness by how she reacts and responds to the questions, by what she says and by what she doesn't say. For Taylor, Rao, and Hamilton, this sense of uniqueness was a very strong disposition in their stories. Each narrative represented here is a reflection not only of that uniqueness, but of what the individual chooses to express, among countless possibilities, in a narrative couched as their religious life story. These narrators represented themselves as being outliers to the traditional tenets and practices of their religious tradition. Furthermore, as evidenced by their narration, they wanted this uniqueness to be part of the record. However, this manifested itself in different ways. Being an

outlier can be a reflection of a personality that wants to be the renegade in the group (Taylor). Being an outlier can stem from a personality that is private and that shies away from group activity (Rao). Additionally, expressing outlier religiosity can manifest as a reaction to life circumstances and traditional religious practices that do not resonate within a person, causing a sense of conflict with the institutional religious tradition (Hamilton).

Many other narrators used the outlier motif to structure their stories. Bill Stewart, another Baptist, said, "I probably don't agree with all of the doctrines of the Baptist church," specifically emphasizing that many Baptists take the Bible literally, but he cannot do that. Aruna Kailasa, a practicing Hindu, has distanced herself from the rituals of her traditional religion since she was a child, making fun of her mother for practicing prayers and pujas. Late in her narrative, she says, "So I compare -- like sometimes friends who have the same awareness but follow the tradition; I follow the tradition... but certain things to me they are very superstitious... Maybe one day I will become superstitious, I don't know. I'm not there yet." An interesting thing about this language, and about Kailasa, is that a person observing her life and her ritual practices may very well consider *her* to be superstitious, or at least an observant Hindu, not an outlier. She attends to and is involved in her religious community, she has a dedicated altar room in her home, and her house is filled pictures and statues of Hindu deities. The outlier disposition in these narratives illustrates how outsider and insider perspectives can lead to differing conclusions about the religious life of an individual. There can be incongruity between observations of a religious practitioner and her observations about herself. I contend that both of these perspectives are valuable in understanding individual religiosity. An outsider can observe an individual in a less biased, objective manner. An insider, the individual, can share what is invisible about his religious life, that is, how he creates meaning from religion as it intertwines with other facets of his life.

Taylor, Hamilton, and Rao would be considered to be devout followers of their religions based on their worship attendance, prayer, and personal adherence to religious practices. For Taylor, this adherence is exemplified by participating in Haj, keeping halal, and covering. Hamilton's adherence is demonstrated in his tithing, praying, and his ministerial counseling. Rao keeps alters in her home, worships daily, and attends to her religious community. So when they construct their stories by consistently referring to themselves as outliers with respect to their religious communities, it begs the question of what it really means to be devout. An individual's definition of devotion to their religious community may not be able to be measured by external observations and standard classifications such as church attendance and financial support. Even if these aspects are present in an individual's life, they may not indicate the personal level of inclusion or belonging that an individual expresses towards his religious tradition.

Some narrators choose to organize and express themselves strongly as outliers with respect to their religious communities while still remaining active members of those communities. Most individuals see themselves as unique, but these narrators *emphasize* this sense of uniqueness to their religious traditions. Furthermore, they convey a disconnect of their experiences of religion with others of their same tradition. The outlier status pushes the envelope of what it means to be devout and illustrates the differences between how people see their own lives and how they are observed by others. Different modes of inquiry and academic methods of studying lived religion lead to different pictures of religiosity within an individual's life story.

Narration is a meaning-making activity. These individuals express that their religion makes sense to them even as they orient themselves slightly apart from it. They all recognize real and perceived stereotypes in their religious traditions, and they have confirmed observing these stereotypes to some others in their religious communities. Additionally, they want the listener to

know that how they view themselves in regard to their traditional religion is different from these stereotypes. These narratives illustrate the complexity of religiosity not only within religious communities, but within the individuals themselves.

## 7 FAMILIAL DISPOSITION

*“Because even though my mother had her health issues, and her health challenges, I saw her read her Bible every day. That has stuck with me to now because I didn't know I was going to follow in her footsteps. And I did follow her. I read the Koran every day.” Betty Amin, Project Narrator*

The second disposition that I will describe in detail is the "familial disposition." A familial disposition drives a story that is fundamentally built around the repeated mention of and reference to one or more members of a person's family or ancestry. Most of the narrators mention family members in their stories, especially their families of origin. For many of these narrators, however, family members function as supporting characters in their story, only being mentioned once or twice during the story, and often only for background information. Conversely, in the narratives with strong familial dispositions, the narrators relied upon specific familial characters, and their relationship to these characters, to construct their religious life story.

The presence of familial characters could be expected in these narratives due to the fact that the narrators were specifically asked about the religious background of their family and religious practices in their home as a child and an adolescent. Therefore, many the narrators responded to these questions by discussing their mother, father, and grandparents as the origin of their religious knowledge. As often cited in religious studies, nuclear and extended families of origin function as the transmitters of the religious tradition. In these interviews, more often than not, these narrators learned the tenets, practices, and beliefs of their religious traditions more through attrition than outright study. They would observe their parents' or grandparents' behaviors and be taken to religious services where they would soak up the experiences in a visceral way.

In *all* of these narratives, however, families functioned as more than transmitters of reli-

gious beliefs and practices. These narrators also articulated family influence in other ways. In addition to learning religious practices, tenets, and beliefs from their families, narrators also developed initial personal and cultural stocks of stories during their childhood under the influence of family members. This initial collection of memories and images would stay with them and influence their stories during their lifetimes. In their childhoods, the narrators internalized distinct patterns of speech and communication. They learned what is acceptable to talk about and how to talk about it. These patterns and varieties of communication are what Dan McAdams refers to as "narrative tone," or "the unconscious and nonverbal attitudes about self, other and world, and how the three relate to each other."<sup>46</sup> The narrative tone illustrates the mood and personality of the narrator and, according to McAdams, is strongly developed in childhood, around and by the family. When they first learn to talk, children also learn how to work with their own autobiographical memories, and they are strongly influenced by their parents' and caregivers' styles of engagement.<sup>47</sup> So, whether they referred to family members or not, *all* of the narrators were influenced by the people who were close to them as children in terms of what they learned to say about themselves and how they learned to say it.

All of the narrators were practicing and involved members of their respective religious communities at the time of the interview. Additionally, they all indicated lifelong continuous involvement with religious traditions. Furthermore, all of them learned about their families' religious traditions through their families of origin in their childhoods. Although some of the narrators had converted from their childhood religions to other religious traditions, they were all brought up in religious households where at least one parent (and usually both) was a practicing member of a religious community. These families produced religious children who continued a

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<sup>46</sup> McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Eakin, Paul. *How Our Lives Become Stories* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 115.

religious tradition into adulthood.

However, in some of the narratives, the presence of family members as characters in the story is much more integral to the story, and much more complicated. These family members not only function as transmitters of the religious tradition, but as dispositional organizing schema in the narratives. The narrators "carry" a family member with them through the narratives, either literally or figuratively. The function of these family members is varied, but their continuing presence in the narratives is necessary for the narrator to convey their story. In some of the stories, the mother, father, or both, are repeatedly mentioned and serve as a touchstone for the narrator. They could act as an inspiration, an example, or even a foil. In other stories, the narrators rely on the physical and metaphorical family motif when telling about their relationship with their religious tradition. In some stories, the narrator sets the stage by providing details about the behavior and personality of a family member. Throughout the rest of the story, the narrator describes the influence this person had on his own personality and behavior. Sometimes, the narrator directly talks about this person. At other times, the narrative describes behaviors or preferences that the narrator acquired from the person during his childhood

Dan McAdams uses the term "imago" to describe one of the narrative elements that appears in a life story. An imago, unlike a character, is not a real person, but is an idealized version of the self that the narrator creates in his story by projecting qualities onto another person, real or imagined. The imago is the "persona" that the narrator conveys to the reader. In narratives with strong familial dispositions, the imago is also the constructed memories of the family member or members who strongly influence the narrator. In the narratives with a strong familial disposition, the family member whom the narrator references repeatedly through their childhood has a dominant presence throughout the narrative. Furthermore, the narrator, in the end, describes attributes



of herself which correspond to the person she emulated. A common colloquialism states, "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." I found this to be true in the narratives with strong familial dispositions. In most of the narratives, the narrator develops similar attributes to the person he describes as having an influence in his religious life as a child. In the narratives with strong familial dispositions, the narrator's story mirrors, in one way or another, the story of her parents. The narrator often concludes her story describing an attitude towards or a relationship with their religious tradition similar to their influential family member.

Eight of the twenty-one narratives in the Pilot Project demonstrated strong familial dispositions. In order to illustrate the familial disposition and how it functioned in the narratives, I will present my analysis of three narratives, one from each religious tradition represented in the pilot study.

