This qualitative study explores and examines the experiences of students at a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest who identify with underrepresented religions. Eight participants were asked to share their experiences individually using semi-structured interview questions and their responses were analyzed utilizing a narrative inquiry approach. Six themes emerged from the analysis of the interview responses: (1) students who identify with underrepresented religious are interested in establishing community with peers who share the same religious identity as themselves, (2) students identify the need of having physical space to practice religious beliefs and traditions in association with peers that hold the same religious identity as highly important, (3) the University does play a role in the way students view the religious acceptance climate on campus, (4) the curriculum of the University plays a role in religious identity formation and exploration, (5) students often feel forced to disclose and explain their religious identity to others, and (6) many students identify the University as a potential and significant resource in their religious identity. This study contributes to the current literature on the experiences of students who identify as religious and the role of colleges and universities in their experience. The study concludes with implications and recommendations for colleges and universities based on the themes that emerged from the shared experiences of the participants.
Experiences of Students who Identify with Underrepresented Religions

by
Weston B. Prisbrey

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing College Student Services Administration

Director of the School of Language, Culture, and Society

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Weston B. Prisbrey, Author
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Giving more careful attention to religion (broadly construed) has the possibility of enhancing the work of higher education in untold ways, because religion is inextricably blended into the key dispositions that drive learning itself - the mixing of critical thinking with hope, the awareness of difference, the ability to wonder and to see the world in new ways, the skill of focusing on one thing at a time, and the blending of the person with the impersonal. Attending to religion can enliven all of these dimensions of higher learning; ignoring religion undermines them”

-Johnsen & Johnsen, 2012, p. 5

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the study which is designed to explore and examine the lived experiences of students on college campuses who identify with underrepresented religions at a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest. The study will utilize semi-structured interviews through a narrative inquiry lens to explore the personal experiences of these students and their religious identity. The purpose of exploring the personal, lived experiences of these students is to understand whether or not these students are feeling supported in their religiosity, and what experiences or university resources are resulting in these students feeling supported or not in their religious lives.

This chapter includes the following sections: (a) an introduction to the research that includes an exploration of the role that religion currently plays in higher education, (b) definitions for key terms frequently used throughout this study in order to provide a foundation of understanding, (c) naming the research questions that served as a guide to this study, (d) the purpose of this study and why exploring the lived experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions is both relevant and important, and (e) outlining the organization of this thesis.
Introduction to Research

According to The Higher Education Research Institute’s (HERI) 2004 survey of 112,000 first year students at 236 colleges and universities, 83 percent of students surveyed affiliated themselves with a religious denomination (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, & Hurtado, 2014). In addition, another survey shows that 68% of college students report religion and/or spirituality plays a major role in their lives (HarvardIOP, 2008). Researchers have also found that a strong majority of students identify with a religious/spiritual denomination and religious/spiritual development is one of the most important outcomes for a student during their collegiate experience (Bowman & Small, 2010; Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). These numbers show the importance of addressing and exploring the experiences of students who identify as religious and exploring what their experiences on college campuses. Because of the increase in attention given to creating inclusive campus communities and the religious diversity that is found within colleges and universities, researchers and scholars have become more interested in religious research (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013).

Institutions of higher education have more recently become a “spiritual marketplace” and a “house of prayer for all people” (Schmalzbauer, 2013). College campuses create a setting that merges numerous aspects of students’ lives such as social interactions with peers, work, and academics, and it is because of this context that the collegiate community is most likely to influence religious beliefs, values, and practices (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). College campuses may actually intensify a student’s religious and spiritual seeking, whether the institution is public or not (Schmalzbauer, 2013). The educational environment of a college or university appears to serve two purposes in terms of the religious identity of students; socializing
students in regards to the values and norms held by society, and creating an environment that has a positive effect on a student’s religious participation, activities related to religious and/or spiritual devotion, and emphasizing the importance of religion in every aspect of daily life (Schwadel, 2011).

Despite the positive effects of a university or college on a student’s religious identity, challenges also exist for religious students. The religious affiliation, if any, of the college or university a student attends and the personal religious affiliation of the student determines how the student will navigate questions and challenges related to meaning, purpose, and spiritual/religious identity (Bowman & Small, 2010). The diversity of religious and spiritual identities on a college campus and the students’ perception of the campus climate related to religion and spirituality can undermine opportunities for engagement in curricular and co-curricular activities and create potentially challenging experiences simply based on religious identity (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013). Students are also encouraged to develop themselves holistically, but the integration of spiritual and religious into daily life and educational activities is generally forgotten or ignored (Schmalzbauer, 2013). In order to address the potentially negative and challenging climate on many college campuses, college administrators should view religious and spiritual diversity as a great opportunity to further develop students and offer guidance to those students so they are able to effectively engage and navigate in challenging and conflict-centered conversations and activities that arise based on religious and spiritual diversity (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013; Schmalzbauer, 2013).
Definitions of Key Terms

The purpose of this section is to define key terms that are used throughout this study. These terms are used frequently, and the following definitions will be applied to these terms throughout the rest of the study.

- **Christian privilege** - the conscious and subconscious advantages often afforded the Christian faith in America’s colleges and universities (Seifert, 2007, p. 11). This privilege is manifested by the religious symbols, cultural markers, food options available in dining halls, physical spaces to hold religious meetings, and academic calendars established in a way that Christian holidays align with days when school is not in session (Seifert, 2007).

- **Religion** - a recognition of the complete dependence of a person on the source of life which leads to attitudes and actions like: reverence, gratitude for life and all that sustains it, shame and guilt for failure to live in a worthy manner, and reliance on the transcendent for help in both living and dying (Schneiders, 2003, p. 168). Religion can also be defined as a spiritual quest, cultural tradition, and an individual’s view on the existence and role of a transcendent reality (Schneiders, 2003).

- **Religiosity** - Religiosity is used to describe the encompassing organized and institutional aspects that are best represented by an individual’s religious beliefs and practices (McNamara, Nelson, Davarya, & Urry, 2010, pg. 312)

- **Religious majority** - Religious majority students are defined in this study as those students in the United States who identify with a Christian religious belief and traditions including mainstream Protestantism, evangelical Christians, and Roman Catholics (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014, pp. 221-222)
● **Religious minority** - Religions that are considered to be unique in their doctrines, values, and practices and the followers of these religions share a minority social status in belonging to groups that do not experience the representation, recognition, and privilege in United States society that is typically granted to followers of mainstream Christian traditions (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014, pp. 223). Students from religious minority groups are also considered to be those who identify with a non-Christian religion, such as Islam or Buddhism, or with no religious affiliation at all, such as atheism or generally spiritual (Small & Bowman, 2011). For the remainder of this study, the term “underrepresented religion” will be used in the place of “religious minority” in order to use language that is consistent with individuals who have been marginalized by the systems of privilege and oppression that are at play in society.

● **Spirituality** - Spirituality is used to describe the encompassing personal and transcendent aspects related to one’s beliefs and practices, whether they be religious or not (McNamara, Nelson, Davarya, & Urry, 2010, pg. 312)

**Purpose of Research**

According to Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Blake, and Tran (2010), the religious preferences and identities of college students are as follows: 68.5% of undergraduates report their religious identity to align with Christianity, 2.9% identify with Judaism, 1.2% identify with Buddhism, 1.0% identify with Islam, 0.8% identify with Hinduism, and 23.0% report no religious or spiritual affiliation. Despite 31.5% of undergraduate students identifying with an underrepresented religion, no research could be found on the experiences of these students and the role their religious identity plays on their collegiate experience. According to Braskamp,
Trautvetter, and Ward (2006), the role of religious and spiritual development needs to be further explored and investigated, including the role of culture and environment on the religious and spiritual choices made by young adults. In addition, current scholarship does not address the perceptions and experiences of students who identify with an underrepresented religion or non-religious with campus climates related to religious and spiritual identities (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014). The purpose of this study is to address this research gap by exploring the personal, lived experiences of students at colleges and universities identify with underrepresented religions or as non-religious in relation to campus climate and the role campus climate plays in their religious and spiritual decisions.

Research Questions

The guiding question for this study is: What are the experiences of undergraduate students who identify with underrepresented religions on a large, public campus in the Pacific Northwest of the United States? In addition to this guiding question, several sub-research questions also guide this study and include: (a) What is it like to be a student on a college campus who identifies with an underrepresented religion? (b) Do students who identify with underrepresented religions feel supported in their religious beliefs on college campuses? and (c) What resources and/or experiences have made or not made these students feel supported in their religious choices?

Organization of Thesis

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter one serves as an introduction to the study and the purpose of the research; and provides a list of terms and definitions that were used throughout the study, as well as the research questions that provided the framework of the study.
The second chapter, the literature review, contains a review of the literature related to the history of religion in higher education, an exploration of Christian privilege, the role that religion currently plays at institutions of higher education, and the effects of religious development in college students. Chapter three defines and establishes the methodology used to carry out this study, specifically the methods used for recruiting participants, collecting and analyzing data, and limitations that are inherent in the study. The fourth chapter discusses the results of this study and the themes that emerged from the interviews with participants. Chapter five is the discussion chapter which specifically explores and discusses the themes found during the interviews, potential implications of the study’s findings, and a conclusion on the research.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature related to the religiosity and development among students at institutions of higher education in the United States. The information used in this chapter was found through a review of scholarly and peer-reviewed articles, books, and nationwide studies in order to provide context and support to the subject. Specific databases that were used to conduct the literature review included: EBSCO Host, ERIC, ScholarsArchive, and Web of Science. The chapter is organized into four sections: (a) the history of religion in higher education institutions, (b) the establishment and prevalence of Christian privilege, (c) the role of religion in higher education today including the experiences of students who identify as religious, and (d) the effects of religious development among college students.

History of Religion in Higher Education

Higher education institutions in the United States were originally established on a foundation of religious tradition, particularly that of Protestantism (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012). Harvard, the first college established in the United States, opened its doors in 1636 and began the country’s precedence of integrating religion into the classroom environment in an effort to prepare those who entered its walls for a lifetime of service as clergymen (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The establishment of Harvard began the long and tenuous relationship between higher education and religion as Harvard was established as an institution to train Puritan clergymen (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013).

Johnsen & Johnsen (2012) divide the history of higher education establishment within the United States into three religious timelines, with the first being named the Protestant era lasting from 1636 to the early 1900’s. Within this era that began with the establishment of Harvard, the
College of William & Mary began enrolling students in 1693 and would focus its curriculum on training clergymen for service within the Anglican church (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Seven institutions would soon be established in the following 76 years by various religious congregations, with the exception of the College of Philadelphia that did not have an affiliation with a religious tradition (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). These institutions and associated affiliations include: Yale College (now known as Yale University) by Congregationalists, College of New Jersey (now known as Princeton University) by the Presbyterians, King’s College (now known as Brown University) by the Anglicans, College of Rhode Island (now known as Brown University) by the Baptists, Queens College (now known as Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey) by the Dutch Reformed, and Dartmouth College by the Congregationalists (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The religious affiliation of these institutions resulted in religious development becoming an integral part of both curriculum and practice (Astin, 2004).

In addition to the focus on religious development, the purpose of these colleges was to educate their students, primarily white and wealthy males, in becoming contributing members of society who exhibited proper conduct and morality (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Rudolph, 1990). During this time, proper conduct and morality was defined having a strong religious background and convictions and institutions sought to produce men that lived up to that definition (Rudolph, 1990). Colleges and universities continued to operate in this manner until the creation of the The Princeton Charter (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The Charter called for religious diversity and was instrumental in orchestrating a change in the religious culture of higher education, specifically calling for this mandate: “Wherefore and for that the said Petitioners have also expressed their earnest Desire that those of every Religious Denomination may have free and Equal Liberty and
Advantage of Education in the Said College any different Sentiments in Religion notwithstanding” (Wertenbaker, 1946, p. 397). Despite the Charter’s call for religious inclusion, institutions continued to maintain somewhat blurry connections with their founding religions and experienced many years of religious revivals (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). University leadership continued to be held by individuals within the clergy for many years to come. Harvard selected its first non-clerical president, Charles Elliot, in 1869, 233 years after the founding of that institution, with Yale’s first non-clergyman being appointed in 1899 and Princeton’s in 1902 (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Each of these appointments signaled a shift in the school’s focus and direction with these administrators honoring the classical curriculum but not letting it stand in the way of more practical education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Rudolph, 1990).

Even with the shift away from religious foundations and leadership, student participation in organized religion has remained relatively stable over the last century (Schmalzbauer, 2013). A new form of religious revitalization has occurred recently with the presence of students who identify with religions outside of mainstream Christianity: Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhs (Schmalzbauer, 2013). An increasing number of college students are looking outside organized religion and identifying with Atheism, Agnosticism, and general spirituality (Schneiders, 2003). This movement away from organized religion has shifted the definition of religion to “what a group believes about the nature and functioning of personal, cosmic, and transcendent reality” (Schneiders, 2003). The widespread religious identities of college students have given college and university campuses the image of being a “spiritual marketplace” and “house of prayer for all peoples” (Schmalzbauer, 2013). Despite the religious ties of many institutions dissolving over the past 150 years and an increase in diversity of
religious identities among college students, a Christian ethos continues to permeate and be prevalent in many campus cultures and organizations (Seifert, 2007).