The first is Mansour Ansari, who identifies as a Muslim. Ansari's narrative was very rich in language and detail. Ansari is a leader in the Muslim and inter-faith community in Atlanta, and considers himself ecumenical when it comes to his religiosity. His religious life story is thoughtful and well presented; I got the feeling he had thought about and told many of these stories before. The major themes in his narrative are socioeconomics, race, ethnicity, and personal influence. All of these themes revolve around his relationship to his father. Ansari initially introduces his thoughts about socioeconomics, race, ethnicity, and influence in reference to his father and/or his relationship to his father, and he continues to cite his father repeatedly throughout his narrative, even when his father is not involved in a particular story that he is telling. Ansari's relationship to his father is a sub-story that, if lifted out of the religious life story narrative, would include a beginning, a conflict, and a happy ending that reconciles their relationship (much like a Hollywood movie). The beginning of the sub-story describes the initial influence

that Ansari's father has on him as a child. This is followed by Ansari's break from his father's physical control as he moves out of his childhood home into his own life and develops his own ideas. The sub-story concludes with Ansari's ultimate reconciliation with his father, a reconciliation that manifested because Ansari's father was able to let go of some of his racial prejudice when he expressed a desire to reconcile with his family. Ansari narrates many sub-stories within his narrative, all of them parallel to the story of his relationship with his father. For instance, Ansari describes letting go of his own preconceived notions in order to convert to Islam, allowing him to reconcile with his racial and ethnic identity. So, the familial disposition that architectural-ly supports the integrity of the narrative is based on Ansari's father, his relationship to his father, and the continuing aspects of his father's personality that manifest in Ansari's religious life as an adult.

When asked about his childhood, Ansari states that he grew up "in a working class neighborhood, where my father got wealthy." So the very first things that he mentions are his socioeconomic status and his father. Ansari refers to social status often in his narrative, but usually in conjunction with his father or a father figure. Certainly, his father was a large influence on him regarding status and influence, as he talks about him as a leader in the church. For Ansari's father, "being a staunch member of the church and somebody who (financially) supported the church" was considered "religious." So, in his mind, and from a very young age, Ansari connected his father's role as a man of wealth and influence in the community to his religiosity. Throughout his narrative, Ansari equates religiosity with influence, continuing the theme he presented in the first words of his interview. For example, he talks about how his father paid to send him to Syracuse, a "rich, expensive school." Later, he talks about going on the "five star air conditioned luxury pilgrimage" to Hajj. At the end of the interview, he is still describing himself in

terms of influence, this time political influence, as he talks about how he has sat with the Iranian president in the general assembly in the United Nations for several years in a row. He says, "I have had my pictures with the current president and former president."

In addition to socioeconomic status, the issues of race and ethnicity are very prominent in the narrative, and they first appear during the section on Ansari's childhood. Ansari's parents were Lebanese immigrants who lived in an Arab and Lebanese neighborhood Ansari describes as a "deeply cultural place." Ansari provides very rich details in the many nuclear episodes within his narrative. In the first of these episodes, he describes the Syrian-American club around the corner from his house where "all the guys hung out and smoked cigars and had parties and ate Lebanese food."<sup>48</sup> His first nuclear episodes are of people fighting with each other in church, as the elders were trying to decide whether the children should be allowed to speak English or continue with Arabic in the home. This was his introduction into a recurring theme of cultural assimilation and privilege and also an example of the strong family like ties within the church and the community. Again, Ansari repeats these themes at the end of the narrative, talking about the schism between different factions of Muslims and equating the church to a family that is fighting over cultural differences. By beginning and ending on similar tropes, he brings the narrative full circle. He reinforces the familial disposition, referring to religious, socioeconomic, and cultural groups that he has been associated with during his life in language that connotes close familial ties.

Ansari describes a racial and cultural identity crisis he experiences in college. The editor of the Black Panther party campus newspaper tells Ansari that if his grandparents "hadn't taken that boat ride to America... then you would be some Arab on the side of a hill in Syria." This idea

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<sup>48</sup> At the end of the interview, Ansari insisted on taking his wife and me to an Ethiopian restaurant near their home. Afterward, we went to a coffee shop where Muslim men (we were the only women) were hanging out and drinking coffee. I found this parallel to his childhood interesting.

jolted Ansari. He says, "I started going through an identity crisis. Here I am, I have an African American wife, and I am considered a white male, and now I am thinking I have to look at this thing." As he discusses this crisis, he immediately brings the narrative right back to his father. He does this by describing an event in his childhood when his father wanted to leave the community golf course and join the more exclusive Wachusett Country Club. His father was rejected, and Ansari credits this rejection to the fact that his father was not a WASP. Like his father, Ansari did not completely fit into the culture in which he found himself. Ansari narrates a reconciliation of his identity crisis with an interpretation of his newly found religious tradition, Islam. In his words, "Arabs are important because of Islam. Had not the prophet been an Arab, the Koran in Arabic, Islam started in the Arab world, they would be just another people in the backwater, and they would have been forgotten by history. It was Mohammed that made the Arabs important." He continues to reconcile his views as he describes Islam as a universal religion. Ansari views Islam in terms of obedience and political reformation. In his words he is not a very spiritual person. He says, "And this is part of my story. An important part of my story. Being a political kind of guy, you know, I'm not really, I never went through the Hari Krishna stuff, never went through the religious experience, I never went through the mystical aspects of any religion...And as democracy is a skeletal system of distribution of goods and services to a society, well, Islam is also, is that grid, if you will, that it... that dignifies the human and also bring them all together under the umbrella of servitude only to God, and not servitude or slavery to other men." His orientation towards Islam is similar to his father's orientation to Orthodoxy in his childhood. Religion is a place to exert influence and work out concrete issues in the world rather than a place to have spiritual experiences. Ansari began his narrative by describing how the men in his Orthodox church came together for a group decision on what language their children should speak to

have the best chance in their American community. He now describes the function of Islam in corresponding practical, familial terms, as Islam "brings people together."

There are three long soliloquies in Ansari's narrative and many nuclear episodes. Two of these nuclear episodes stand out as stories that Ansari has told many times, punctuated by thoughtfulness and humor, and both of these stories are about his father. During the chronological interview, Ansari had begun talking about meeting his wife in college. He interrupts himself, however, saying, "I want to mention another time, two years before I went away to college." He then narrates a story about when his sister went away to college. At her going away dinner, her father had ceremoniously given her his Navy pea coat to stay warm; in Ansari's words he "bequeathed to her his most prized possession." In return, Ansari's father asked his daughter for two things, telling her, "Don't bring back a n-word or a Jew, okay?" (This was the third reference in the narrative to racial prejudice exhibited by Ansari's father, an issue that Ansari would highlight many times during the life story. In Ansari's words, "That's one of the things that disappointed me in my life.") Ansari then tells about going with his father to visit his sister a few months later. They entered the campus and saw Ansari's sister and her Jewish boyfriend leading a march against the Vietnam War. She was wearing the pea coat. Ansari leaves suspense in the story, ending it here, only saying that his father was "breathing fire" and "made a big scene" and "the relationship didn't last."

Another important nuclear episode is about the reconciliation of Ansari and his father. Ansari gives a long soliloquy where he talks about meeting and marrying his African American wife and converting to Islam after she had converted. Ansari's father is never far from his mind as he narrates these episodes even when they are not explicitly about his father. He says, "So I knew that if my father found out about the relationship I would be out of school and in Viet

Nam. So we kept the relationship hush-hush during those college years."<sup>49</sup> A few years later, Ansari would tell his father of his marriage and conversion to Islam. He says, "'He just screamed, 'If I see you, I'll kill you.' This is how it works. So he rejected my life, he rejected my faith in Islam, he never saw his granddaughters." Ansari continues his story to describe their reconciliation in 2004. His father called him after the Red Sox won the World Series.<sup>50</sup> His father talks about the game, and then says that he wants to meet his great grandson. Ansari replies that his daughter married a black man, so the child is black, to which his father replies, "Oh fine, that's no problem." Ansari tells of his reaction, saying, "And that was my, if you will, my come to Jesus moment because my desire wanted to tell him, what do you mean it's alright? Why couldn't it have been alright thirty some years ago. We could have had a life. Instead I was the good guy, my model was the Prophet Mohammed, he was magnanimous." Ansari graciously accepts his invitation and his entire extended family, some of which he had never met before, gathered in Massachusetts for the happy reconciliation.

For many reasons, these episodes are pivotal to understanding Ansari's religious life story. First of all, he narrates the conflict in his life, which always revolves around his father. However, he is able to create a story that brings this conflict to a resolution. When he later talks about conflict in Islam or his personal struggles with learning the tenets and practices of his new found religious tradition, the episodes always end in resolution, echoing the resolution with his father. Secondly, it is obvious that Ansari has told these stories many times before, and that he is a person who knows how to tell a story in a way to keep his audience enthralled. The colorful language and specific details in his narrative may or may not be exactly how these things happened.

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<sup>49</sup> This was necessary to Ansari since his father was paying for his college.

<sup>50</sup> Both Ansari and his father were huge Red Sox fans, a baseball team which had not won the World Series in over 85 years. Ansari told me later of similar stories of reconciliation and healing involving other Red Sox fans and attributed to the win.

Was his sister really at the front of the protest? Did five hundred relatives really show up at the dinner in his honor? Regardless of the truth of these episodes, these are the statements and the stories that Ansari wants his audience to hear and the way that he wants them to know them. Most importantly, he wants his audience to understand that there has been conflict in his life, that he has followed the example set by Mohammed, and that this conflict has been resolved. Ansari will later talk about the tenets of his religion, switching from speaking in first person to third person, as if in a teaching mode. He describes a consistent and obedient Islamic personal practice, but first and foremost describes how he uses Mohammed as a model for his own behavior.

Ansari ends the interview by talking about the familial lineage of the Abrahamic religions, saying that "Islam is simply the third and youngest and the final chapter in the Abrahamic monotheistic line." He begins by talking about his orthodox church as a family group, and ends by talking about Islam as a family. Being born and raised in the Syrian Christian Orthodox Church and then converting to Islam as an adult, Ansari obviously did not learn his current religious practices and tenets from his family of origin. However, his narrative has a strong familial disposition and is anchored by stories about family and, in particular, his father.

Some narratives, like Ansari's, exhibited a strong familial disposition by focusing on one specific family member. However, other narratives focused on a few family members, even the entire family. Ansari's narrative is strongly influenced by his father and later by the Prophet Mohammed, both strong masculine figures in his life. He only briefly mentioned his mother, and only did so when he was asked about her directly, and then also in relationship with his father. In contrast to Ansari's narrative, the next narrative I will present is Seshu Sarma. Sarma references both her mother and father, and traits and attributes she learned from them, continuously and consistently throughout her narrative. Her relationship to each of her parents, as well as her ob-

servations of their relationship to each other, creates the framework for Sarma's religious life story. Additionally, these relationships continually interplay with her evolving understanding of her religious tradition.

Sarma is a 60-year-old physician who was born in India. Her religious tradition is Hinduism. Sarma begins the narrative by stating that her mother is "extremely devoted, extremely religious to a point where if she doesn't do a certain ritual she is afraid something bad is going to happen." She then immediately describes her father as a non-religious atheist. She clarifies this point by describing the contrast between her parents. She says, "I grew up with a mother who saw God in the idols and the statues, you know... on one side and on the other side a father who actually saw divinity in people." Sarma establishes this conflict in the beginning of her narrative and continues to express the contrast between her mother and her father throughout her story. As a child, she saw herself caught between the two worlds of her mother and father. Her mother's world was superstitious and passive, and her father's world was rational and active. She describes this conflict when she says, "I enjoy the rituals because you dress up well, you decorate the altar... On the other hand, the Vedantic the, the philosophical side of it, which my father, I thought he always believe in, there's a lot of peace inside. So I tried to balance it out. Neither here nor there, for a long time."

Sarma's narrative is a series of conflicts, mentioned repeatedly, and all driven by her original statements about her parents. The first is the feminine versus the masculine, illustrated by her differing relationships with her parents. She talks about getting her father's nature, saying that she was actively involved in community and activism events. She will eventually follow this rational way of thinking vocationally, going into medical practice.<sup>51</sup> She repeatedly says during

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<sup>51</sup> Her father insisted that she finish her college degree before joining her husband in the United States, and postponed her marriage plans in order for her to pursue her education.



the narrative that her mother did not actively *teach* her Hinduism, but that she just passively observed her. Sarma seems disappointed by the idea, feeling that her mother should have actively taught her. Her words suggest that she was more inclined to emulate her father, although she felt herself drawn to her mother. The next conflict is the active persona versus the meditative persona exemplified by the differing practices of Hinduism. Sarma found her mother's rituals entertaining, but not that meaningful to her. In contrast, she was attracted to the more meditative practices of Vedanta, but said they could sometimes be dull. The third conflict Sarma wrestles with in her narrative is related to "magical thinking," the superstitions she observes, versus rationality and concrete action in the world. She chides what she observes as silly superstitions of her mother and grandmother and leans towards a more realistic and scientific way of interacting with her world.

The language in the first part of Sarma's narrative emphasizes her conflict with her mother's "magical" Hindu rituals and her father's atheistic rationality. She expresses this conflict not only in the content of her narrative, but also by the way she constructs her sentences. She will often make a definitive statement followed by a clarification, but the clarification seemingly contradicts her original statement. For instance, when describing her father, Sarma says that he was an atheist, but clarifies this characterization by stating that "he never believed in a religion that did not see the divinity in people." Even though she tries to distance herself from her mother's rituals and superstitions, she recognizes that she did internalize these aspects of Hinduism viscerally. Sarma emphasizes the fact that she learned her mother's Hindu rituals passively, and repeatedly makes the point that she never "learned" religion from her mother, she only "observed" her. Part of her conflict stemmed from the fact that she did not "feel" what she thought she should feel when practicing a religious tradition. She thought that religious experience should have

made her "tearful" when she tried to connect to God, but she did not feel this way doing the rituals.

As much as Sarma tries to distance herself from her mother's Hinduism, the nuclear episodes in the first part of her narrative revolve around her mother and the ritualistic aspects of Hinduism. She provides many rich details as she describes visiting Balaji's temple in Tirupati. Another memory is of her father chastising her mother's religion. Sarma says, "I remember one time... I was probably eleven, twelve, maybe thirteen, my father used to say to her, what's the point of it? What do you get out of it? Ask your Lord to give you a rupee, would he give it to you?" At this point, Sarma's tone changes, and she describes how she enjoyed the rituals, but still felt ambivalent about them. As she says, "I always considered myself a Hindu, but I always battle as to which kind of Hindu I was."

As her narrative progresses, reflecting the chronological progression of her life, Sarma's language changes. At the beginning of the narrative, she speaks in partial, interrupted sentences, but this style changes after the first half of her narrative. She speaks more decisively. The transition is marked by her first soliloquy. Here, Sarma begins by contrasting her experience of pluralism growing up in India with that of living in the United States. She had described a peaceful coexistence with Muslims and Christians in her childhood neighborhood where, she says, "We all thought we were one family. We did not really separate it into three religions."<sup>52</sup> She then tells of three nuclear episodes in the United States when others tried to convert her to Christianity. In each case, she tells the person that she *does* believe in Jesus, but she goes further than that. She echoes her original descriptions of her father, saying, "We believe in divinity." In this soliloquy, her language and message do not reflect the ambivalence of the first half of her narrative. She now states that her belief is that people, even if they take different paths to God, are all one fami-

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<sup>52</sup> Sarma does acknowledge hearing about Muslim-Hindu riots as a child, but says she never saw them.

ly and that each person has a little piece of divinity in them. She ends this soliloquy by saying, "So, finally, in my forties, I came to the realization that this is the religion. This is the basis of my religion. And I am *quite* comfortable with it."

In her second soliloquy, she talks about a series of coincidences that led her to become a devotee of Shirdi Sai Baba in recent years. During the interview, she showed me pictures and books of Shirdi Sai Baba that she claims to have received serendipitously from disparate sources. When she begins her devotional practices to Shirdi Sai Baba, she is filled with ambivalence. She says, "In the morning I get up, I pray, I do this; I've never done this, what's happening to me?" She also states that reading and listening to lectures by Shirdi Sai Baba gets her to a point where she is sometimes in tears, fulfilling her childhood assumption about religious experience. At this point, her narrative is about being confused at her attraction to her new found guru and the experiences that she is having. Although she married a Hindu and raised her children within the tenets and practices of Hinduism, her childhood aversion to magical thinking and superstitions resurfaces throughout the narrative. When she finds herself having unexplainable experiences centering on a guru whom she has never met or previously known about, she is surprised and confused. She describes herself being drawn into her mother's world of ritual and magical thinking, while at the same time channeling her father's rational and scientific thinking in an attempt to figure out what is happening to her.