**Christian Privilege**

Religion, specifically Christianity, within the United States has continued to shape, inform, define, and give vocabulary and structure to many facets of society within the United States (Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009). Christian privilege is defined as the conscious and often subconscious advantages that are given to individuals who identify with the Christian faith, and this privilege tends to be very prominent on the campuses of colleges and universities in the United States (Seifert, 2007). Examples of Christian privilege both within society and college campuses include: academic calendars centered around Christian holidays and celebrations, having a visible physical space in which to perform religious activities and ceremonies designed specifically for Christian traditions, the meal options in dining halls not reflecting dietary needs of other religious groups, the unlikelihood of receiving ridicule, discrimination, or harassment because of religious traditions or wearing religious symbols especially following the events that took place on September 11, 2001, and the “non-denominational” prayers at commencement and athletic events that tend to be based in Christianity (Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009; Seifert, 2007). Despite the declining influence since the 1960’s, mainline Christianity continues to maintain a strong foothold in institutions of higher education (Schmalzbauer, 2013). The strong foothold held by Christianity and religion in higher education can be attributed to the religious and spiritual matters that are embedded in the work that colleges and universities do (Johnson & Johnson, 2012).
Despite the strong foothold of religion, religious life on college campuses can be very diverse, which necessitates giving attention to the distinct ways in which students of different religious worldviews may perceive and experience college campuses (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014). In order to understand the role of Christian privilege on a college campus, it is crucial to explore the experiences of those students who do not identify with Christianity due to members of religious minority groups being the individuals who most often experience the forms of Christian privilege (Schlosser, 2003). Religious minority groups are defined as groups that are “unique in their doctrines, values, and practices, their adherents share a minority social status in belonging to groups that do not experience the representation and recognition in general society typically granted to affiliates of Christian traditions” (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014). The definition of religious minority groups can also be expanded to include groups of people who identify with no religious affiliation at all like those who identify with agnosticism or atheism (Small & Bowman, 2011). On the other hand, religious majority students are defined as those “who identify with a Christian religious worldview and include mainline Protestants, evangelical Christians, and Roman Catholics” (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014).

While little is known about how the campus climate for religious and spiritual diversity is perceived and experienced by students from varying religious and nonreligious identities, indicators do exist that can give an insight as to what a campus climate may be for those who do not identify with mainstream Christianity (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014). One of the strongest indicators of the privileges held by students who identify as Christian is not having to choose between schoolwork and attending religious ceremonies or observing holidays, like Christmas, whereas many students who identify with non-Christian beliefs are marginalized by
having to negotiate conflicts between studies and spiritual observances, like Ramadan (Seifert, 2007). Another area of campus where Christian privilege manifests itself is in the dining centers where students may not be able to find food related dietary needs based on religious practices; Jewish students aren’t guaranteed to find Kosher dishes and Muslim students may not be able to find an open dining hall after sunset during Ramadan to break their fast (Seifert, 2007). Dining hall issues are being more prevalent as universities continue to implement requirements for first-year students to live on campus and thus be required to have a meal plan (Seifert, 2007).

Institutions of higher education, even those institutions that are classified as public, have an abundant supply of organizations and physical spaces that meet the demand for students who identify as Christian, whereas organizations and physical spaces are rare, if any, for those who identify outside of mainstream Christianity (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). The language used by colleges and universities in relation to spiritual and religious organizations can communicate greater respect or priority for some religions and faiths over others (Seifert, 2007).

The overall climate on campus may be perceived as divisive by religious majority students while students who identify with underrepresented religions or as non-religious may perceive the campus climate to be normal as they have become accustomed to being marginalized on college campuses based on their religious identity (Seifert, 2007). What students from religious majorities feel as welcoming may not be for those from underrepresented religions and may further the silence and marginalization created by the vehicle of Christian privilege (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014). Campuses can explore and address the climate for students who identify with underrepresented religions by initiating campus dialogue that both challenges and addresses Christian privilege, and these dialogues should be created in
way that allows for the voices of those who identify with underrepresented religions as well as spiritual and/or non-religious (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013; Seifert, 2007).

**Role of Religion in Higher Education**

Religion has recently become an area of interest for practitioners and scholars in higher education because of the importance of building inclusive campuses (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013). Colleges and universities have been found to be places for spiritual development as well as liberation from religious identity (Bowman & Small, 2010; Hill, 2011). College campuses have become known as “spiritual marketplaces” based on the variety of religious and spiritual identities held by students (Schmalzbauer, 2013). Johnson & Johnson (2012) describe the role of religion in higher education as follows:

Giving more careful attention to religion (broadly construed) has the possibility of enhancing the work of higher education in untold ways, because religion is inextricably blended into the key dispositions that drive learning itself - the mixing of critical thinking with hope, the awareness of difference, the ability to wonder and to see the world in new ways, the skill of focusing on one thing at a time, and the blending of the person with the impersonal. Attending to religion can enliven all of these dimensions of higher learning; ignoring religion undermines them (p. 5)

A large number of college and university students affiliate with a religious denomination (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). According to The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) survey in 2004, 83 percent of 112,000 first year students at 236 colleges and university affiliated themselves with a religious or spiritual denomination (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, & Hurtado, 2014). When the survey was administered again in 2008, 18
percent of college students identified with a non-Christian religion compared with only 9 percent in 2004 (Eagan et. al, 2014). In addition, over 58% of a surveyed 1,680 placed high importance of more fully integrating a religiosity and/or spirituality into their personal lives (Astin, 2004). According to HarvardIOP (2008), 68 percent of college students report that religion is important in their lives. Additionally, 82 percent of college students are found to maintain at least an unchanging level of personal religiosity in early adulthood while 86 percent of students retain their religious affiliation (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007).

Based on these numbers and the experiences reported from experiences on a college campus, some colleges and universities have been found to have a positive effect on religious participation and activities related to religious identity while emphasizing the importance of religion in daily life and strengthening a personal commitment to the religious identity students hold (Maryl & Uecker, 2011; Schwadel, 2011). College campuses may actually intensify a student’s desire for seeking religious and spiritual identities (Schmalzbauer, 2013). College campuses create a space for students to explore their personal religious identity in relation to the identity of their parents, and the influence of external factors like parents and religious communities appears to play less of a role in the choices students make (Leonard, Cook, Boyatzis, Kimball, & Flanagan, 2013). Education assumes the role of socializing students in terms of the norms and values of society, and this socialization can strengthen or lessen a student’s religious identity (Schwadel, 2011). Colleges and universities create an environment where numerous contexts merge (e.g., peer, work, academic), making the college community a place where influence over religious and spiritual beliefs and values is very likely (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). Departing from family religious traditions and forming a personal
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religious identity is common among college age students, and education appears to play a role in this differentiation (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Other factors, such as culture and religious background, may serve to moderate the effects of education on religious beliefs and practices (Schwadel, 2011).

Educators in higher education institutions also play a role in the religious and spiritual development of college students (Thomson, 2013). Educators should place continual emphasis on students getting involved with religious or spiritual communities in an effort to both understand and support diverse worldviews on campus, and prepare for the potential challenges that may come with those diverse views (Bowman & Small, 2012). Diverse worldviews on campus, both spiritual and religious, can create challenges for students to navigate, and educators and administrators can offer guidance to students as they navigate the complexities that come with living in a climate that is conflict-ridden particularly in students’ encounters with differing religious identities and backgrounds, and work to provide opportunities where students can engage in these differences with respect and compassion (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013). Co-curricular activities are ideal opportunities for educators to create opportunities for this engagement to happen, and a greater emphasis needs to be placed on students from underrepresented or non-religious backgrounds being affirmed and supported (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013). These co-curricular spaces should be places where students believe their faith will be respected, and should allow the students to develop skills needed to speak openly and listen empathically regarding their faith and the faith of others (Seifert, 2007).

Spiritual development is important for students of all faiths and religious identities and is an important aspect of learning and accomplishing many of the goals as outlined by higher
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education (Seifert, 2007). Despite the high numbers of students reporting a religious identity and a commitment to that identity, higher education seems to have shifted to focus primarily on what students do and less on helping students develop a personal and meaningful life philosophy (Astin, 2004). The integration of spiritual life and work/school life rarely happens for college students, and is commonly neglected by campus life despite the supposed focus on holistic student development (Schmalzbauer, 2013). The diversity of religious life on college campuses requires attention to be given to the way students from different religious identities - including religious majority, religious minority, and non-religious students - may perceive and experience the current climates of university campuses (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014). Creating a climate that is supportive of all religious and spiritual identities may allow students who do not neatly fall into existing religious or spiritual groups to feel more welcome (Small & Bowman, 2011). Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to educate the whole student, which requires college communities to create a climate where students feel safe to share and practice their religious and spiritual beliefs while feeling supported to learn about the beliefs and practices of others (Seifert, 2007). These safe communities must be preceded or accompanied by changes in higher education policies and procedures in order to avoid the risk of being viewed as an empty and superficial gesture towards students who have been historically marginalized based on religious identity (Seifert, 2007). Mayhew, Bowman, and Rockenbach (2014) pose two crucial questions for institutions to ask themselves in order to measure their progress on creating safe and inclusive communities based on religious identity: Does the institution have a priority to serve students from all faith and non-faith traditions? and How, if at all, is this priority reflected
in the mission, vision, values, strategic plan, space allocations, curriculum, and university services?

**Experiences of Religious Students in Higher Education**

Students who identify as religious report being more satisfied with their collegiate career and experiences (Maryl & Oeur, 2009), and therefore institutions of higher education should create space for students to develop their own personal sense of religiosity, or organized and institutional aspects that best represent an individual’s religious practices and beliefs (McNamara, Nelson, Davarya, & Urry, 2010). Students who were able to find and participate in religious groups were found to flourish in their religious identity due to the association with like-minded students (Small & Bowman, 2011). Religious communities on college campuses provide safe spaces for relationships, both friendship and romantic, to form through shared experiences including religious rituals and practices (i.e. worship) to social events (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). Engagement in religious communities can create spaces and opportunities for college students to socialize and form friendships, explore and establish a personal sense of meaning and purpose, and encourage and provide motivation for volunteer work and community engagement (Bowman & Small, 2012). In addition, social events designed for students with similar religious beliefs are related to a greater commitment and diminished skepticism of their religious identity (Bowman & Small, 2012). Affiliation with, and participation in, a collegiate religious community has been shown to influence the depth to which both spiritual and religious beliefs are developed and the value placed on those beliefs and the way practices and beliefs are socialized (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). A positive association to worldview commitment was found for both students with religious majority and minority identities when
they participated in social and religious activities (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014). If or when diverse worldviews on campus and students’ perceptions of the campus climate in relation to this religious diversity were positive, opportunities for both curricular and co-curricular experiences for engagement were created and contributed positively to a student’s experience (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013).

Specifically, for students who identify with majority and mainstream religions, campus climate was viewed as negative despite the prevalence of religious symbols, holidays, organizations to participate in, and the curriculum design (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014; Seifert, 2007). The divisive and negative environments described by students from religious majorities were noted as normal by students from underrepresented religions due to the prevalence of previous marginalization and Christian privilege throughout society in the United States (Seifert, 2007). In addition, greater gains were found with college students who identified with Judeo-Christian religious beliefs due to the higher prevalence of religious communities on a college campus (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). When students from majority religions interact with students from underrepresented religions, those in the majority tend to retreat to pre-existing psychological development stages or stereotypes because they feel threatened by difference; a pervasive and effective tactic used by those in power to continue the marginalization of groups (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013).

In order to further explore the experiences of religious and spiritual students, studies have suggested future research on the experiences of religious students, particularly those that identify with underrepresented religions; these additional studies should explore the current and former
religious identity of students in relation to their college experience in the classroom, social interactions, and extracurricular activities (Hill, 2011).

**Experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions.** According to the 2012 HERI survey, 68.5% of undergraduate students reported a Christian religious identity, 2.9% identified as Jewish, 1.2% as Buddhist, 1.0% as Muslim, 0.8% as Hindu, and 23.0% as “none” (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Blake, & Tran, 2010). Despite these numbers and surveys, little is known about how the religious and spiritual campus climate is perceived and experienced by students who identify with underrepresented and/or nonreligious identities (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014). Christian privilege has long been used as a tool to silence and further marginalize those who identify with religions outside mainstream Christianity, and that includes students from underrepresented religions or non-religious identities (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014). This marginalization has created an environment where students who identify with underrepresented or non-religious identities must navigate the academic and social challenges of transitioning to college in addition to the lived experiences that are shaped by these religious identities (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014).

Students who identify with marginalized or underrepresented religious groups have been found to have smaller gains in well-being and spirituality during their college years compared to peers that identified with religious majorities (Small & Bowman, 2011). In addition, students from underrepresented religious identities show smaller gains in developing a spiritual identity and increases in skepticism for religion than those students who identify with a majority religion (Bowman & Small, 2010; Bowman & Small, 2012). Students from marginalized religions are less likely to receive support from the institutions they attend (Nash, 2003). One of the biggest
challenges faced by these students is feeling a lack of support and acceptance from faculty and administrators in regards to their religious beliefs and practices (Bowman & Small, 2012; Small & Bowman, 2011). College campuses are home to cultural markers that alienate and exclude, like students having to mark the “other” box on forms when noting a religious identity on applications to private colleges because their religious identity does not fall into mainstream Christianity (Seifert, 2007). Another example of alienation on college campuses is the inability of students to practice dress or grooming habits related to religious or spiritual identity out of fear of backlash and ridicule, particularly after the events of September 11, 2001 (Schmalzbauer, 2013; Seifert, 2007). Research surrounding religious and spiritual climates on college campuses has yet to address the perceptions and experiences of underrepresented and non-religious identities and the ways this campus climate affects commitment to their particular identity (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014).