When concluding her religious life story, Sarma integrates the qualities of her mother and her father. She brings cohesion to her narrative by reconciling the two conflicting aspects of herself and her religious tradition. She does not do this by choosing one side over the other. Instead, she directly acknowledges her religious experiences and beliefs and explains that although it may seem superstitious and magical to outsiders, it works for her, so that is enough. She emphasizes

this point a few times, by saying, "Now I tell myself, the way I rationalize it that whenever I do this, whatever it is, whether it is the meditation aspect or how other people explain it, I have a lot of inner strength, and that is enough for me to continue what I am doing." She also says, "Because no matter how much you are logical, still the human mind is such that at sometimes, just like an old or a weak person needs a cane, you need something. And to me, spirituality, religion, that gives you that strength and I welcome it. And so I don't see any problem." She compares religious experience to electricity as something that you can use even though you do not see it and do not understand how it works.

Sarma's narrative, like Ansari's, is a story about conflict originating in childhood and finally resolving during adulthood. Sarma's narrative conflict is based on the dichotomy of her parents' traditional religious practices and beliefs. At the very end of her interview, she repeats the first themes she mentioned in the narrative: rituals and atheism. However, she is now able to speak of these two concepts without any ambivalence. She says, "Atheism is considered a form of Hinduism because you may not believe in a particular religious principle, but you still believe in God and human beings. So, it gives you freedom to choose, to... and there are some that are just very happy with rituals, like my mother. But as for me, rituals along don't satisfy me. To me, you really have to go a little beyond that."

Sarma not only rectified her ambivalence towards her two opposing natures, but also expanded this idea to incorporate an acceptance of all varieties of religious traditions. As people get older, they are able to reminisce about their lives and make sense of different elements. Sarma's narrative is a good example of how an individual builds a story that is coherent by continuously using the familial elements that influenced her so strongly during her childhood.

Sarma and Ansari both structure their narratives with the familial disposition by focusing

on the effects of their relationships with one or more parents. However, as illustrated in our final narrative, familial disposition can be constructed in a narrative by using the entire family structure and the recurring concept of family. Our final narrator is Pam Earnest, a Baptist Christian who works as a CEO of a privately held company. Unlike the other two interviews, Earnest does not provide a lot of details about a specific family member that influences her during her childhood. Rather, she emphasizes the concepts of family and small town life. She starts her narrative by saying, "I was very blessed to be born into a wonderful family. My mother was a church organizer; my father was a deacon. I grew up in a very small town in southern Mississippi. I had uncles that were preachers, cousins that were missionaries, just a wonderful blessed family." Earnest continually refers to her family and community using positive words such as "blessed", "happy go lucky" and "wonderful." (She uses the words "wonderful" and "blessed" over ten times in the first five minutes of the interview). She relates few specific episodic memories from her childhood part of her narrative. In the first, she relates a picture she has in her mind of her father sitting in the living room reading his Bible. Although she initially paints a picture of a family whose center was the church, she also says, "There weren't any family devotion times, we really didn't have those." Regardless of the factual truth, the story that Earnest is choosing to tell about her childhood is of a happy, God-centered family. Moreover, she avoids discussing any conflict in her childhood, choosing to emphasize her happy and wholesome family and her church family. She also describes her small town community as a close knit family, saying, "It was a small town, you could walk down Main Street and everybody would say hello, everybody knew your name."

Even though she grew up in the 1950's and 1960's, a time of social and racial turbulence in the United States, her narrative does not reference any of this. She describes that period of her

life in her hometown as "a very sheltered time, a very God-centered time."<sup>53</sup> She continues her narrative by referring to her extended family, saying that "I think I have prayers of grandfathers and great grandfathers that prayed, and coming forth I am the product of Godly people, so it was a peaceful little town."

Earnest continues using the family disposition as she narrates her adolescence and early adulthood. When she does mention pivotal moments, she always refers to her family. For instance, she describes two young men who came to her town for two summers. She was shocked by the fact that they took notes in church. She did not know that it was permissible to take notes or write in a bible, and because of this event she started looking at different ways of worship (always Christian). She references this memory thematically back to her family, explaining that they did not expose her to different ways of worship.

Earnest, like many of the narrators, paints a picture with her story. During the part of her narrative that describes her childhood, she uses very broad strokes. She builds her narrative using generalizations about her nuclear family, her extended family, her church family, and small town family community. Due in part to the lack of specific memories, the narrative that she creates looks more like an impressionistic painting. She creates an image of a peaceful, happy, problem free childhood centered on family. This emphasis on a happy family life is all the more pronounced when she mentions, but does not emphasize, specific traumatic events in her life. The first is the death of her father, which occurred when Earnest was sixteen years old. Although he died after a very prolonged illness, she does not elaborate about the event or her feelings about it, except to say that the pastor's wife and family were a great source of support for her family. The other aspect of her life that is only mentioned in passing is travel. Earnest traveled extensively,

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<sup>53</sup> Many of the narrators did not describe a strong historical placement, even though they were reminiscing about specific time periods, as adults, knew more about historical events happening in their childhood.

living throughout Europe while her husband was in the military, but she does not discuss this in her narrative. She prefers to focus on the stability and consistency of family themes and tropes to tell her story.

Earnest does discuss conflict in her life during her soliloquies, which focus on her marriage and nuclear family life. The first of these involve her husband. She states that she was attracted to him because he was afraid of nothing, but later on found out that he had a bad temper. She references this back to her familial disposition when she says, "he was brought up in a dysfunctional family. Now isn't it just like the Lord to put somebody very strong in their faith, and someone [not so strong in their faith]." In her soliloquy, she discusses turning to the Lord to save her marriage, since she was not going to leave her husband. (Although they separated three times, she did not believe in divorce.) She turned to God through prayer, and then described a type of conversion experience, where she learned to pray in a way that would have direct impact on her life and her world, a practice she continues to this day. Earnest emphasized that this type of prayer was new to her and included use of the Concordances in her bible, things she never knew about as a child.

Her second soliloquy is a series of stories about miracles surrounding her family establishing roots in Atlanta, finding their permanent family home, and establishing their church home at Peachtree Corners Baptist Church. She talks about how the family came close to bankruptcy, about massive legal problems in their business, about health and family problems. Each time, she prayed and her prayers were answered. In her words, "It takes the limit off what God can do in your life, you know, you're healed, you're prosperous, you're blessed, your family is intact. It's not that we haven't had any more problems, we have had plenty of problems, but we have learned how to go to the word to find the answer, and believe that, and then watch God work."

Earnest uses the word "we" here, denoting her attachment and understanding that she is part of a family unit. Now, however, the predominant family unit is her husband and their daughters.<sup>54</sup>

Earnest raised her daughters in the church. She mentions that because of many health problems doctors told her she was not able to conceive and bear children, but that the Lord came through and blessed her with two healthy babies. At the end of the interview, she talks about her family. Both of her daughters are married, and both of her sons-in-law work for the company that Earnest owns with her husband. Her daughters are both practicing Christians, and they now live within two miles of Earnest. She is narratively re-creating the happy and intact nuclear family of her childhood that she described in the beginning of her narrative.

Additionally, Earnest has created a Christian family atmosphere in her workplace. She and her husband own a business with about eighty employees. Every Wednesday she screens Andy Stanley videos in the break room to encourage fellowship and to inspire her staff. Their company has a cross built into the logo, and she considers herself a minister and a counselor to her employees. At the very end of her narrative, she echoes the words that she started with, saying, "I call my girls (and say) listen to this scripture. We talk about the Lord all the time. It's just a wonderful way of life."

Earnest starts her interview with somewhat vague childhood memories of a happy family in a small, close knit community. After her childhood, her stories get more directed as she talks about conflicts with her husband and how the resolution of these conflicts changes and increases her faith in God. She develops a rich and consistent prayer life that she did not have as a child. The last third of her interview is much more directed, with very specific episodic memories of changing jobs, legal issues, health issues, and business problems. Each conflict is resolved by

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<sup>54</sup> Earnest's narrative was unusual in the fact that she focused so much on her current nuclear family. Most of the narrators, if they focused on family, focused on their family of origin. Many either did not mention their current families or mentioned them just in passing.



prayer. There is a feeling of expansion and increasing specificity in her narrative. Earnest chooses to recount events in which she portrays her God as the hero who heals and showers her with blessings in response to her directed prayer. Conversely she did not use the same level of detail in her narrative when describing her younger life when her understanding of God and prayer was limited.

Throughout all of the narrative changes in her story, however, family remains the anchor. She opens her story and ends her story with family, and all of her nuclear episodes involve her family, not just herself. We do not know if, like many other narrators, Earnest grew up to become like her mother or another important religious figure, as she did not provide enough detail about her childhood, or about childhood family members. However, she was able to re-create the small town feel in her small closely held company, and her descriptions of her current nuclear family life echo her "blessed" and "wonderful" childhood family life. Family is her anchor, and the anchoring disposition of her narrative. Earnest is born into a Christian family in a Christian community. At the end, when asked if she has had encounters with people of other religions, she answers that she has always wanted to have a relationship with a Jewish person and that Mormonism is a cult. However, she has learned that "God is just a lot smarter than I am. And he looks at the heart of people. If they are trying to get to him by a certain way, and they believe that Jesus is the way, who am I to judge?" Again, her response is echoing the small town inclusiveness of her childhood, affirming the brotherhood of Christianity. Although her family gave her a Christian upbringing and heritage, in some ways she turns away and changes the way she prays and relates to her religious tradition. So, the dispositional leanings of her childhood do much more than provide the religious language and knowledge that she eventually grows into. They provide the patterns and the focus on people and family that have stayed with throughout

her life story.

Here are examples of three narratives of people with different backgrounds and religious traditions. In all three, the familial disposition architecturally structures their narratives into coherent stories. It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine why these narrators chose to tell us story that so strongly references certain family members, or the concept of family, when other narrators clearly do not refer to their families much at all, and do not structure their stories around them. For now, it is enough to note that familial disposition is very strong to some of these narrators, and they tell stories that give a lot of agency and importance to family, regardless of their religious tradition or the circumstances of their lives.

Families are more than the teachers of religious traditions and patterns of communication. These narratives show that the transmission of religion from generation to generation is complicated. Religious decisions may sometimes have more to do with the relationship of a person to a family member than to what the family member did or did not teach about the religion.

## 8 CONCLUSION

*“I say in my prayer, make everyone a good person, and bless all the good persons.”  
-Aruna Kailasa, Project Narrator.*

In this thesis, I have used a narrative approach to examine how the individuals who participated in the Religious Life Stories Pilot Project structured their narratives to create coherent, cohesive stories. I did not separate or code the stories into traditionally understood religious and secular language but considered the totality of the story as important to the narrators' religious lives. I analyzed each narrative as a whole story, looking for the story line or main focus of the narrator in order to understand how they viewed their personal religiosity and how their religious traditions integrated into other aspects of their lives. To do this, I concentrated on a few of the narrative elements in the stories, specifically the imagery, imagoes, soliloquies, nuclear episodes, beginnings, and endings.

The use of oral history narratives in the academic study of religion complicates the picture of individual religiosity. Narratives are more difficult to code and quantify than answers from polls or shorter interviews because of their length and variety of responses, but the knowledge gained from them is invaluable because they can give us information that polls and shorter interviews cannot. For instance, a pollster can ask a group of people if they belong to a religious denomination. From that question, researchers can glean statistics on religious affiliation. However, as illustrated by the outlier disposition, that poll cannot glean to what extent the individuals identify with that denomination, or how. Furthermore, oral history interviews can illustrate connections between religious identity and other aspects of identity, changes in religiosity over time, historical and social context, topics that are hard to address with polls or short

answers.<sup>55</sup>

In my analysis, I identified specific patterns used by narrators to anchor and develop their stories which crossed religious traditions. These elements I designated as the dispositions. Further research is needed to see if these dispositions can be found to frame other religious life stories, and also to see if they are prevalent among younger populations. Nevertheless, these narratives illustrate how these individuals orient themselves to religious traditions and choose among the vast varieties of tenets, practices, beliefs, and organizations offered under the umbrella of their traditions. These individuals each had natural affinities and propensities, be they toward family, socioeconomic status, service, etc. The dispositions classify common propensities by analyzing the frequency and depth of what they spoke about. The narratives further show how these propensities intersect with their religious tradition. "Religious" people are sometimes stereotyped as being altruistic or overly obedient. Perhaps these characteristics are the propensity of the individual, and the religious tradition is one of the vehicles they use in their lives to express this propensity.

Dispositions are beneficial to the academic study of religion as a way to categorize individual religious narratives. Before I discuss this, I will briefly show how using the dispositions can enhance understanding of personal religiosity in popular culture, between persons, and on an individual basis. In discussing his incoherence theory, Mark Chaves says, "Indeed attributing an unwarranted coherence to people's religious ideas and practices may be the single most important misunderstanding about religion among the general public. It is behind both the unrealistic popu-

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<sup>55</sup> I have used one specific methodology to analyze these narratives, but there are many ways to analyze them. These oral histories will be useful to scholars who will be able to study them from historical, social, psychological, and traditional religious perspectives (coding for religious events, language, etc.).

lar idealizations for religion and the popular demonization of religion."<sup>56</sup> This "demonization" is illustrated by stereotypical assumptions found in the press and popular forum that individuals follow the teachings of their religious tradition to the letter and also to assumptions that treat deviations from accepted belief and behavior as an aberration rather than a common occurrence. Conveying the breadth of religiosity within individuals and religious communities can broaden an understanding of religious pluralism and individuality of practice as a norm. To this end, dispositions classify some of the ways that individuals relate to religious tradition within their lives.

Dispositions also foster a greater understanding of religious tradition on a personal and interpersonal level. Often, people avoid discussing religion and their own personal religiosity, especially with people of different religions.<sup>57</sup> This avoidance can harbor unrealistic assumptions about the varieties of ways people practice religion and the variety of ways religion manifests in peoples' lives, as illustrated by the individuals who structured their narratives using the outlier motif. They each narrated their stories by characterizing their religious traditions somewhat as foils to their own religious experience, describing themselves as different than the typical practitioner. Finally, having incomplete understanding about the varieties of religiosity affects people individually. Some people express a desire for the community and sense of purpose that having a religious tradition can offer, but they are under the assumption that they need to fit the stereotypes of a religious tradition to be involved with it. Personal religious narratives foster a sense of normalizing the variety of orientations towards religious traditions. Based on these interviews, religion has many different meanings, orientations, purposes, and applications to different people. Understanding these variations can help to limit the sensationalism of religious pluralism

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<sup>56</sup> Chaves,9. The coherence that Chaves is referring to is the assumption is that individuals believe and practice the tenets and dictates of their religious tradition without modification and without questioning; he is not referring to the coherence of narrative I discuss.

<sup>57</sup> My source for this is antidotal. During the interviews, I was told, many times, that this was the first time they had been asked questions like these.

and soften rigid interpretation of how individuals *should be* oriented within their religious tradition by understanding how they actually do portray themselves within their religious life story. Any work, academic or otherwise, that fosters communication between people regarding lived religious traditions is valuable insofar as it can enhance understanding and lessen divisiveness.

Next, in addition to enhancing general understanding of individual religiosity, the dispositions are useful in the academic study of religion. As religious studies scholars know, people do not bracket religion as a separate part of their identity or their lives. Religion is not an all-or-nothing proposition, and there are probably as many varieties of "religion" as there are human beings who practice, believe in, or are members of a religion. By analyzing how individuals describe their own history and how they place their lives in context of their religiosity, the dispositions can help us categorize, study, and explain this diversity. The dispositions show specific ways in which an individual orients her life story around, to, and within her religion. They illustrate how different aspects of an individual's narrative identity are not compartmentalized, but weave in and out of each other to create unique, one of a kind stories. Using religious tradition as the overriding category for the individual's religiosity only gives us part of that individual's story. For example, the religious life story of a Baptist minister who comes from a long history of Baptist hierarchy is not just the story of the continuity and evolution of Baptist traditions and teachings. It is also the story of a man's conflicts with his conscience and how he ameliorates these conflicts religiously and professionally while still maintaining a connection to his religious tradition. Likewise, the story of a Muslim man who converts from Orthodox Christianity is not only a religious conversion story. It is also the story of a man experiencing ongoing conflict and ultimate resolution with his father, and how he uses his propensity towards justice and being a man of influence to find his place within Islam. The dispositions are one way to categorize the

narratives in order to quantify this understanding of the variety of what individuals speak about under the umbrella of religiosity. The dispositions define these elements in the narratives.