**Religious Development of College Students**

Faith development, an integral part of religious development, is the process by which students make meaning while discovering and creating connections between events and experiences (Love, 2011). The spiritual and religious development of college students may be one of the most important aspects of a college experience (Bowman & Small, 2010). College students are seen as the age group (18-29 years of age) in which spiritual development is crucial and a time in which creating distinct religious and spiritual identities is enhanced (Arnett, 2000; Desmond, Morgan, & Kikuch, 2010). Prior to college attendance, the religious identity of students is primarily influenced by family models in which students observe and imitate, and then receive reinforcement (both positive and negative) related to their religious choices; all
factors that help determine whether the student will retain the religious identity of their family (Desmond, Morgan, & Kikuch, 2010).

A student’s college experience is a time where commitments become made and remade, where a sense of inner-dependence is gained and tested, and where a student may participate in one or more mentoring community (Love, 2011). One goal of a college education and experience is to create an environment where students are able to become self-authored individuals who are able to create an informed and critical religious identity as well as be able to describe themselves and others in reference to that identity (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013). A development of self-awareness that often comes with an understanding of a religious and/or spiritual identity, is necessary for students to be able to understand and resolve conflict (Astin, 2004). In addition, students with well-developed identities are able to embrace and succeed in challenging environments that present opportunities for them to make choices and commitments (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013). Being able to navigate challenging environments increases a student’s willingness to engage in opportunities that allow them to challenge and strengthen the religious and spiritual identities they have formed (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013). And yet, Astin (2004) argues that institutions of higher education have developed to a point where “inner” development, namely the teaching of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding, receives little to no attention.

Faith development and cognitive development both involve making meaning of the experiences and environments college students find themselves in, and using that meaning to construct a personal, holistic identity (Love, 2011). If colleges are working to create environments and curriculum that focus on holistic learning and the development of productive
citizens, the student must begin to be treated as a whole person (Seifert, 2007). Most students are currently not integrating their religious and spiritual identity into their academic and work lives, neglecting this portion of campus life and at the same time neglecting opportunities that can enhance religious and spiritual development (Schmalzbauer, 2013). Focus on a student’s cognitive development through activities, environments, and experiences that are designed for development also contribute to a student’s religious and spiritual development (Love, 2011). Religious and spiritual identity formation is enhanced by a student’s ability and choice to participate in a religious group that focuses on discussing and exploring transcendent meaning (Erikson, 1968). A student’s religious and/or spiritual identity is also affected by the sector (public/private), religious affiliation (if any), and status of the school (e.g. liberal arts/research) they choose to attend (Hill, 2009). Another obstacle that may exist in terms of religious identity development, particularly for students who identify with underrepresented religions, is Christian privilege that is found throughout society (Seifert, 2007).

Little research has been conducted on if and how spiritual and religious development differs among students and what factors result in differing development (Bowman & Small, 2010). The specific context and environments for spiritual and religious development need to be studied further, including the role of culture and communities in which college students find themselves, in relation to their spiritual and religious identity development (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions at a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest. In this chapter, the research questions and purpose described in Chapter 1 are reintroduced, along with the methodology used to carry out the study. This study used qualitative methodology, specifically narrative inquiry, to explore the personal, lived experiences of these students and how these lived experiences affect the way students view and interact with the world around them, specifically a college campus. Qualitative methodology was chosen because it places participants’ lived experiences at the center of the research while providing a safe environment for students to share openly (Pynn, 2014).

The first focus of this study was to explore the personal lived experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions at a large, public institution and how these experiences are affected by the culture on campus in regards to the students’ specific faiths or religious traditions. The second focus of this study was to explore whether or not the current resources offered by the university are perceived to be assisting these students in their religious lives. It is hoped that the themes and connections found among the experiences and stories of these students can be used to guide the practice of student affairs and higher education professionals in supporting these students in their religious development as well as in making campus a more welcoming environment for individuals who do not subscribe to mainstream Christianity. Some qualitative research currently exists on the experiences of religious students on college campuses, but it is largely based on students who identify within mainstream Christianity. No research could be found during a review of related literature that explored the
experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions and how they are or are not supported by resources offered on a college campus.

**Research Questions**

The main research question of this study is: What are the experiences of students who identify with an underrepresented religion at a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest?

In addition to the main research questions, three sub-questions were developed to help further explore the topic:

A. What is it like to be a student on a college campus who identifies with an underrepresented religion?

B. Do students who identify with underrepresented religions feel supported in their religious beliefs on a college campus?

C. What resources or experiences on a college campus have made or not made these students feel supported in their religious lives?

In order to further frame and add context to the following sections as to why some participants met the eligibility requirements of the study, it is important to reiterate a few definitions of key terms that were first introduced in Chapter 1. The first term is religion. According to Schneiders (2003), religion is defined as “what a group believes about the nature and functioning of personal, cosmic, and transcendent reality”. Using this definition as a guide in this study, students who identify as atheist or agnostic are considered to be a part of a religion since their beliefs surrounding both the existence and role of the transcendent is common among the specific group. Thus, they were included as members of underrepresented religions for purposes of this study. The second term to review is underrepresented religion. According to
Mayhew et al. (2014), an underrepresented religion is “unique in their doctrines, values, and practices and their adherents share a minority social status in belonging to groups that do not experience the representation and recognition in general society typically granted to affiliates of Christian traditions”. This definition also encompasses students that do not identify with mainstream Christianity or any religious denomination or tradition at all (Small & Bowman, 2011).

**Research Perspective**

This study utilized qualitative research methodology, specifically that of narrative inquiry to explore the personal experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions. Narrative inquiry provides an opportunity for students to make meaning of themselves and the world around them (Creswell, 2015; Merriam, 2009). Narrative research design focuses on “gathering data through the collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing of those experiences for the individual” (Creswell, 2015). In addition, qualitative methodology provides a researcher with tools needed to find a deeper understanding especially surrounding topics related to religiosity (Kimball, Boyatzis, Cook, Leonard, & Flanagan, 2013). As a researcher, narrative inquiry allowed me to explore the experiences and stories of students and then report these stories in a manner meant to convey meaning and connection.

**Research Design**

This study used semi-structured individual interviews to explore the personal, lived experiences of each participant while searching for themes and connections among these stories. The semi-structured approach will be an important factor in the interviews for several reasons. First, a semi-structured interview will allow the interviewer to re-word the question if the
participan does not understand what is being asked and second, if the interviewer needs a participant to elaborate on a response to any of the questions clarifying questions such as “can you tell me more?” can be asked (Patten, 2014). One of the greatest strengths of semi-structured interviews is flexibility. The flexibility offered by in-person open-ended interviews will allow the researcher and participant to expand on experiences that may not be shared in a setting created by closed-ended questions that are generally “prepared in advance and locked in stone” (Babbie, 2007). Open-ended interviews allow respondents to answer the same established set of questions, allowing for comparability of responses while providing space for participants to answer in their own way (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). In addition, individual interviews will provide a private, one-on-one space for individuals to share their thoughts and feelings regarding their experiences.

**Participant Sampling and Recruitment**

The researchers for this study submitted a proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on September 15, 2015. Once IRB approval was received, an email containing a participation invite for the study (see Appendix) was sent to several individuals who actively work with student groups relating to underrepresented religious identities. Along with an invitation to participate in the study, the email included a brief description of the study and its purposes, eligibility requirements for participation, as well as clear language stating this is a research project. Students who were interested in the study replied to the email and were provided with the informed consent form including a space for the potential participant to choose a pseudonym they were known by throughout the study and a reiteration of the eligibility requirements. Once the signed consent form was obtained, the researcher emailed each
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participant a demographic questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gather basic demographic information, including religious identity, in order for the researcher to diversify the participant pool as much as possible and examine a broad spectrum of experiences. These questionnaires and informed consent forms were kept in a locked filing cabinet in order to protect the information of the participants. In addition, students were informed that they could be asked to participate in up to two (2) interviews with the second interview taking place if the researcher had clarification questions surrounding the pre-determined interview questions, as well as member checking that could be done individually and/or in a focus group setting. Students were given the choice to opt in or out of the potential second interview as well as the member checking opportunity.

The goal of this study was to interview up to 25 undergraduate students who are enrolled in the large, public university in the Pacific Northwest where this study took place. The qualifications for students to participate included: attending the previously mentioned large, public university in the Pacific Northwest as a full-time student, being classified as an undergraduate student, being eighteen (18) years of age or older, and identifying with an underrepresented religious identity. A total of 11 potential participants contacted the researcher with interest of participating, and a total of 8 students were actually interviewed.

Study Site

This study took place at a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. The Pacific Northwest provides a unique, and potentially unique, site for this study as the Pacific Northwest is known for its lack of religious commitment and overall skepticism in regards to religion. 62.8% of the total population in the Pacific Northwest does not affiliate with
Students from underrepresented religions a specific religious tradition or denomination versus an area of the country like the South that has 40.5% who do not affiliate with a religion (Killen & Shibley, 2004). It was acknowledged that this high percentage of non-affiliation may result in a different experience for students who identify with underrepresented religions in the Pacific Northwest since affiliating with a religious identity alone sets them apart from the majority of the population.

This study site was also chosen because of its close proximity to the researcher so participants would be easy to access and communicate with, especially given the limited time of approximately six months to conduct and report this thesis research.

**Data Collection**

The researchers in this study sought to interview ideally 10-15 (and no more than 25) undergraduate students from a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest. Eight students were actually interviewed for this study. These 8 students who participated in the study did so based on their response to the recruitment email and meeting the participation requirements. The requirements to participate in the study included being a full-time, undergraduate student at the large, public university in the Pacific Northwest, being eighteen (18) years of age or older, and identify with an underrepresented religion. Eight (8) students contacted researcher and were interviewed for the study. Before the interviews began, participants were given a copy of the informed consent form to help answer any questions they may have. Once the participant signed and returned the consent forms, the one-on-one interviews were conducted in a private location on campus to ensure that the participants feel comfortable sharing their story and their privacy is maintained.
The interviews consisted of eleven (11) open-ended interview questions that were created before the interviews began (see Appendix). The interviews were scheduled for up to 60 minutes to allow for the potential differences that occur in the engagement with the questions and length of participant responses. During the interviews, the researcher took notes as well as audio-recorded the participants’ responses. The audio-recordings were used to assist the researcher in gathering the complete responses of the participants and analyze the interview transcriptions for common themes and connections. The participants then had an opportunity to participate in member checking on an individual basis and/or in a focus group setting in order to ensure the transcriptions were accurate and complete. Follow-up interviews were scheduled with the participants if the researcher needed clarification on any of the answers given to the pre-determined questions during the first interview. If these second interviews were needed, the students were given the option to participate or not. However, given the richness of the data collected during the one-on-one interviews, it was determined that no second interviews were needed for this study.

**Data Analysis**

This study utilized coding in analyzing the transcriptions from the one-on-one interviews. Coding is used to explore connections and themes that exist between stories in order to add depth and insight into the individual experiences (Creswell, 2015). To begin the coding process, each transcript was first analyzed individually using open coding in an effort to get a general sense of distinct themes or categories present in the individual experiences of the participants (Merriam, 2009; Patten, 2014). During this initial coding phase, distinct themes or categories were extracted based on the apparent significance of the concept conveyed to the researcher, given the emphasis
from the participant on sharing that specific experience. Examples of these key themes or categories that emerged during the initial coding process included: “community”, “physical space”, “curriculum”, “university role” in conjunction with the qualifiers of “positive”, “negative”, or “neutral”, and “support”.

Once each transcript had been analyzed individually, the key themes and categories found in the individual transcripts as described above were condensed to determine the most consistent themes within that transcript. The transcripts and codes from the individual transcripts were then compared with the themes and categories from the other transcripts to find common connections or experiences. These common themes and connections between experiences were then used to help understand commonalities that existed between the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2015; Patten, 2014). Once common themes and categories were determined that applied to all of the transcripts, each transcript was then re-read by the researcher and phrases were highlighted according to the theme or category under which they best fit. The themes and connections found within the transcripts will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Limitations of Study

Despite efforts to explore the experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions, several potential limitations still exist within this study. These potential limitations include: small sample size, study site, and identities held by the researcher.

The first limitation in this study was the small sample size of participants. Due to time constraints as well as the reliance on faculty and staff within the institution being studied to forward the study recruitment material so students who qualified and were interested in
participating, a small number of participants may be gathered that will not allow the results of this study to be generalized to all students who identify with underrepresented religions.

The second limitation of this study was the study site. As noted previously, the population in the Pacific Northwest is largely unaffiliated with any religious tradition or denomination (Killen & Shibley, 2004). Because of this, students who identify with underrepresented religions may have different experiences in this region versus a student in the Southern states where the majority of the population is affiliated with religious traditions or denominations found within mainstream Christianity. Based on the responses and experiences shared by the participants during the interviews, Christian privilege was still very apparent to them both on and off campus.

The third limitation is the identities held by myself, the researcher. I identify as a white Male, heterosexual, as a graduate student, a Christian, and a future higher education professional. My specific religious identity is not accepted as “Christian” by individuals who identify with mainstream Christianity. According to Killen and Shibley (2004), the theology found within my religious tradition, which is Mormonism, sets us apart from those who identify with mainstream Christianity despite those who identify with my religious tradition holding the same fundamental beliefs surrounding the role of Jesus Christ. The member-checking aspect of the study was implemented in order to mitigate and address the potential bias that may have arisen during data analysis based on my religious identity and experiences surrounding that identity.
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the themes discovered through the semi-structured interviews in relation to the research questions that served as a guide to this study. Specifically, the guiding question of this study is: What are the experiences of college students who identify with underrepresented religions on a large, public campus in the Pacific Northwest of the United States? The sub-research questions that also served as a guide for this study include the following:

1. What is it like to be a student on a college campus who identifies with an underrepresented religion?
2. Do students who identify with underrepresented religions feel supported in their religious beliefs on a college campus?
3. What resources and/or experiences have made or not made these students feel supported in their religious choices?