Finally, using dispositional categories to classify individuals offers scholars a method of studying individual religiosity across doctrinal boundaries. Comparative religious studies have looked for common elements in different religious traditions. Instead of asking what religions have in common, maybe the question should be what do people have in common? As this small analysis has shown, certain people construct their narratives with a strong sense of personal agency, going so far as to describe themselves as outliers to the tradition to which they are committed. And it does not matter which specific religious tradition they belong to; we find this "type" of person in all three religious traditions represented in the narratives. Similarly, other people structure their stories using the familial disposition, giving agency and importance to one or more family members in a way that builds the cohesion of their stories. Again, this "type" of person was found in each of the three religious traditions. The stories of two individuals of different religious traditions may have more in common with how they orient themselves to their traditions within their narrative than two individuals of the same tradition. By identifying how an individual is disposed to telling her religious life story, it may become evident that there are a certain number of different ways a person orients herself to her religion, no matter what the religious tradition. In this way, scholars can comparatively study how these dispositions manifest in different religious traditions. Using dispositional categories can also help explain how people can connect across traditions and illuminate the natural affinities and antipathies between people of various religious traditions. Many inter-faith activities and organizations strive to create understanding between people of different religious traditions. Understanding an individual's disposition towards his life story, and seeing that people of varying religious traditions share this dispo-

sition, helps to explain why some of these initiatives work, and some of them don't. For example, the Higher Ground group in Atlanta is an inter-faith organization which focuses on service projects all around the city. When the members speak, it is from a place of interest in being of service, rather than a place to debate their theological differences. Perhaps the leaders of this group have a contributive disposition towards their religious traditions and within their lives. This would help explain why their efforts have been successful. It is easier to focus on enhancing commonalities than directly coming to grips with doctrinal differences. Dispositions can help explain why certain people are attracted to certain denominations and congregations. A person with a contributive disposition would probably be found in a congregation with the same directive of service. A person with a compliant disposition would have fewer issues with a community that encourages strict adherence to rules and requirements, as this is already in their nature. Dispositions may help explain attributes of successful religious leadership across denominational bounds. It is obvious that religious people are all unique and different; dispositions help to illustrate how they are different.

There is much more to these religious life stories, and by deduction, individual religiosity, than belonging to a religious tradition or a congregation. Religiosity weaves in and out of individual lives, and is not always bracketed or segregated into sacred space or sacred time. The dispositions offer one way to understand the breadth and depth of religiosity within an individual's life story.



## AFTERWORD

First, all of the narrators expressed appreciation for the opportunity to tell their stories, even those who were reticent at first. They appreciated, first of all, being heard, but also being given the opportunity to make connections and put their religious life stories in context. For these narrators, being asked to record their story was a rare opportunity, especially in the context of an academic study.

Second, I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to conduct and study these interviews. Being a graduate student in religious studies and being a part of this project has greatly expanded my understanding of religion and human nature. I have found that traditional religiosity is not as privileged in the lives of the individuals as I previously assumed. I find myself having fewer stereotypes, or at least being aware of them. My work with the Religious Life Stories Project has fostered a greater appreciation of all religious traditions, and I now find myself defending religion in a way that I never did before. I do not approach people with the idea in my mind that they are seeing me through a doctrinal religious lens; I no longer feel that people are "leading with their religion." I now have a better grasp on how religious conversion can be as seamless as changing clothes, how baseball can heal conflict, and why a woman tells me that she became a Seventh-Day Adventist because she did not want to eat pork. Finally, I have a better understanding of why it is possible, and even probable, that my mother would tell me she only started to believe in God at age sixty-five when to me she appeared to be the most devout cradle to grave Catholic.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

Following are the guidelines used for the Religious Life Stories Pilot Study.

#### RELIGIOUS LIVES AND IDENTITIES

##### A Spiritual Autobiography Archive

##### Interview guideline

##### I. Prior to recording

1. Introduce the project briefly and ask the participant to carefully read the informed consent form. Informed consent signature is mandatory prior to conducting the interview. Sign two copies, one for you the researcher and one for the research participant.

2. If the participant agrees and signs the consent sheet, summarize the basic elements of the interview: “The interview will take no more than ninety minutes, this is the audio recorder that we will use, if you feel uncomfortable at any moment during the interview and wish to stop or pause, please feel free to do so.” Ask, “Before we proceed, do you have any questions about the confidentiality and privacy of the interview?” Take time to discuss any concerns that the subject brings up.

3. Ask the participant if it is okay to go ahead and start the recorder.

\*Recorded section following

##### II. Introductory information

1. Ask for the subject’s name

2. State your (Interviewer’s) name

3. State the date, place, and time of interview

#### 4. Discuss definitions of religion/spirituality/faith

Suggested: “The subject of this interview is your religious life. Sometimes people prefer to use the words ‘spirituality’ or ‘faith’ instead of ‘religion.’ Do you have a preference for how we refer to this area of life?” If the participant does prefer a term other than religion, use that term throughout the interview rather than ‘religion.’

### III. Religious Background

#### A. Childhood

1. What are your earliest memories concerning religion? Can you recall a specific moment or event?

2. What role, if any, did religion play in your childhood?

3. As a child, what religious practices did you participate in? (i.e., prayer, meditation, worship/gathering, etc.) How often?

4. What was the religious background, if any, of your family of origin? Did your parents talk to you about religion? Did they share their religious experiences or stories with you?

5. Were there any influential religious persons or figures in your childhood? If so, which ones were most influential to you? Why?

6. How did you identify yourself religiously as a child?

7. How did you feel about religion as you moved out of childhood into adolescence?

#### B. Adolescence

1. What were your religious views or beliefs as a teenager?

2. Were there any changes or differences in your religious life between childhood and

when you were a teenager?

3. Were there any pivotal moments in your religious life when you were a teenager?
4. When you were a teenager, were there any significant religious figures or persons in your life? What influence did they have on you?
5. How would you have identified yourself religiously when you graduated from high school? From college? (if appropriate)

#### C. Adult

1. Was religion different in your life as an adult than it was when you were in high school (or college)? If so, how would you describe the differences?
2. Have you noticed specific moments in your life when religion became increasingly more or less important? (Have the participant describe any changes)
3. How do you identify yourself religiously? How important to you is your religious identity? (and/or, what areas of identity would be more or less significant to you?)
4. Has religion been an element in any major life changes you've experienced (moving across the country; international moves; traumatic events; death in the family; etc.) ?
5. What role does religion play in your life now? (Suggested: is it included in family events, important life moments, celebration of holidays, etc.)
- [optional] 6. If you have children, how are you raising your child/children religiously?
7. Have you had any particularly powerful religious/spiritual experiences that we have not already discussed?

#### D. Pluralism

1. When was your first interaction, if ever, with someone of a different faith/religion?

Did that interaction or relationship have any influence on your own faith/religion?

2. Are there any traditions outside of your primary religion that you draw upon? (i.e., holidays, rituals, beliefs)

3. How do you see yourself in comparison with other people who practice your religion?

In what ways do you see similarities? In what ways do you see differences?

4. In regards to your religion, do you feel understood by others? (look for cultural, insider/outsider, regional/Atlanta perspectives) In what ways do you feel misunderstood?

5. What would you most want others to understand about your religion and/or about yourself in relation to religion?

E. Final demographic information

1. What is your occupation?

2. When and where were you born?

3. How do you describe your ethnicity?

4. What is your educational background?

5. What is your marital/partnership status?

6. How many, if any, children do you have?

7. What is your current religious affiliation?

\*Be sure to ask your interview subject if there is anyone she knows whom we should interview. If so, be sure to get his/her name and contact information, or provide one of our student researcher cards.



## Appendix B

Following are brief synopsis of the narratives used in this thesis:

### DR. DOYLE HAMILTON

Doyle Hamilton is a pastoral counselor and a licensed marriage and family therapist. He was born in 1955 and grew up in a small town in North Louisiana, the son of a physician. Hamilton came from a long lineage of Southern Baptists, and begins his narrative by speaking about his family history, "And faith has been a part of our family heritage, back to my great grandfather." (His grandfather held a doctorate, and was at one time President of the Southern Baptist Convention; his father was a church Deacon). His first memory was of his baptism, with his sister, when he was eight. He describes the event, " And the symbolism of the baptism is we're buried with Christ in baptism, and then when they bring you up, the minister says raised to walk in the newness of life. So that's what happened to me. But, you know, I was eight, so it was a ... it was faith of an eight year old." He describes his childhood as one of privilege, where "I grew up on the wealthier side of the tracks. And there were times in my adolescence that I felt very guilty about that "a lot of blessing." Although pressured to go to private school, he was "very intentional about going to public school." Giving back has always been an important issue to Doyle, as he explains, "So, part of my faith was, I guess it was unique in a sense that I had a heart- and I still have this heart- for people that didn't have some of the necessities of life." He graduated from Baylor University and Baptist seminary, and began work first as a pastor and later as a pastoral counselor. In his adult life, his faith starts to change with two events: "It changed particularly, Suzanne, when my wife and I went through infertility. And it changed particularly as I