Eight students participated in semi-structured interviews designed to explore their lived experiences as students of their faith in an effort to address the research questions. The transcripts from these interviews were then coded and analyzed to produce common themes which were found when comparing the experiences of the participants. The first section of this chapter will provide an overview of individuals who participated in this study, including the information they reported on the demographic survey completed by each participant and a brief summary of their experiences on campus that were associated with their faith. The chapter concludes with the results of this study represented in themes that are supported by information provided in the
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participant interviews. This information includes direct quotes and lived experiences of each person.

**Participant Overview**

This section provides an overview of each participant including their religious identity, the frequency of how often they engage in religious activities on a personal and group level, and their overall thoughts on the role of the university in their religiosity. The names provided in this section are the pseudonyms chosen by each participant in order to protect their identities and keep the information they shared anonymous.

**Amy.** Amy currently identifies as Agnostic whereas her parents were both raised and baptized catholic although they are not currently practicing. She engages in group (i.e. church, worship) and personal activities (i.e. prayer, meditation, scripture reading) related to her religious identity 0-1 times per month. Amy said she has not experienced religious discrimination in college and has never had to ask for an accommodation related to her religious identity. Overall, Amy has felt like she is a religious minority due to her religious identity “never being acknowledged or connected with since agnosticism is not considered mainstream or popular so it’s forgotten a lot of the times” both among peers and by the University. Amy named her experience as being difficult due not knowing where she fits in when “a lot of the students here identify with a specific, prominent religion and I don’t”.

**Aria.** Aria identifies as Pantheist with her family identifying as formerly LDS but now non-religious, Pantheist, or Universalist. Aria engages in group activities related to her religious identity 0-1 times per month but engages in personal activities related to her religious identity weekly due to the individualized focus of her religion. She has not experienced religious
discrimination but has had to ask for a religious accommodation to miss class and work in order to observe Passover. Overall, Aria does feel like a religious minority and shared her experience as following: “I often am forced to explain my religious identity in order to gain accommodation or even when just telling a story about a tradition or experience. There are no group worship activities available to me on campus”.

**Francis.** Francis identifies as Theravada Buddhist with her family identifying as Theravada Buddhist and Catholic. She engages in group activities related to her religious identity 0-1 times per month while engaging in personal religious activities 2-3 times per month. Francis has never experienced religious discrimination in college and has never had to ask for a religious accommodation. She does feel like a religious minority specifically saying “when trying to find a monk to talk to or a place to pray and/or meditate, it’s around a 45-minute drive to the nearest Buddhist temple. But I am surrounded by churches for other religions and it feels overwhelming seeing all these religious identities being supported around/on campus”.

**Helen.** Helen stated she was not familiar with specific terminology related to her religious identity due to her religious identity not being salient in her college experience, but feels that she is closer to Agnostic. Her family identifies as Christian with her parents being raised strongly within the Catholic religion and her extended family still heavily identifying with the Catholic faith. Due to her religious identity not being salient, Helen participates in group and personal religious activities 0-1 times per month. In addition, she has never experienced religious discrimination or had to ask for a religious accommodation. Helen has never felt that she is a religious minority and said “I wouldn’t say there were any hardships because I guess I’ve never really been super invested in faith”.
Jane. Jane identifies as Muslim, with her mother also identifying with Islam and her father identifying as Buddhist. Jane participates in group activities related to her religious identity 2-3 times per month and engages in personal religious activities weekly. Jane reported not experiencing religious discrimination in college, and has never had to ask for religious accommodations. Jane has felt like a religious minority specifically saying, “except for elementary school and up through my first year of college, I was the only Muslim student I knew of at my school and then the only Muslim in my residence hall my first year of college”. She currently feels like she is in a place “where it’s comfortable to be Muslim”.

Miriam. Miriam named her religious identity as Jewish. Her mother and sister are also Jewish, but her father is not religious. Miriam participates in religious group activities 2-3 times per month and engages in personal activities related to her religious identity weekly through “mostly dietary choices”. She has never experienced religious discrimination at college and has had to ask for a religious accommodation when she has to be excused from class to observe a Jewish holiday. When asked if Miriam felt like she was a religious minority, she responded yes with the following reasoning:

Whenever the topic of religion or traditional religious holidays comes up, other people know little to nothing about my religion so I am expected to explain it. I have never lived in a place where the majority of people are Jewish. I rarely get any of my holidays off and I would need to get a special exception if I wanted to get a holiday off from my job most times.

Ross. Ross identifies as nonreligious, specifically spiritual but feels he is closest to Agnosticism. Ross’ mother and brother also identify as nonreligious and his father identifies as
Muslim but is currently not practicing. Ross engages in group activities related to his religious identity weekly. He also engages in personal religious activities weekly as well. Ross has never experienced religious discrimination while attending college and has never had to ask for a religious accommodation. Ross does feel like he is a religious minority and says about his experience, “Most people I speak to in regards to religion and religious affiliation identify as Theists but since I’m closer to Agnosticism and Atheism, I differ”.

**Sally.** Sally names her religious identity as Satanist with her family identifying with Atheism. Sally engages in group activities related to her religious affiliation 0-1 times per month but engages in personal religious activities weekly. Sally feels she has experienced religious discrimination at college in the form of stigma when she discloses her religious affiliation to peers. She has not had to ask for a religious accommodation Sally does feel like she is a religious minority and states her beliefs are “grossly misunderstood” and “I get like a lot of stigma and teasing [from fellow students] for what I choose to be”.

Table 1, below, contains the pseudonyms of the participants, their religious identity, how often they engage in both personal and group activities related to their religion per month, whether or not they have asked for a religious accommodation, if they have ever felt discriminated against due to their religious identity, and whether or not they have ever felt like a religious minority.
Table 1.1: Overview of participants’ religious identities and responses to demographic survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Religious Identity</th>
<th>Personal Activities per month</th>
<th>Group Activities per month</th>
<th>Asked for religious accommodation?</th>
<th>Experienced religious discrimination?</th>
<th>Felt like a religious minority?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>0-1 times</td>
<td>0-1 times</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>Pantheist</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>0-1 times</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>Theravada Buddhist</td>
<td>2-3 times</td>
<td>0-1 times</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>0-1 times</td>
<td>0-1 times</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>2-3 times</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>2-3 times</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Satanist</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>0-1 times</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

Once the eight interviews were completed, each interview was transcribed. Each transcription was compared by the researcher to the audio recordings in order to ensure the transcription was correct and accurate. When the transcripts were finalized, they were analyzed using the open and axial coding approach. Open and axial coding allowed me to effectively get a general sense of themes or category that existed in each interview and lived experiences of the individual student (Merriam, 2009; Patten, 2014). In order to find themes and connections between each interview and lived experience of the participants, each transcription was compared with the others in order to find and understand commonalities that existed between the participant’s experiences (Creswell, 2015; Patten, 2014). The coding software, Dedoos®, was used to both find and analyze the codes and themes found in the individual transcripts and comparison of the individual transcripts with each other.

When the transcripts and experiences were compared to each other, six major themes were discovered: (1) students who identify with underrepresented religions are interested in establishing community with peers who share the same religious identity as themselves, (2)
students identify the need of having physical space to practice religious beliefs and traditions in association with peers that hold the same religious identity as highly important, (3) the University does play a role in the way students view the religious acceptance climate on campus, (4) the curriculum of the University plays a role in religious identity formation and exploration, (5) students who identify with underrepresented religions often feel forced to disclose and explain their religious identity to others, and (6) many students identify the University as a potential and significant resource in their religious identity. The rest of this chapter focuses on exploring each of these themes and the sub-themes associated. Within each theme, quotes and experiences shared by participants during the interviews will be provided to demonstrate the presence of each theme and discuss the interpretation through the lived experiences of the participants.

**Theme 1: Students who identify with underrepresented religious are interested in establishing community with peers who share the same religious identity as themselves.**

Each of the eight participants mentioned during the interview process the importance of connecting with and building community among peers that share the same religious identity as themselves. The participants who did not identify the need for community, due to the focus of individualism in their religious beliefs and traditions, still mentioned the community that others engage in around religious affiliations. Of the five participants who responded to the demographic survey saying they engage in group activities related to their religious identity 0-1 times per month, three of the participants identified a lack of knowing and being able to find other students who shared their religious identity as the reason for not attending group activities more regularly. The other two participants who also engage in group activities 0-1 times per
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month do so because of the individualistic nature of worship associated with their religious affiliation, not from a lack of wanting or being able to find a community to associate with.

The support for this theme comes mainly from the quotes and experiences of the participants. Amy finds that being Agnostic “really difficult because of not having those set foundations” that come from a community of peers and that “students tend to click up around a certain religion”. Interacting with students who identify with a specific religion has led Amy to question where she fits in within these religious communities. Similar to Amy, Aria stated that her “faith has been shaped by meeting people” and exploring her religious beliefs in relation to those who hold the same religious identity as herself but “finding people to practice with has been difficult”. She also stated “I haven’t had any opportunity to really specifically find people that have my beliefs through a group or anything” again noting the lack of a peer community and opportunities needed to develop such a community. Transitioning from a large community to practicing individually is a challenge Aria has faced since both a transition in her religious identity and moving away from family to attend college. She said “it is really hard transitioning to practicing my faith by myself because I had never had to do that before”. She also noted the pressure that comes from being responsible for “organizing and planning things I want to do surrounding my faith, whereas I always had an institution to do it while growing up and then my father and I did it together during the in-between period”.

During Francis’ first year of college, she said “I didn’t find anyone that identified like I did religiously”. When she was able to find a group of other Buddhist students, she stated that her religious identity became “more prevalent” due to having people to talk and connect with over religious similarities. Especially coming from a location where the community at large
provided support in the form of religious leaders and structures, Francis stated, “here I have to rely on friends for the sense of community I felt when I was home”. Like Francis, one of the biggest concerns Jane had when first coming to college was whether her roommate would be accepting and understanding of her religious beliefs and practices. Fortunately, Jane was able to have “good friendships” and these good friendships created space for her to work through an “identity crisis” as she further explored her religious beliefs and identity. Having the support “was a huge deal because it created a community” where she could be accepted.

Miriam stated the university has had “kind of a negative impact on [her] keeping religious because there just isn’t [sic] very many people to keep religious with”. When asked what role, if any, religion should have in a public university, she responded that she feels it is a “good idea” for space to be provided where students of the same religion can “discuss things of religious background” and build community with one another. As Miriam found and became involved in the Jewish Student Organization, she said having the opportunity to talk with people from similar backgrounds that shared similar values “for once in many months was a rare experience for us”. Even a simple event like having people to walk with to religious services was something that Miriam identified as impactful. For Ross who identifies as spiritual but closer to Agnosticism, providing space for people to connect with those who share similar beliefs when away from home or other potential support structures would be important in building community with peers.

Helen was one of the individuals who did not cite the reason for attending group religious activities 0-1 times per month as a lack of community among peers but instead on the low saliency of her religious identity. However, in regards to the religious identity of others, she said
“there may be a community that I am not a part of” again citing the role that community plays in the religious choices and identities of students. Sally also engages in group religious activities 0-1 months due to the individualist focus of her religious beliefs and practices, but cited the importance of co-curricular activities in her religious choices because “I choose to be in co-curricular activities with people I enjoy so they don’t care as much [about her religious beliefs]”. Ross also spoke to the role of community in religious affiliations by being “surrounded by people from one or two primary religions”.

The importance of building community with those who hold different beliefs and traditions was also addressed. For Ross, having conversations about faith have been “really rewarding because it is nice to speak with people and get to understand someone and why they believe what they believe”. Specifically facilitating group meetings and having a dialogue “where people from different religious backgrounds can come to better understand the aspects of other faiths and why they are important to them” and “just coming to understand [a person] to a greater degree so you can make those personal connections” would be helpful for building community with those who may be different. Connecting with people from different religions has also given Aria the opportunity to explore her religious identity and examine her beliefs. Jane cites the opportunity to meet and interact with students who hold different religious beliefs from herself as a positive factor in leading to an “identity crisis” that helped solidify her religious beliefs.

**Theme 2: Students identify having a physical space to practice religious beliefs and traditions as highly important.** Throughout the interviews, the participants identified having a physical space to practice religious beliefs and traditions either on or near campus as highly
important in their collegiate experience. Of the five participants that reported engaging in group activities related to their religious identities 0-1 times per month, three of those participants report not having a physical space as a contributing factor due to the inability to find a space to practice and worship. Of the other two participants who reported their group engagement in religious activities occurring 0-1 times per month, one of the participants does not engage in group activities related to their religious identities because of the individualistic nature of their faith and the other due to identifying their religious identity as non-salient.

Amy spoke to the importance of having physical spaces for students to engage in religious activities regardless of the religious identity they hold and suggested the need to have a “sort of religious culture center” where students can gather based on religious identity. Specifically, in regards to the importance of having a physical space on campus for these students, Amy said:

If we had a location that focused around a topic like religion, I think it [campus] would be way more positive and also the creation of different religious spaces for students to like pray.