watched my sister die. And Sally and I were married and we wanted a child and we prayed for a child, and our prayers just went unanswered! And, as a pastor, as a young student, I was in my early thirties; I had a hard time making sense out of that. So, my way of dealing with my grief, I went back to school, and got another degree and my emphasis was on pastoral counseling with couples dealing with infertility." Eventually, he and his wife conceived, and had a healthy daughter. He describes the event: "That was such a powerful manifestation of the goodness of God (words very measured and careful) and I say that with reluctance, because what do you say to the couple that prayed for a child and doesn't have a child. So, I think of it as a blessing of God, but I am reluctant to say that because does that mean that the couple that does not have a child – that they are cursed by God? I don't feel that." In his work, he blends psychology and theological thinking to help couples deal with infertility, an issue that he says the church has not dealt with. As an adult, he attends church and actively prays in his vocational and personal life. He sees changes in his denomination, in his words, "There has been a lot of changes in my congregation; I just grieve this very much. This congregation that I mentioned where Brenda and Debbie and I were baptized, and my two sisters were married in that congregation, and I was married in that congregation; it has been... they just asked the pastor to leave, it has dwindled down to nothing." He talks about issues that the Baptist tradition has struggled with, including issues of homosexuality. His own parents, now in their eighties, have not worshiped anywhere for the last dozen years or so. Doyle says that, his "roots are from a conservative Baptist tradition." He laments the future of the Baptist tradition, saying that "these younger people have no loyalty to any denomination whatsoever. Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist-these younger folks could care less. And so I don't know what's going..." However, he doesn't see himself as a Baptist Christian. When asked if his beliefs are in line with what his church teaches, he replied, "Yeah, I'd say they

are pretty much in line. Now, here is what might be a fine line. I think probably I am a little bit more open minded than the average within my denomination. Because, what would you say to the Buddhist, or what would you say to the Hindu that has their own tradition?" He is curious about other faiths, but acknowledges that he knows little about them. "But of course, you have to take seriously the words of Christ who said 'I am the way, the truth, and the light. No one comes to the father but by me'. So, I wrestle with that as a Christian. What does the Hindu believe, or the Jewish faiths, who say the Messiah is yet to come?" Additionally, he was curious about the other interviewees, ending the interview by asking, "How is my interview similar and different than other people you have interviewed?"

#### LAKSHMI RAO

Lakshmi Rao was born in 1938 in Ander Pradash, India. She begins her story by saying that she grew up in village, the youngest of five children, and the only daughter. She says of her brothers (and laughs), "They were all Communists." She went to the temple, only fifty yards from her house, on "big occasions" to "chant some songs and eat prasad and then come home." She said that it was taken for granted in her neighborhood that you were a Hindu, and that "nobody approached you to change it otherwise", but, other than "doing some pujas once in a while... we (her family) didn't practice too much." She talked about the enjoyment and fun that she experienced during the festivals, especially Diwali, the Festival of lights. She expressed pride at the fact that her father was unorthodox. He allowed her to ride her bike to high school, four and a half miles from her home, which for a girl, was "quite a no-no in those days." After obtaining a degree in English, she married Dr. Rao. Although the marriage was arranged, her father "is a very broad-minded person- he asked me if I liked him. I said yes. If I said no, he wouldn't have gone forward, so I had some independence."

They settled in Oregon for a while before coming to Atlanta where her husband took a position with Emory University. Her husband was, and is, very influential in the Atlanta Hindu community, and was one of the founders of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta in Riverdale. The Raos and their two daughters would participate in Temple activities and festivals. The Hindu religion has become more important to her as she has gotten older. She says, "I started reading and listening to lectures. I learned a lot." Of the role that religion now plays in her life, she says, "Well, I relate to it... it gives me strength, and it gives me devotion from getting any bad thoughts and anything...now I'm retired, so I have all the time to do whatever I want. So it keeps me busy." In addition to her studies, she experiences coincidences which makes her wonder "how these things happen", such as being given a statue of a particular saint that she has been wanting (from a stranger), or finding a religious object she did not know she had. She goes to the Hindu Temple "mostly for socializing." She is sad by what she sees as an insulation of the younger Hindus from the greater Atlanta community, saying, "I mean, they don't go out and meet other religions, other people. They are just clinging to their own people." At the end of the interview, she was asked if Hinduism is practiced differently here than when she was a child in India. She answered by saying, that, today, "People became more religious. Even in India now." She does not see this as necessarily a positive trajectory, as she says that she is sad by what she sees as an insulation of the younger Hindus from the greater Atlanta community, saying, "I mean, they don't go out and meet other religions, other people. They are just clinging to their own people." At the end of the interview, she was asked some demographic information. Here is an excerpt:

SD: How would you describe your ethnicity?

LR: A good Hindu. Oh, do you mean like Caucasian?

SD: And how would you describe your current religious affiliation?

LR: Like one to ten?

TAYYIBAH TAYLOR

Tayyibah Taylor is the publisher and editor in chief of Azizah Magazine, which the website calls "The World's Window on the American Muslim Woman." She was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1952, and her parents were originally from Barbados and were Christians. As a child, she lived in Trinidad, in the Caribbean, and later in Canada. For Taylor, "In the Caribbean even now it is very common place, that there is this world that is unseen that is parallel to ours" and even though she did not have any "formal, ritualized (religious) experience in the Caribbean" she did experience and hear about non-physical happenings. When the family moved to Canada, they attended a non-denominational, un-named Christian church that met in the members' homes. In her words, "The whole idea behind the belief was that they tried to duplicate Jesus' life, so it would be a very simple life. It wasn't... extravagance was not something you celebrated or aspired to. So many things like celebrating Christmas was a completely man-made holiday, so they did not celebrate Christmas." During her adolescence, she embraced her love of math and science, "one of my favorite activities was trying to comprehend infinity." She had her first introduction to Islam in high school, and the idea of God as one instead of the Trinity made sense to her. She Islamic prayers and went to the Mosque for six weeks under the guise of doing a project for school. She moved on to living the life of a teenager and young adult, going to college to study pre-med. At school, she had interactions with Muslims, and stayed intrigued, but not committed. Finally, "But, lying on the beach in that bikini, and it was almost like God had said to me, if you don't change the way you are living, actually God did say this to me, it's going to mean your death." She "left Toronto in a pair of hot pants and this huge Afro, and these go-go boots, do you remember go-go boots? And came back in this long skirt with my hair wrapped,

so this transformation was really unsettling to a lot of people of course. Praying five times a day, not drinking, not smoking." Much to her family's surprise, the conversion held. Taylor married a Muslim man (she is now on her third marriage) and subsequently had five children. She lived in Saudi Arabia for 6 1/2 years while her husband started a basketball program. She says of this experience, "Because for years, when I was in Jeddah I would say this is so difficult, it was difficult physically, because I couldn't drive, I had to have a driver, or I had to arrange with my husband, plus learning the language was difficult. The cultural nuances were all very different. So I found that difficult. So the first couple of years I would complain about being there, then when I got home, here I am the only Muslim, people are staring at me cause I am covered, and this is so difficult, back in Jeddah everyone knows religion, I can't find any Halal food, then I would complain about being here." Because of this, she cultivated her "portable peace." When two of her children were young, she took them with her to Hajj, and tells a harrowing story of the camp she was living in catching fire. She lived through it, and says of the experience, "but then when a crisis comes, it is really the test of your faith. Do you really believe? And so that was really a pivotal, really huge thing in my spiritual journey that experience. Of course he got there, thought we had burned up and got back home and found us there. I thought he had burnt up. It was really profound experience and it really taught me a lot about the level of your faith and that you are doing all these rituals, but if they don't go beyond your mouth, they are just rituals." Taylor has associated with Muslims who have varying perspectives of Islam, and her magazine reflects these differing perspectives. Additionally, she is very involved in inter-faith work in Atlanta, and is a leader in the interfaith community. For her fiftieth birthday, she went skydiving. She compares the experience to her Hajj experience, "I couldn't feel my body, I felt like I was all essence, just spirit, this feeling of not being encased in my body. That Hajj was really mind expanding to me.

And when I jumped out of the airplane, for the first minute and a half it is just like you drift; there is no sound. But after the cord is pulled, it was tandem jump, I didn't do it myself, you just drift, there is no sound, and there is nothing between you and the creation. You can't feel your body. And I had the same sensation of just being spirit. Though the two experiences were totally different, I had that same understanding of myself, as being a spiritual being."