Aria said “it takes a lot of work to find a space on campus to practice my faith”. Aria also spoke to her experience of living in the residence halls and the difficulties of not having a physical space to practice her religion by saying “it is really hard to practice anything I want to do for my faith because of the close quarters and of all the shared spaces”. In addition to the close quarters and shared spaces, finding a space in the residence halls to practice that “is not just my room” has been a challenge for Aria. When asked about her experiences on campus, Francis said celebrating certain holidays regarding her faith has been difficult because a physical space to
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celebrate those holidays does not exist. Francis said “I think in a public university there should be spaces for all religious identities, and seeing the religious identities that are prevalent and being supported on or around campus is overwhelming”. As a solution, Francis spoke of the importance of having a “small space for people to practice their beliefs”.

Jane shared the support she has received as a result of having a physical location and space dedicated for students who identify with Islam to gather together and build community. The ability to take a fellow student who converted to Islam to this dedicated space brought “comfort and support” to this student in a time of transition and allowed her to build community around a new identity; something Jane feels would have been extremely difficult without this dedicated space. Miriam spoke of the importance and need of a permanent physical space to “be able to fulfill a lot of religious obligations” such as lighting candles and eating Kosher.

Currently, Miriam says “there is nowhere on campus” where she can light candles or eat kosher. Another activity that is highly valued by Miriam in relation to her religious identity is being able to bake bread, something that has been difficult to do with the lack of kitchens in some of the residence halls. Ross spoke to the value of having physical space for students to engage in religious activities by saying, “places on or just off campus that identifies one specific religious group that allows people to get in greater touch with their religions when they [students] are not at home” are an important part of campus. However, Ross identified having physical space that “accommodates for such a large variety of religions can be difficult”.

Aside from a space dedicated for religious worship, Amy also said having a location where groups of people can meet to talk and discuss topics related to religion, particularly with those who may hold different religious identities, would be a positive addition to the campus.
Ross also spoke to the value of having physical space where conversations about religion can occur as “being really rewarding because it’s nice to speak with people and get to understand someone and why they believe what they believe”. When trying to have conversations around religion outside of structured space, Ross describes these experiences as “uncomfortable”.

**Theme 3: Students feel the University does play a role in the way students view the religious acceptance climate on campus.** When completing the demographic survey, each participant was asked to identify whether or not they felt like a religious minority on campus and if they did feel like a religious minority to describe the experience(s) that led or contributed to that feeling. Of the eight participants who participated in the study, all eight said they do feel like a religious minority on campus. Outside of these experiences of feeling like a religious minority, the participants described experiences where the University played a negative and/or positive role in their view of campus culture.

**Negative experiences.** While each of these students feel they are a religious minority, only one of the eight participants has experienced discrimination related to their religious identity while attending college. Sally identified the source of religious discrimination she has experienced as that of her peers when her religious identity, Satanism, is spoken about. Specifically, Sally said “I get a lot of stigma and teasing for what I choose to be” and that her religion is “grossly misunderstood” and “a lot of people don’t have any understanding what that [Satanism] is all about, but they judge instantly based upon the name of my religion…people’s initial reaction to what I say than what I really am is a lot different than other religions”.

The other participants also described the experiences that have made them feel like a religious minority. Amy described the reason for feeling like a religious minority on campus
because her religious identity (Agnosticism) is “never acknowledged or specifically connected with” and “I never really feel like there’s a lot of support being offered for me in the first place”. Amy describes the annual Move-In Day for the residence halls as a negative experience for her, due to the religious affiliations of the volunteers. She relays the experience as the following:

A lot of volunteers who volunteer on Move-In Day are religiously based in a Christian faith so I felt uncomfortable the moment I tried to move into the residence halls and have all the posters there and even just walking the campus it’s very, very obvious who is supported.

Jane related that she was going through an “identity crisis” as a result of what she described as “culture shock and a totally new environment” when first arriving at college as she was one of the only Muslims in her residence hall during her freshman year. This “identity crisis” was described as “a positive disguised as a negative”, but still had an impact on the way Jane viewed her religious identity and how accepted she felt within the campus community.

Miriam shared the difficulties that come from trying to observe Saturday as the Sabbath for the Jewish religion. She said, “it’s forbidden to do any sort of work on Saturday. Oftentimes people will kind of get that on Sunday but Saturday doesn’t really work”. Most of the co-curricular events Miriam chooses to participate in happen on Saturday so she finds it “very difficult to have a secular life outside of her religion” because she is always having to choose between work, co-curricular activities, and religious observances. When asked if there was anything that wasn’t asked during the interview that Miriam wished would have been, she spoke to the stereotypical comments heard from peers in response to her religious identity. These comments include, “oh you are Jewish so you must be wealthy”, “any grades you get must be based on how smart you
are because you are Jewish”, “Einstein was Jewish and he was smart so therefore you must be smart because you are Jewish”, and “You are Jewish so it’s not like you have actually worked for anything”. She also spoke of having to disguise religious symbols, like a Star of David necklace, on campus to not draw attention and questions from peers. Overall, Miriam does say the University is a “nice place to be Jewish” but states she doesn’t feel the University is good at preventing the type of behavior addressed in her experiences of receiving stereotypical comments and feeling the need to disguise religious symbols. Francis also spoke to the misunderstanding and oftentimes stereotypical comments from peers when she wears jewelry with religious symbols or has “trinkets” in her room due to her religious affiliation.

One common negative experience among three of the participants was the presence of religious marketing that occurs around campus. As stated above, Amy spoke to the conversations and religious affiliation of volunteers on Move-In Day potentially creating an uncomfortable environment for students who hold religious identities that are underrepresented. In addition to Move-In Day, Amy spoke of “always seeing posters for Christian clubs and religious clubs that are very Christian based, but I never really see anything for other religious groups”. Arias also spoke to the negative impacts of marketing across campus by saying:

I see all of the flyers for all the different religious groups on campus and it can be kind of sad when I realized that there's nothing really advertised especially for me and so it can be kind of isolating and make me realize that there’s not a lot of people that do this.

Aside from the feelings of discrimination felt by Sally in relation to her religious identity, marketing across campus is the other negative part of being on campus. In relation to this marketing, Sally said “The only other negative thing I can think of is a lot advertisements for
Christian ideals and practices across campus from organizations sponsored by or affiliated with the campus that I have to constantly be subjected to”. When asked if Sally finds any other religious marketing as negative, she responded that “Christian is the only one I really ever see”.

Another negative experience on campus shared by five of the eight participants is the holidays the University chooses to observe mainly through not holding classes on the days of those holidays. Amy spoke of feeling a lack of support and representative of campus culture by saying “students get Christian holidays while other students have to go to school on their specific religious holiday”. When speaking to asking for religious accommodations, Amy said, “I feel it’s almost inappropriate for students to have to ask for those days [holidays] off if you identify as something other than Christian. You shouldn’t have to ask your professor to have a day off you should just have it off.” Aria said “more observance of different religious holidays” is something that she would find helpful and supportive in her religious identity. Observing religious holidays “is a huge part of” how Aria develops her faith. She recounts the following experience related to observance of religious holidays:

I saw this happen with a person who is on my hall council who needed to have a religious holiday observed and was missing all of these things that were planned over the top of it and it was a big holiday. It wasn’t like a really, really obscure, it is a big holiday for a pretty major religion that wasn't observed at all in our events.

Francis stated that celebrating holidays associated with her religious affiliation was difficult. Specifically, she said, “certain holidays of my faith are in the middle of the school week so I didn’t want my religious faith to impede my studies”. Helen also spoke of the language used to describe Winter Break as “Christmas Break” and how isolating the terminology can be to
those who do not identify with Christianity. When speaking about religious holidays, Miriam described those holidays associated with the Christian faith as the “norm”. Miriam has found the ability to take a day off due to a religious holiday is difficult, specifically saying:

If I were to say I cannot work during this time period on any day of the week or request time off for a holiday, they might be required to make an accommodation but it would take some serious effort and some serious getting around things. It would take a lot of fuss and bother which is really difficult.

**Positive experiences:** Despite the negative experiences faced by the participants on campus, all eight participants identified and explained positive experiences they have had with the University in relation to being a student who identifies with an underrepresented religion. As stated above, one of the eight participants named feeling discriminated against due to her religious affiliation, but the other seven participants reported that they had not experienced religious discrimination.

Amy described the University as “very inclusive” when discussing interactions with professors and other university employees. Aria also spoke to the positive experience of interacting with professors when asking for a religious accommodation to observe religious holidays, specifically saying “the professors are really good about it usually”. In addition to a positive interaction with professors, Aria also said being in an environment like a college campus has allowed her to “get more exposed to a lot more identities” which she contributes to strengthening her religious identity. Aria feels her “faith has been shaped by meeting people” and the University has helped her “connect with more people who are of different religions”.
Francis describes the role of higher education in her religious choices as positive. According to Francis, her religious identity “would prefer me to focus on something that betters me” and she feels higher education is bettering her. Specifically, in regards to living in the residence halls, Helen said “they really try to promote feelings of inclusivity”. Jane also feels the residence halls and University as a whole is “really great about social justice things and informing people” allowing her to “feel like I’m in a place where it’s really comfortable to be Muslim”. Exposure to new things was also a benefit Jane experienced from her time in higher education. Jane again spoke of the “identity crisis” she felt during her first year at the University and the feelings of “questioning yourself”. She described going through the “dip of the identity crisis” making her more sure of herself and what she chooses to believe in and says she is “constantly appreciating the efforts taken by the University” to support students of her faith. Sally also feels higher education allows her “to understand my religion and myself” and describes the relationship between higher education and her religious affiliation as “mutual drivers”. Miriam also spoke to the positive experiences of interacting with University officials in relation to her religious identity by saying “I haven’t had any problems and the University as a whole is very well-trained”. Miriam describes the University as “a very nice place to be Jewish in the sense that I don’t really have to worry too much”.

**Theme 4: The curriculum of the University plays a role in religious identity formation and exploration.** Of the eight participants involved in this study, six of the participants feel the curriculum of the University has been beneficial in terms of providing space for the exploration and discussion of religion has been beneficial in their personal religious identity formation and exploration. The other two participants stated they do not feel religion
should be included in the curriculum of the University and that any discussion on religion should occur separate from the University’s classrooms.

According to Amy, higher education has provided her an opportunity to educate herself in a way that allows her to understand other people and to be “more aware of myself and in the future on how to interact with other religions, understand different backgrounds and communicate with different people on different religious grounds”. She also says “higher education has allowed me to explore different religions especially in religious courses”. When speaking about her experiences in the classroom when religion is discussed, Amy says “I don’t feel uncomfortable. I feel really comfortable.” In terms of the University’s curriculum, Amy said:

I think that's one the biggest things that we’re missing. There's no specific education around religion and in the bac-core system they do attempt to make you a better person but not a lot of the students will opt to take the religious courses. They’ll often take geography or something so I think there's a huge separation and missing section there. I feel like that’s what led to a lot of issues in the world but the University can make an effort to be more aware and really work on the education portion.

According to Miriam, one of the biggest things that should be happening at the University is “encouraging people to learn about many different religions”. She feels this can take place in many forms but thinks that “it is good to have unbiased classes that encourage scholarly attitudes toward religion, especially about multiple religions”. Aria also says her experience in the classroom has been positive. When interacting with professors for religious reasons like asking for accommodations, she said “they’re really good about it”. She also says
the classroom is an environment where she “gets exposed to a lot more identities than ever before” which contributes to her religious identity. In terms of professors, Jane says she has “never had any offensive teachers” but has heard of offensive teachers when it comes to Islamophobia. Learning about “the complexity of the world” in her classes has made Jane feel better “about believing in a higher power”. She also appreciated when students had to take certain classes during bac-core that were centered in religion because “that’s only going to help you be a better person and more confident about what you do”.

Ross also feels the curriculum at the University strengthens his religious identity and identifies the main source of support he feels in his religious identity being “primarily the education I’m receiving”. Specifically, Ross says “When I learn about all of these intricacies of reality when I’m learning about biology or chemistry or mathematics, it’s an extremely rewarding experience and understanding reality in that regard I would say that’s almost my religion”. Because of what he is learning in the classroom, he has gained a “great appreciation for it all because it’s just so unlikely that this is here; that we’re all here”. When asked what support the University should provide, if any, for students from underrepresented religions, Ross says “I’m obviously inclined to think there should be religious studies classes”.

Each of the eight participants did say the role of religion and the amount it is discussed within the classroom is dependent on the type of class they are in. Amy says “I have found when I take philosophy or Ethnic Studies courses a lot of the course material is around religion which I find to be really positive as I’m able to learn about other ones [religions]”. Francis is currently taking mostly Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) courses and says “we don’t tend to talk about ourselves, just mainly on what we are focusing on”. However, religion did play
a large role in a Philosophy class she took. Helen also said that as a STEM major “we don’t really talk about religion”. Jane has not experienced specific conversations related to religion because of her major, but is taking a Philosophy class next term and says “I’m sure it’s going to come up”. As stated above, she does feel learning about the complexity of the world in science class “made me feel better about believing in a higher power”. Ross also feels like he is able to connect with his religious identity based on the material he learns in “biology or chemistry or mathematics”. Sally said religion has “only come up when the class itself brings up discussions on spirituality and religion like my current Honors Writing class”. However, Sally says “I think that it [religion] should not be involved in the curriculum teachings or the structure or creation of such”.

**Theme 5: Students who identify with underrepresented religions often feel forced to disclose and explain their religious identity with others.** When sharing the experiences faced on a college campus in relation to their religious affiliation, seven of the eight participants spoke of times when they were felt forced to disclose their religious identity with others and many faced stigma as a result of the forced disclosure. Often after these forced disclosures, the participants also felt that others expected them to explain more about their religious affiliation in terms of beliefs and traditions. Only one of the forced disclosures came as a result of requesting a religious accommodation and the professor asking how the student identified. The participants who were forced to disclose their religious identity also experienced stigma related to their identity and the explanations that followed the forced disclosures.

When speaking about her religious identity of being Agnostic in association with her peers, Amy said “I don’t necessarily think I would want to just come out and tell everybody”.
Amy finds this particularly difficult at the beginning of each school year when “people ask you what you identify as so they can build friendships and for me I have always found it a bit difficult to explain to people what my religious identity is”. Amy recounts several experiences where she has felt forced to disclose her identity in order to build friendships because “students tend to click up around a certain religion” and describes those experiences as follows: “I don’t really bring it [my religious identity] up that often especially when people ask me directly I kind of push it off. I don’t really want to offend anybody or make anyone feel uncomfortable” because of her religious affiliation. Once Amy discloses her identity, she says “I’m Agnostic and have to define it for people or explain it”. Amy also shared experiences of watching her peers request religious accommodations in order to miss class for a holiday and as a result have had to share their identity with professors, some of which have been understanding and other situations where professors have said “come on just say it” when asking a student how they identify.

Aria said of her experience in requesting accommodations, “I often am forced to explain my religious identity in order to gain accommodations”. She relates the following experience when asking to miss class in order to observe Passover:

“It felt weird to ask because everybody when I say ‘Can I have time off for Passover?’ they say ‘Oh you’re Jewish’ and I’m like ‘No’ and then you feel like you’re less valid in being able to ask for the time even though it is part of your religious identity

She has also felt forced to disclose her religious identity when “just telling a story about a tradition or experience”. In regards to the stories she shares, she said “I have to explain away the assumptions that are made about my faith based on what I have said”. Aria also spoke of receiving invitations from peers to participate in religious activities with them and “not being
able to decline it without having to give an explanation is really stressful”. Aria travels frequently with a club she belongs to and the conventions they attend are generally opened with a Christian-based prayer due to the geographic location of the conference. Aria recounts the following experience when choosing not to participate in the prayer:

I choose not to participate and I’m like “I’m going to have to explain this to everybody and I don’t want to do that.’ My whole club is like ‘Why didn’t you participate in prayer?’ It's not like they’re upset about it but they asked me questions about my religious identity because of that and sometimes I don't want answer them.

Francis also feels she is questioned frequently about her faith when she chooses to wear trinkets from the Temple given to her by her mother. She says some of her peers don’t recognize the items as being religiously significant, but some do and then ask questions about the trinkets. Francis said these questions can be “preferable” because “Buddhism in general gets misconstrued from its original meaning and what people think it is” so these questions can provide an opportunity for her to correct those misconceptions. However, she also said these questions “go into a conversation and wondering ‘how much do I want to go into this since I don’t know that much about it myself but I do practice it’. Francis related an experience in a class where the class was discussing Buddhism and being “one of six or seven people of color” in the class and only a few of those people identifying as Southeast Asian and being familiar with Buddhism. The professor asked the class who knew what Buddhism was to which Francis raised her hand and reflected “it felt kind of ostracizing when we had to raise our hands if we knew what Buddhism was because only the people of color raised their hand” and making apparent to the group who may potentially identify with that religious affiliation.
Miriam spoke of her experience sharing her religious identity by saying, “I don’t necessarily hide it but if it’s not directly asked to me I will try not to answer”. In the classroom, she has had several experiences where topics of Judaism arise and “if people know that you’re Jewish...everyone turns and stares at you, but if they don’t know they’re not going to look at you”. When people do know she identifies as Jewish, she is expected to explain religious holidays or general questions related to her religion. She also shares that it can be difficult if she doesn’t share her religious identity “because then people assume that I’m Christian if I don’t say otherwise”. Like Francis, Miriam has experienced forced disclosure due to wearing religious symbols. She says, “I have a Star of David necklace where it has a magnet and if you undo the magnet the necklace just looks like butterflies. When I’m on campus, I turn it into butterflies because I don’t want to start risking anything”. Miriam attributes much of her reluctance to share her religious identity to “a fear that I have that if I make myself known then people who would want to target you would have someone to target” and cites this as a reason why she hesitates to ask for religious accommodations due to the subsequent forced disclosure that generally follows requests for accommodation. She rounded out her experience of being fearful of sharing her religious identity by saying, “So for me that is a very real risk and I never know when it will come up so I’m always cautious about revealing information”.

Sally related her experience of interacting with her peers in relation to her religious identity by saying, “I try not to bring up my choice of religion because I feel since people don’t understand it, it could make me look bad and I want to be a role model and someone they feel they can confide in”. When others do know Sally’s religious affiliation, she says her identity is “grossly misunderstood” and “I get a lot of stigma and teasing for what I choose to be”. She says
one of the biggest things she has experiences with her peers is the “initial reaction to what I say I am” and “a lot of people don’t have any understanding what that [Satanism] is and they judge instantly based upon the name”.

On the other end of the spectrum, Jane does not often feel forced to disclose her identity because “I’m not obviously Muslim because I don’t wear the hijab so when I tell people they often surprised and are like ‘oh I wouldn’t have expected that’”. Helen also has not had experience being forced to disclose her religious identity because of the non-salient nature of that identity. Ross’ experience with his religious identity also did not lead to forced disclosures or explanations saying “a lot of my interactions are just person-to-person or talking about a subject outside the realm of faith and religion for the most part”.

Theme 6: Many students who identify with underrepresented religions identify the University as a potential and significant resource in their religious identity. Throughout the interviews with each of the participants, the University was identified as a potential and significant resource for students who identify with underrepresented religions. Many of experiences and examples given by the participants relating to this theme were shared in previous themes, but they will be shared again to demonstrate aspects of the university that the participants identified as being areas of support that are currently being provided or that are needed. It should be noted that Helen felt she could not answer this question due to the non-salient nature of her religious identity.

One of the main ways the University is viewed as a resource by these students is providing education. Amy generally “never feels like there’s a lot of support being offered in the first place” for students that identify like her. She feels that of the needed areas of support from
the University is education specifically around religion and “we never talk about actual things that could help students or educate.” She says:

One of the biggest things that we’re missing is education around religion. In the bac-core system they [the University] do attempt to make you a better person but not a lot of the students will opt to take the religious courses. They’ll often take geography or something so I think there’s a huge separation and missing section.

Amy also feels “religious support groups” or the creation of “culture center” would be beneficial. In terms of religious support groups, Amy says “I knew they talk a lot about them but I never really see them manifest. How often do people use it because it’s never really brought up a lot.” Aria feels that having a space to connect with others that share the same religious identity is needed, and would be beneficial for her religious identity development. Specifically, about connecting with others, she says:

There should be some way to find other people that had your faith for like the less practiced religions and the less-mainstream religions, something that would be safe because right now you can’t just get on social media and say ‘Who wants to come to my pantheist practice for service’ because it's going to be a not safe environment

Like Amy, Aria feels that the need to connect with others like herself is not unique and “there are people out there who have beliefs similar to mine that would love to do my nature church, but I can’t find them because there’s no environment to do that in”. Transitioning from a huge community to practicing individually was difficult for Aria, and she feels having a support group would have eased that transition. Connecting with people who do not share the same
religious identity is something the University is doing well, but intentionally focusing on creating space should also occur, Aria says.

One of the most difficult times for Aria to practice her religion was her freshman and sophomore years saying, “it was really hard my freshman and sophomore years to actually do anything related to my faith. I didn’t necessarily have the knowledge of campus to go find my own space and the things I’m doing now are hard to do”. Transition from a large community that practiced together to practicing individually was another challenge Aria faced her first year at college.

Francis spoke of the importance of providing space for students to gather as well. Specifically, she says,

They [the University] attempt to have certain prayer rooms and be aware of the Muslim student population, and there’s clubs on campus where they are specifically Christian or Catholic based, but for religious minorities I don’t know if they are doing all too much or just focusing on the larger groups [of students].

For Francis, her first year was especially difficult as well. She reported that she “didn’t find anyone that was Theravada Buddhist like me” which resulted in difficulty when celebrating certain holidays. Francis still identified the second year as a challenge but noted “I met more people of my faith so it was easier to connect with them and discuss”.

Miriam also experienced challenges during her first year, including meeting other people that held the same religious affiliation by reporting “it was really difficult for me to meet other Jews on campus”. When considering roommate and living options on-campus, Miriam said “I had pretty much no way to contact and figure out if anyone else on campus was Jewish and
trying to live with them”. She said “I definitely think it’s a good idea that students of the same religion can meet and discuss things of religious backgrounds” when asked what support she would find helpful. Another challenge for Miriam has been keeping Kosher based on the limited community kitchens and the difficult nature of fully cleaning those kitchens, and the limited options found in the dining centers.

Jane feels that religion should not have a role in the everyday operations of the University “but it should be acknowledged” When asked what it would look like for the University to acknowledge religion, her response was “the programs they have and events run by cultural centers for different religions and nationalities”. Like Miriam, Jane has found challenges when finding food accommodations on campus especially during Ramadan. By the time Jane is able to eat in the evening, the dining centers have closed so she is unable to eat food unless she purchases food to keep in her room ahead of time, something that can be a challenge when a student is in summer classes and trying to fast.

Ross also feels the University should play a role in facilitating group meetings between students who hold the same religious beliefs and those who identify differently. Specifically, he says:

Facilitating group meetings where you have people from a variety of different religious backgrounds and then just having a dialogue between those people to come to better understand the aspects of other’s faiths and not only why they are important to them but just coming to understand to a greater degree so you can make those personal connections and understand different cultures. I mean it plays such a large role in so many people’s lives.
Sally said the University should support students in their religious identity and an area where she feels the University could increase its support is “having more resources available for me to look into at the library surrounding my beliefs”. However, overall she feels “it [religion] should not be involved in the curriculum teachings, structure, or creation of the curriculum”.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the semi-structured interviews of eight participants who identify with underrepresented religions. Despite the varying religious identities held by the students who participated in this study, six themes were identified that connected their experiences to others’. The chapter presented six major themes and the associated data from each interview that supported those themes. The six themes are: (1) Students who identify with underrepresented religious are interested in establishing community with peers who share the same religious identity as themselves, (2) Students identify having a physical space to practice religious beliefs and traditions as highly important, (3) Students feel the University does play a role in the way students view the religious acceptance climate on campus, (4) The curriculum of the University plays a role in religious identity formation and exploration, (5) Students often feel forced to disclose and explain their religious identity with other, and (6) Many students who identify with underrepresented religions identify the University as a potential and significant resource in their religious identity.

These themes serve as illustrations of the participants’ experiences on campus and their view of the University’s role in that experience. The next chapter presents a discussion of the findings, recommendations for the University, suggestions for future research, limitations of the study, and a conclusion of the study.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter is to present a general discussion surrounding the research questions that guided this study. Specifically, this chapter contains the following sections: (a) answers to the research questions that guided this study in association with the themes found during the analysis of the participant interviews, (b) implications for the University, (c) recommendations for University, and (d) an overall conclusion of the study.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, eight students participated in this study through semi-structured interviews designed to explore the participants’ experiences of identifying with an underrepresented religion at a large, public university. This study utilizes the definition of an underrepresented religion or “religious minority” presented by Mayhew, Bowman, and Rockenbach (2014):

Religions that are considered to be unique in their doctrines, values, and practices and the followers of these religions share a minority social status in belonging to groups that do not experience the representation, recognition, and privilege in United States society that is typically granted to followers of mainstream Christian traditions (p. 223)

Despite the small sample size of this study, the participants were able to share their experiences associated with being a student who identifies with an underrepresented religion at a large, public university, which provided sufficient data for the researcher to gain insights both on what these students experience on a regular basis, and what resources they feel are needed for their religious identities to be appreciated and understood by both peers and the University as a whole.
Six themes were identified when the experiences shared in the interviews were analyzed and compared to find commonalities between the participants’ experiences with their religious identity. The six themes are: (1) Students who identify with underrepresented religions are interested in establishing community with peers that share the same religious identity as themselves, (2) Students identify having a physical space to practice religious beliefs and traditions as highly important, (3) Students feel the University does play a role in the way students view the religious acceptance climate on campus, (4) The curriculum of the University plays a role in religious identity formation and exploration, (5) Students who identify with underrepresented religions often feel forced to disclose and explain their religious identity with others, and (6) Many students who identify with underrepresented religions identify the University as a potential and significant resource in their religious identity.

The following section uses the experiences shared during the interviews and the themes that emerged throughout the interviews as bases for addressing the research questions that guided the framework of this study.

**Research Questions and Themes**

This study was centered on the guiding question of: What are the experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions on a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest? Several sub-research questions which supported the guiding question of the research were also incorporated into the study, specifically: (a) What is it like to be a student on a college campus who identifies with an underrepresented religion? (b) Do students who identify with underrepresented religions feel supported in their religious beliefs on college campuses? and (c)
What resources and/or experiences have made or not made these students feel supported in their religions choices?