### MANSOUR ANSARI

Mansour Ansari was born in 1949 in the ethnic section of a working class neighborhood in Worcester, MA, "where my father got wealthy." His parents were of Lebanese descent, and the family were members and leaders in St. George's Syrian Orthodox Church. His earliest religious memory of church was "people fighting each other", as the Lebanese and the Syrians had differences which included whether their children should speak English or Arabic as their primary language. Ansari's father became wealthy, "being a staunch member of the church and somebody that supported the church with their resources and wealth, that's what they called religious." He describes his father as "a person with very strong opinions that couldn't be challenged", hating Jews because he was Arab-Lebanese and hating blacks when they came to America. "A real Archie Bunker type of thing. There was no reason for the prejudice, just because he has to be better than somebody else." Ansari says his "story really began" when he and his father visited his sister at college, and found her leading a protest of the Vietnam war, wearing her father's Navy pea-coat, walking hand in hand with her Jewish boyfriend. A few years later in college at Syracuse University, Ansari would also manifest his father's wrath when he dated and subsequently married a black woman, Kasi Naimbi. During his time at the university, he became involved in campus journalism, and wrote about the Revolutionary Journal of the Black Panther party. His research caused him to go "through an identity crisis. Here I am, I have an African American

wife, and I am considered a white male, and now I am thinking wow, I have to look at this thing. During my teenage years, and I remember my father when he would get more money, he wanted to join the exclusive country club, Worcester country club, instead of the Wachusett country club where the common blue collar people go. Well, even when he had the money, he was rejected, and I wondered why? Because he is an Arab. He's not a Wasp." At this point, he started to learn about Islam. After graduation, he and Kasi traveled throughout Europe as he played trumpet in a jazz band. When they returned to the United States, Kasi converted from Christianity to Islam, and Ansari soon followed suit. He describes seeing her after a two month absence, "Woa. She's really lost to me. Thinking about God, you know, she'll never be thinking of me like she's thinking of him. So I said to her, I want to tell her thank you, have a nice life, stop writing me letters wasting my time, goodbye. But when I saw her, I just had to change that... I wanted to say the other thing, but I couldn't it, instead I said 'Yeah, I realize it now, I'm a Muslim. My life changed in (snaps his finger) in that fraction of a second." Kasi & Mansour have been practicing Muslims ever since, and raised their two daughters in Islam. He eventually reconciled with his father after the Red Sox (they were both huge fans) won the World Series in 2004. Ansari considers himself at home in any mosque, with any group of people. He says, "There is no such thing as being a stranger in a mosque, or a guest. Like I can go to any mosque in the world, and I'm not made to feel and I don't feel like a guest." Just like he saw divisions in the Orthodox church of his youth, he acknowledges some divisiveness in the sects and ethnicities of Islam. However, he does not feel aligned with any one side, saying, "I've sat with the Iranian president in the general assembly in the United Nations for several years in a row. I have had my pictures with the current president and the former president. So, my view of Islam is global and non-sectarian. And because of that, what does Star Trek say, to go where no man has gone be-



fore?" Ansari spoke a lot about the historical background of Islam and draws personal inspiration from Muhammad, whom he called "magnanimous." He also credits Muhammad with putting the Arab world on the map: "Had not the prophet been an Arab, and the Koran in Arabic, Islam started in the Arab world, they would be just another people in the backwater, and they would have been forgotten by history. It was Mohammed that made the Arabs important." When asked about his demographic information at the end of the interview, Ansari says that people do not accept it if you say "I'm from Boston."

### SESSHU SARMA

Sesshu Sarma is a fifty nine year old physician who works at Grady Hospital in Atlanta. She was born in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, to a Hindu family of the Brahmin caste. She began the interview by talking about her family life: "I grew up in a household where my mother is extremely devoted, extremely religious, to a point where if she doesn't do a certain ritual, in a certain way, that is she afraid something bad is going to happen to her." And, "My father was an atheist. He never believed in; he never believed in a religion that does not see divinity in people." She passed her childhood by observing her mother practice Hindu rituals and partaking of the myriad of Hindu festivals which she describes in sensual details in her interview. However, to Sarma, "I was never, in a way, never connected myself with the Lord as I was growing up or never tried to learn anything. I just learned passively." Some of her neighborhood friends were Christians and Muslims, and she sometimes participated in her friend's Christian prayers; in her words, "There was a lot of harmony." She began attending University in India, and was married at age twenty in an arranged marriage (she had already turned down an offer from another suitor). She finished her education in India at her father's insistence, and joined her husband in the United States three years later. She has three children, and raised all of her children as Hindu,

and is an active member of the Hindu Temple in Riverdale. Still, she says about religion in her adulthood, "I always considered myself a Hindu, but I always battle as to which kind of Hindu I was." In 2009, she had a series of pivotal religious experiences. She was going through a very stressful time at home, and during this time, she had a series of coincidences regarding Shiri Sai Baba: she was given books, tapes, and pictures of the saint from disparate sources. "He was such a phenomenal speaker and orator; I was drawn to him like a magnetism." She began to pray and pay homage to the saint, and felt "like I'm getting connected to it to a point where I get tears sometimes." As she had never considered herself to be a superstitious person, she was taken aback by the succession of happenings and also her own reaction. She explains this change: "Now I tell myself, the way I rationalize it is that when I do this, whatever it is, whether it is the meditation aspect or how other people explain it, I have a lot of inner strength, and that is enough for me to continue what I am doing. "And on the conflict between her rational self and her spiritual self, she says, "Because no matter how much you are logical, still the human mind is such that at sometimes, just like an old person or a weak person needs a cane, you need something. And to me, spirituality, religion, gives you that strength that I welcome it. And I don't see any problem." She is open and pluralistic in her understanding of other religions, but she acknowledges that some people in the Atlanta area do not understand Hinduism. She recounted a few episodes of Christians trying to convert her, and she expressed amusement but also acknowledged their kindness as they did not want her to burn for eternity. Her understanding extends to her children; she says her son may be an atheist at the moment and is trying to "find himself."

#### PAMELA EARNEST

Pamela Earnest was born and grew up in Poplarville, MS, in the 1950's. She was "very blessed to be born into a wonderful family. My mother was a church organist; my father was a

Deacon. We were at the church, the Baptist church, every time the doors opened practically. Our faith was strong. I had uncles that were preachers, cousins that were missionaries, just a wonderful blessed family.” She describes church as the center of their family life; her mother played organ, Earnest sang in the choir and was involved with the GA's (Girls in Action church group). At home, "there weren't really family devotion times, we really didn't have those, but we were all encouraged to know scripture and to walk in the ways of the Lord. 'To walk in love, to be forgiving'." She describes the 1950's and 60's, as "a very sheltered time, it was a very God-centered time "A pivotal religious moment in her childhood came when she saw her music teacher's nephews taking notes in church; she did not understand why they were doing this or writing in their Bibles. To Earnest, "we didn't travel very much as a family, we took little vacations, but it was always with the family, so I was not exposed to a lot of different ways to worship." Her "teenage years were pretty much like my childhood, just a continuation." Her only childhood "tragedy" was the death of her father when she was sixteen. She studied at Pearl River Junior College, and eventually received her Master's Degree in Music Education. She continued to be involved in church choirs throughout her college years, and her faith and life continued in the same vein, in her words, "it was still kind of a cocoon life." She then met and married her husband (they are still married to this day), a man who was "brought up in a dysfunctional family. Now isn't it just like the Lord to put somebody very strong in their faith, and someone, he was strong in his faith, but he did not have the nurturing that I did." He was in the military, and was sent to Vietnam. Afterwards, Earnest and her husband were stationed in Germany. She describes the early years of her marriage as very difficult, as they were separated three times and she almost filed for divorce. She prayed about this, and they went to see a counselor after moving back to the States. "They just got on the floor, they did business with the Lord, and that spirit

was lifted off of him. He came home and he looked different. His countenance was different. Well I had prayed that he would be delivered for 8 years, I don't remember exactly the sequence of events. "From then on, she started a prayer and bible study practice, which she describes: "And that changed me. That did it that was just the thing that changed my life completely. I got up from there and all I could do was praise God. All I could do, I just knew, this is it, this is the beginning of my journey with you Lord. And so from that time on, I have done nothing but just devour the word, listen to preachers on TV, go to conferences, get as much of God in me as I can. And talking about it, just overflows. And from that point on we just started living this blow-out, miraculous life. I mean, I've got stories that will curl your hair, your toes, your fingers, your whatever." Her husband Joe started a series of businesses in which he had no formal training (first selling coffee machines and then circuitry for pay telephones) whose great success she attributes to messages and miracles from the Lord. They moved to Atlanta and started to attend Peachtree Corners Baptist Church. Their business suffered financial and legal difficulties, the positive outcome of which Earnest attributes to God: "We did not declare bankruptcy. We said we are not going to do it, God can do this, either he can do it or he can't, and I know he can. And so he did. And so you live through something like that, and it takes the limit off what God can do in your life, you know, you're healed, you're prosperous, you're blessed, your family is intact." She describes other miracles and blessings in her life, and talks of her children, who are married and are all Christians. Her son-in-laws work for their company, and as the CEO, she spends a lot of time nurturing the faith of those in her office. She continues with her prayer practices in and out of church. When asked if she had any interactions of other faiths, she responded no, but "I have always wanted to have a relationship with a Jewish person." She tries to not judge people, saying, "And he looks at the heart of people. If they are trying to get to him by a certain way, and

they believe that Jesus is the way, who am I to judge? Who am I to say that is wrong?"