**Guiding research question.** For the main research question, exploring the experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions, all of the themes found during analysis of the interview provide a rich and detailed depiction of the experiences of these students. Overall, the participants identified the University as a potential and significant resource in their religiosity as well as playing a role in their religious choices. Despite the role the participants felt the University does or should play, each of them reported feeling like a religious minority on campus. The reasons for these feelings of marginalization were attributed to the following reasons: the inability to connect with others who share the same religious identity, no physical space where they could practice beliefs and traditions associated with their religion, and often feeling forced to disclose their religious identity to peers in order to be accepted and to instructors when asking for religious accommodations. Many of the participants reported feelings of isolation and stigma due to their religious beliefs, especially those who felt like they were forced to disclose their identity to their peers during “bonding” experiences or to professors when requesting religious accommodations. In addition to these challenges that created a negative environment on campus for the participants, all eight of the participants were able to name positive experiences they have had on campus in relation to their religious identity. These experiences included: the opportunity to be exposed to identities that differed from the ones held by the participants, being able to better themselves through education, having a space to question their own identities and strengthen their commitment to these beliefs, and the focus on inclusivity at the University that the participants attend.
Each of the eight participants named the importance of building community with peers who shared the same religious identity as themselves and the challenges faced as a result of not being able to find these peers. Five participants reported engaging in group activities related to their religious identity 0-1 times per month, and three of those participants cited the reason for this occurrence being the inability to find others who share similar beliefs. According to Schwadel (2011), education assumes the role of socialization in relation to norms and expectations of society, and this socialization plays a strong role in the religious identities of students. The first year of college appears to be the most difficult for these students due to the lack of knowledge surrounding campus and related resources as well as not knowing peers who share their religious identity. One of the most important roles of college administrators is to offer guidance and support that encourages effective and successful navigation of challenging environments created based on religious differences (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013). This support and guidance should be intentional and focused during a student’s first year so they are able to navigate the challenges presented by a new and complex environment.

Creating space to interact with others of the same faith was an area of support from the University that the participants felt was needed, and it played a major role in their religious identity. Of the five participants who reported engaging in group activities related to their religious affiliation, three reported not having a physical space to practice their religious beliefs and traditions as a contributing factor. Having a physical space where one can socialize with students who hold similar religious beliefs, particularly for those who belong to underrepresented religious, allows students to flourish in their religious identity and experience a diminished skepticism towards their identity (Seifert, 2007; Small & Bowman, 2011). The participants who
spoke of the physical space designated for religious purposes currently on campus noted that it is centered mainly on religious groups that identify with Christianity. Participants also spoke about religious beliefs and practices (i.e. lighting candles and holiday observance) that require specific accommodations within a physical space that are not currently met by having rooms designed for multi-faith use. One important responsibility of colleges and universities is to create spaces where dialogue between student who hold different religious identities can openly share and learn with others (Seifert, 2007). Two of the eight participants spoke of the potential benefit of having a physical space where students from different religious identities could gather together to discuss their different beliefs in an effort to better understand and support one another.

One unanticipated finding of this study is the feeling experienced by many of the participants of feeling forced to disclose their religious identity to peers and professors, and the stigma and feelings of feeling obligated to explain those beliefs that followed the forced disclosure. Many of the participants identified times when they felt forced by their peers to disclose their religious identity, and subsequently explain the tenets of their religion as a result of the forced disclosure. These disclosures occurred during introductions at the beginning of the academic year with peers living in the same hall, during participation in co-curricular activities, in the classroom when religious topics are being discussed (and professors ask for students in the room to raise their hands if they know about or belong to the religious group being discussed), or when asking for an accommodation in order to observe religious holidays and the professor asks the student how they identify in order to grant the accommodation. A few of the forced disclosure experiences have been the result of the participants wearing jewelry related to their
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religious identity and being questioned by peers about the meaning and significance of these symbols in their religious practices.

Sub-research question #1: The first sub-research question posed by this study in support of the guiding question is: What is it like to be a student on a college campus who identifies with an underrepresented religion? As shown in the sections above and the previous chapters, the participants in this study were able to relate both positive and negative experiences they have faced at the University in relation to their religious identity. Each of the participants was able to identify positive experiences where they felt supported by their peers for their religious choices, have been able to ask for religious accommodations from employers and professors who have been understanding, and the positive environment created when conversations on religious topics happen in the classroom and are intentionally incorporated into the curriculum.

On the other hand, students who identify with underrepresented religions face many challenges and struggles in relation to their relation their religious identity. Most of the participants have faced stigma or other negative responses in relation to their religious identity from peers. The participants have experienced isolation as a result of not being able to connect with others who share their faiths. An important role of college administrators is to provide opportunities for students to engage each other in respect, compassion, and openness in both the classroom and co-curricular activities (Mayhew & Bryant, 2013). Many of the participants also reported experiences of feeling forced to disclose their religious identity in order to connect with peers or request religious accommodations and felt stigma or tokenized; even required to explain all tenets of their faith as a result of the disclosure. The choices of holidays that are observed by the University have also created an environment for many of the students in which they do not
feel supported, as most of the university-recognized holidays center on Christian ideals. Marketing for student clubs and organizations around campus also contributes to the chilly environment felt by many of the participants as they rarely see advertising for groups that align with their beliefs. Such cultural markers, like advertising, alienate students who identify with underrepresented religions and “subtly designate them as ‘other’” (Seifert, 2007). These “othering” feelings were expressed by the participants who interacted with the advertisements for Christian organizations as well as the number of buildings dedicated to Christian religions found around campus.

**Sub-research question #2:** The second sub-research question that supported the guiding question of this study is: Do students who identify with underrepresented religions feel supported in their religious beliefs on college campuses? Overall, all but one of the participants reported feeling not supported by the University in relation to their religious beliefs and traditions. The participant who differed in this category felt like she did not have sufficient experiences to address the support, or lack thereof, as she reported her religious identity being non-salient. The seven other participants were able to identify experiences where they did not feel supported by the University in their religious choices. The specific examples given by these participants include having to ask for accommodations to observe religious holidays, whereas their peers who identify with Christianity do not have to do so since the breaks found within the academic calendar of the University align with Christian holidays (Seifert, 2007). Some of the participants report positive experiences with professors when asking for religious accommodations, but feel they should not have to ask for these accommodations just because their identity doesn’t align with the majority.
According to Mayhew & Bryant (2013), a student’s perception of the climate around religion on campus can create or undermine opportunities for both curricular and co-curricular engagement. Many of the participants identified that they wanted to build community with peers who hold the same religious beliefs, but being unable to do so because there is currently no system or organization that would provide a space for these connections. The heavy presence of Christian clubs, organizations, places of worship, and marketing have also led to the participants feeling unsupported in their religious beliefs and the presence of Christian privilege feeling more prominent (Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009; Seifert, 2007).

Sub-research question #3: The third sub-research question presented in this study is: What resources and/or experiences have made or not made these students feel supported in their religions choices? The participants in the study were able to identify resources and experiences that made them feel supported and experiences where they did not feel supported. The main experience in which students felt supported by the university was being given the opportunity to receive a college education. The majority of participants noted the opportunity to interact with other students who held different religious identities allowed them to examine their own beliefs and strengthen their commitment to their specific religious affiliation. The participants also noted the role of the curriculum in their religious choices. Religious courses that are currently offered at the University for bac-core requirements are identified as a supportive resource, but the relatively small number of students who elect to take these courses is a concern identified by some of the participants. In addition, participants reported a positive experience when religion is appropriately and intentionally incorporated into classroom discussions. Participants identified
positive experiences associated with events held on campus through cultural centers that represented religions and cultures with which they identify.

Experiences that made participants feel not supported include a lack of physical space in which to practice their faith/beliefs and ability to connect with other students who share the same religious identity. Most of the participants spoke to the challenges of practicing their religion individually because they didn’t know how to connect with others like them and the mediums that could potentially be used for connecting, like social media, did not feel safe or inclusive. They also spoke of the inability to practice certain religions and beliefs due to not having a physical space on or near campus for them to do so, including accommodations needed for food related to their religious identities. A lack of student organizations that represent the religious identities held by the participants was also cited as a reason for not feeling supported.

**Implications of Study**

The field of Student Affairs is primarily focused on serving students and helping them develop within their respective identities so they can contribute to their chosen professions and society as a whole. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions and whether these students feel supported or not in their religious identity on a college campus. The results of this study will contribute to the research being done on students who identify as religious and what can/should be done to support these students. It is important to note the researcher did not collect certain demographic information such as race and gender when administering the demographic survey so the implications and recommendations of this study do not reflect connections that may exist between the participants’ social identities and their experience of identifying with their particular religion.
Despite 7 of the 8 participants verbally identifying as female during the interviews, this study did not explore the effects of this social identity on their religious identity and experience. Future research could explore how and in what ways intersectionality may exist between social identities (e.g., race, sex, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation) and the experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions.

The researcher hopes that this study can specifically informs colleges and universities on how they can better support students who identify with underrepresented religions and the challenges these students face in everyday interactions on a college campus. Based on the themes that emerged from an analysis of the participant interviews and the experiences they shared by the participants in these interviews, I have outlined below what I have identified as the major implications for student affairs professionals and their universities, in order to foster a broader understanding of the experiences of these students and the support they need to feel a sense of belonging.

The main implication emerging from this study is the need for student affairs professionals and faculty members to examine and act on the active and passive ways a university contributes to a student’s sense of whether they belong or not based on their religious identity. Students who identify with underrepresented religions are looking for support and resources from the University, even as the current shift in higher education is to focus more on what students do and less on helping students navigate and develop within their identities (Astin, 2004) [italics added]. These students often encounter environments and situations where they do not feel supported, even though these environments can be altered by the university. Among the biggest challenges faced by the participants in this study were the lack of physical spaces needed
to practice religious beliefs and traditions and not having a way to connect with students who share the same religious identity. Both of these challenges were cited as contributing factors in students not feeling the university supports them in their religious identities. Some situations, like the amount of marketing material related to Christian clubs and events, cannot be controlled by the university, but it is important that student affairs professionals know these environments exist and are able to help students process through these experiences as they seek to feel supported. Mayhew, Bowman, and Rockenbach (2014) pose two crucial questions for institutions and student affairs professionals to ask themselves in order to measure their progress on creating safe and inclusive communities based on religious identity: Does the institution have a priority to serve students from all faith and non-faith traditions? and How, if at all, is this priority reflected in the mission, vision, values, strategic plan, space allocations, curriculum, and university services?

**Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions. This section discusses the recommendations that follow from the data, and the implications presented in the previous section.

An crucial component to the recommendations outlined below is the role a public institution of higher education plays in the religious aspects of a student’s experience. In the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, the Free Exercise Clause notes, and subsequent Supreme Court decisions have guaranteed and delineated, a person’s right to participate in religious activities without government intrusion unless there is a “compelling interest” to do so. The Establishment Clause, on the other hand, forbids Congress from establishing an official
religion and favoring one religion over another (Kaplin & Lee, 2014). In 1971, the Supreme Court outlined a three prong test known as the *Lemon* test. The *Lemon* test specifically outlines three conditions for policies and practices related to public government (in this case public colleges and universities) and religion: first, there must be a secular legislative purpose; second, the primary effect must not advance or inhibit religion; and third, the policy/practice must not foster excessive entanglement in religion (Kaplin & Lee, 2014, pp. 50-51). However, despite these legal restrictions, neutrality does not require a public college or university to prohibit religious activities either on-campus or at off-campus events it sponsors (Kaplin & Lee, 2014).

With these legal implications in mind and as a result of the individual experiences and challenges shared by the participants and the analysis of these experiences, I have identified three primary recommendations for university administrators and student affairs professionals: Create safe spaces for students who identify with underrepresented religions to connect with other students who hold the same religious identity, assess resources designed to support students who identify with underrepresented religions to measure student satisfaction and effectiveness, and review best practices in relation to religious accommodations. Each of these recommendations is explained in further detail in the following subsections.

**Create spaces for students who identify with underrepresented religions to connect with other students who hold the same religious identity.** As mentioned in the findings and notes in the themes resulting from the experiences shared by the participants during the interviews, building community with others who shared the same religious identity is extremely important and necessary. Institutions of higher education should provide spaces for students who identify with underrepresented religions; spaces that are designed for both social events and
practices related to religious beliefs and practices. The ability for students to create community with peers who share the same identity is critical if students are to feel included and valued. Many institutions have created general “multi-faith” rooms within residence halls and student centers to support the needs of these students and provide a space for community, but [as the students in this study reported] most of these rooms soon become home to one group of students who identify around a particular religion leaving others to feel like they are not welcome to utilize the space as well. Institutions should explore policies and procedures around the creation and use of interfaith spaces in order to prevent the space from potentially being monopolized by one group of students.

In addition to physical spaces, the university should provide and administer online communities designed to connect students from underrepresented religions with students who share the same religious identity. The first year of college can be difficult for students regardless of identity, but having the ability to develop a community around similar identities like religious affiliation has the potential to make a student feel supported and included from the beginning. Feelings of support and inclusivity can lead to greater satisfaction with the college experience and may lead to better retention rates for these students. Marginalization creates a distinct set of challenges with academic and social transitions, so students who feel closer to an institution and believe they matter to the institution (and its faculty, staff, leaders) are more likely to continue their association with that institution and become more involved (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014; Schlossberg, 1989). One example of an online system needed to connect students from underrepresented religions with students who share the same religious identity is a roommate matching platform for the residence halls. Many students experience stress and
discomfort when moving to a new place and sharing a room with someone they are not familiar with, and those feelings can be enhanced when there is a difference in religious beliefs, practices, and traditions.

**Assess resources designed to support students who identify with underrepresented religions.** Many institutions of higher education are providing support and resources to students who identify with underrepresented religions. However, it is crucial for the university to know whether these services and resources are effective and if students are truly finding them helpful. The results of this study demonstrated the university as a potential and significant resource for students who identity with underrepresented religions. The assessment of the resources for these students should include matrixes for effectiveness in the following areas: whether the student is feeling supported or not as a result of the resource or support system, whether or not the students who interact with the resource are satisfied with the resource, how many students are interacting with the resource and what religious identity those students hold, and any suggestions for improvements from the students who utilize the resource. It is also important to understand why the students who are not interacting or utilizing the resource and why they are not doing so, in an effort to structure the resource in a way that supports the greatest number of students feasible while still feeling individualized and tailored to meet the unique experiences and challenges faced by each student.

Implementing assessment practices provides the university the opportunity to examine the resources already in place for students who identify with underrepresented religions, and should point out how to best revamp them in order to meet the needs expressed by those students. The assessment results could also identify potential gaps in resources and what the
university can do to address those gaps in an effective way that satisfies the support needs for all students, regardless of religious affiliation.

**Review best practices in relation to religious accommodations.** The academic calendars of most institutions of higher education are developed in a way that university-wide breaks from classes and other commitments related to the university align with holidays based in Christianity. To mitigate this conflict for students who identify with underrepresented religions, institutions should offer reasonable religious accommodations to students so they are able to be excused from classes or other commitments due to religious reasons. Several participants in this study reported they knew about their prerogative to request a religious accommodation, but only one of the eight participants had actually requested an accommodation -- and the participant felt forced by the professor to disclose her religious identity during the accommodation request.

Students who identify with Christianity rarely, if ever, have to choose between their schoolwork and observing religious holidays while students who identify with underrepresented religions must negotiate frequent conflicts between academics and spiritual observances (Seifert, 2007). When discussing the accommodation process, comments such as “difficult”, “a lot of fuss and bother”, “inappropriate”, and “impede my studies” were made by the participants in this study in regards to the conflicts faced by students who identify with underrepresented religions and the conflict they face when classes are held on a religious holiday which they want to observe.

In an ideal world, institutions of higher education would be able to observe holidays associated with all religions to create an environment where students from all religious identities feel supported. This is not only impractical but virtually impossible, because of the wide variety of religious holidays that exist and the even wider spectrum of the religious identities held by
students. In order to address the discrepancy between not holding classes for some holidays and holding classes on others, institutions should review the process for students to request religious accommodations. One potential solution that would both streamline the process and protect students from feeling forced to disclose their religious identity and receive unwanted attention or stigma as a result of the accommodation request is to consider creating an online system for accommodation requests. This system would allow students to submit the request through a generated form which asks for the minimum information necessary in order to grant the accommodation and would subsequently generate a generic email to the instructor of the course the accommodation is being requested for that includes the name of the student, the dates they will be missing class, and a phrase like “excused for religious reasons”.

Conclusion

In order for a university to fully support students who identify with underrepresented religions, the institution (i.e. administrators, faculty, staff, and students) must first understand something of the lived experiences of these students on their campuses and the challenges they face given their [underrepresented] religious identities. Colleges and universities have long been considered a “spiritual marketplace” because of the wide variety of religious identities held by students on campuses (Schmalzbauer, 2013). Because of the wide variety of religious identities found among college students, institutions have the responsibility to recognize these students’ identities as they strive to teach the whole student and create an environment that is supportive of all religious identities; environments where students feel safe to share and practice their beliefs (Seifert, 2007; Small & Bowman, 2011). This thesis began with a poignant quote, and it bears repeating here:
Giving more careful attention to religion (broadly construed) has the possibility of enhancing the work of higher education in untold ways, because religion is inextricably blended into the key dispositions that drive learning itself - the mixing of critical thinking with hope, the awareness of difference, the ability to wonder and to see the world in new ways, the skill of focusing on one thing at a time, and the blending of the person with the impersonal. Attending to religion can enliven all of these dimensions of higher learning; ignoring religion undermines them (Johnson & Johnson, 2012, p. 5).

The stories shared by Amy, Aria, Francis, Helen, Jane, Miriam, Ross, and Sally speak to the importance of understanding the experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions. The experiences shared by these students can help professionals at institutions of higher education understand what resources are currently being offered in which students are finding support, and areas where support is currently not being offered but would be crucial to students from underrepresented religions feeling included on their college campuses. The future implications of this study in relation to student affairs professionals and university administrators include: creating safe spaces where students from underrepresented religions can connect with other students who share the same religious identity, assessing resources designed to support these students, and reviewing and implementing best practices in relation to religious accommodations.

The narratives shared by the eight participants in this study depict the experiences – positive, negative, and otherwise -- of students who identify with underrepresented religions on college campuses. In order for institutions to best support students who identify with underrepresented religions, they must be familiar with the lived experiences of these students and
the challenges they face by these students in relation to their religious identities. These experiences and challenges can then be used to inform and strengthen the areas of support being offered that students identify as helpful, and address the gaps of support identified by these students -- in an effort to fully support all students, including those from underrepresented religions.
References


doi:10.1177/0743558402175002


Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Experiences of Students Who Identify with Underrepresented Religions

Dear Student:

My name is Weston Prisbrey, and I am a graduate student in the College Student Services Administration program at Oregon State University. The purpose of my research is to explore and understand the experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions. This study defines an underrepresented religion and students from religious minority groups as those who identify with a non-Christian religion (e.g., Islam, Buddhism), a religion that is not considered to lie within mainstream Christianity, or with no religious affiliation at all (Small & Bowman, 2011).

Participants in this study will be asked to have an individual interview with the student researcher (Weston Prisbrey) for no longer than an hour and half. The individual interviews will be audio-recorded. In addition to an individual interview, participants will be asked to engage in a focus group designed to examine the validity of the study’s findings.

The results of this study will be used to complete a thesis for a Master of Science (M.S.) degree in College Student Services Administration at Oregon State University.

Qualifications to participate in this study:

1. Must be currently enrolled full-time, undergraduate at Oregon State University and be 18 years or older.
2. Must identify with an underrepresented religion as defined above

If you meet the qualifications for participating in this study and wish to participate, please email me at weston.prisbrey@oregonstate.edu. I look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your consideration of this request.

If you have any further questions about this study, please feel free to email me.

Sincerely,

Weston Prisbrey
Graduate Assistant, Student Conduct and Community Standards
University Housing and Dining Services
Oregon State University
Appendix B: Consent Form

EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Project Title: Experiences of Students who Identify with Underrepresented Religions

Principal Investigator: Tom Scheuermann

Student Researcher: Weston Prisbrey

Co-Investigator(s): None

Sponsor: None

Version Date: 07242015

Purpose: You are being asked to take part in a research study. The purpose of this research study is to explore the personal, lived experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions on a college campus. This study will use qualitative research founded in narrative inquiry methodology to explore and examine the lived experiences of students who identify with underrepresented religions. Individual interviews will be conducted in order to explore the personal experiences of the students. The results of these interviews will be analyzed through the interpretations of the student researcher.

The study is being conducted by the student researcher for the completion of a Master’s thesis in College Student Services Administration.

Activities: The study activities include personal, one-on-one interviews between the participant and student researcher. The student researcher will be taking observation notes and audio-recording equipment to record the interviews. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you should choose not to participate. In addition to the personal interviews, member checking will be offered for you to verify the accuracy of your interview responses.

Time: Your participation in this study will last about two hours over the span of one individual interview, and a possible follow-up interview individually or in a focus group. You will be asked to participate in one personal interview. You will also be asked to participate in a member checking focus group which will allow you to verify your interview responses. You will be given 10 calendar days in which to acknowledge interest in participating in the focus group. If you do not respond within this timeframe, your responses will still be used in the study’s findings. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up individual interview or a focus group (interview) with the other study participants. The interview(s) will be focused on exploring your experiences as a student who identifies with an underrepresented religion and the focus group being used to validate the findings from the personal interviews.

Risks: The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the being in the study include: Because you are a student at Oregon State University, there is a risk that you could be identified
based upon your responses to the interview questions. To minimize this risk, pseudonyms (e.g. if your name is Weston, you might request to be called “Tom” for this study) will be used throughout this study and will be associated with your responses.

Please choose a pseudonym for the records of this study: _______________________

Potential risk, though minimal, may include emotional reactions with regard to reflecting upon your personal experiences and perspectives identifying with an underrepresented religion. If you have such a reaction during the process, and wish me to, I can connect you with references at Counseling and Psychological Services. In addition, under Oregon law, researchers are required to report to the appropriate authorities any information concerning child abuse or neglect. The researchers may also report threats of harm to self or to others.

The researcher is using email to communicate with you in this study. There is a risk that the security and confidentiality of information sent by email cannot be guaranteed. Information sent by email can be intercepted, corrupted, lost, destroyed, arrive late or contain viruses. To minimize these risks, the researchers will not open any email accounts, or data files on any public computers. Only private password-protected computers and/or OSU computers with authenticated password logins will be used to access any materials related to this study. This study will not collect any private information via email. Email will only be used for scheduling individual interviews.

Benefit: This study is not designed to benefit you directly.

Payment: You will not be paid for being in this research study.

Confidentiality: The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. All records associated with this study will be stored securely and will only be accessed by researchers in this study. Federal regulatory agencies and the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research. Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you.

If the results of this study are published, your identity will not be connected to your responses. Only the student researcher and the principal investigator will be able to access the audio recordings taken during the interviews. The recordings will only be used for educational purposes of this research and will be erased once the study has been completed.

Voluntary: Participation in this study is voluntary. During the interview and focus group, you are free to skip any questions that you would prefer not to answer. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you and this information may be included in study reports. Your decision to take part or not take part in this study will not affect your grades, your relationship with your professors, or standing in the University.
STUDENTS FROM UNDERREPRESENTED RELIGIONS

Study contacts: If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Tom Scheuermann at tom.scheuermann@oregonstate.edu or Weston Prisbrey at weston.prisbrey@oregonstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights or welfare as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu

__________________________________________
Participant Signature (can either be handwritten or electronically typed)

__________________________________________
Date

__________________________________________
Researcher

__________________________________________
Date
Appendix C: Demographic Survey

Pseudonym: _________________________ (Pseudonym you chose on the informed consent form)

Instructions:
Please read each question carefully and fill out or select which option most closely fits you. If you need additional space to answer a question, please add the pages to this document.

1) What is your religious identify?

__________________________________________________________________________

This study defines an underrepresented religion as a non-Christian religion (e.g., Islam, Buddhism), a religion that is not considered to lie within mainstream Christianity, or no religious affiliation at all (Small & Bowman, 2011)

2) What is the religious identity of your family, if different than your own?

__________________________________________________________________________

3) How often do you engage in group activities (i.e. church, worship) related to your religious identity?
   a. 0-1 times per month
   b. 2-3 times per month
   c. Weekly

4) How often do you engage in personal activities related to your religious identity?
   a. 0-1 times per month
   b. 2-3 times per month
   c. Weekly

5) Have you ever experienced religious discrimination in college?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If yes, please describe:

6) Have you ever had to ask for a religious accommodation while attending college?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If yes, please describe:

7) Have you ever felt like you are a religious minority?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If yes, please describe:

Please bring completed survey with you to the time of your personal interview.
Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. What is it like for you to be a student of your faith on campus?

2. How has your religious identity played a role in your experience in housing?

3. How has your religious identity played a role in your experience in the classroom?

4. How has your religious identity played a role in your experience in co-curricular activities?

5. What role has or does higher education play in your religious choices?

6. What role should religion have in a public university?

7. What support, if any, have you received from the university in relation to your religious identity?

8. What would you find helpful to support you in your religious beliefs and traditions?

9. How has the university played a negative, neutral, or positive role in your religiosity?

10. If applicable, what was the transition like when your religious identity went from being dominant to under-represented?

11. Is there anything else I didn’t ask that you wish I would have? If yes, what?

*The above questions, or very similar, will be used during the interviews. In addition, follow-up questions may also be asked as needed/appropriate.
Appendix E: Institutional Review Board Exemption Approval

The above referenced study was reviewed and approved by the OSU Institutional Review Board (IRB).

EXPIRATION DATE: 09/14/2016

Annual continuing review applications are due at least 30 days prior to expiration date

Documents included in this review:

- Protocol
- Consent forms
- Assent forms
- Alternative consent
- Letters of support
- Recruiting tools
- Test instruments
- Attachment A: Radiation
- Alternative assent
- External IRB approvals
- Translated documents
- Attachment B: Human materials
- Grant/contract
- Other:

Comments:

Principal Investigator responsibilities for fulfilling the requirements of approval:

- All study team members should be kept informed of the status of the research.
- Any changes to the research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to the activation of the changes. This includes, but is not limited to, increasing the number of subjects to be enrolled. Failure to adhere to the approved protocol can result in study suspension or termination and data stemming from protocol deviations cannot be represented as having IRB Approval.
- Reports of unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others must be submitted to the IRB within three calendar days.
- Only consent forms with a valid approval stamp may be presented to participants.
- Submit a continuing review application or final report to the IRB for review at least four weeks prior to the expiration date. Failure to submit a continuing review application prior to the expiration date will result in termination of the research, discontinuation of enrolled participants, and the submission of a new application to the IRB.
Appendix F: Reading List for Religious Education

Agnosticism:


http://www.britannica.com/topic/agnosticism

Atheism:

Agnosticism. (2016). In Encyclopaedia Brittanica online.

http://www.britannica.com/topic/agnosticism

Islam:


Judaism:


Pantheism:


http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/

Satanism:


Theravada Buddhism:
