CHALLENGES TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AMONG TRADITIONAL AGE COLLEGE STUDENTS OF MONOTHEISTIC FAITHS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A dissertation submitted to the Kent State University College of Education, Health, and Human Services in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy

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This study contributes to the dialogue in the higher education literature on spirituality by describing how traditional-age college students of monotheistic faiths make meaning of a challenge to their conception of God. These students’ experiences were examined in order to address two, identified deficiencies in the literature: a) the neglect of perspectives that assume a supernatural reality; and b) the unintentional suppression of perspectives that view spirituality and religion as being intertwined. Extensive, open-ended interviews were conducted to access the meaning-making processes of eight college students who attend a public university and identify strongly with one of the Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. A phenomenological approach was employed to analyze the students’ meaning-making processes and identify the common essence among their experiences free from assumptions about spirituality found in the literature or held by the investigator.

The phenomenological essence of the participants’ experiences was discerned as a disruption to their relationship with God due to their expectations not being met in regards to how divine authority should be exercised. These disruptions precipitated challenges to relationships both inside and outside of their religious communities as
participants worked to re-conceptualize God and their relationship with Him. These findings demonstrate the centrality God played in the spiritual experiences and the interrelatedness of spirituality and religion for the participants; and thus, suggest the need for a broader, more inclusive definition of spirituality that accounts for the experiences of naturalists and supernaturals, and for those who divide and those who join spirituality and religion.
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Finally, I give thanks to God, to whom I owe everything. As it is written, “What shall I return to the LORD for all His goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all His people.” (Psalm 116:12-14)
Dedicated to

Yeshua HaMashiach

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.” (Psalm 19:14)
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the last fifteen years student spirituality has become a topic of interest for both researchers and administrators in higher education (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Nash, 1999; Parks, 2000; Tisdell, 2003). The growth of interest in the topic is the result of two movements that have emerged during this period. First, university administrators and faculty are finding themselves ill-equipped to mentor and advise students who increasingly express an interest in their spirituality (Astin & Astin, 2003). Second, a number of critics from various philosophical traditions have raised questions as to whether the academy has cut itself off from certain means to knowledge discovery by insisting upon an epistemology that demands objectivity and the marginalization of the individual knower (Astin, 2004; Marsden, 1997; Palmer, 1983, 1998; Parks, 2000; Zajonc, 2003). However, despite the increased attention spirituality has received as a topic in the higher education literature, there is little consensus as to what it is or what language should be used to discuss it. Commentators have attributed the lack of a uniform definition to spirituality’s personal, individualized nature (Chickering et al., 2006; Tisdell, 2003), competing metaphysical assumptions (Speck, 2005), and higher education’s break with traditional definitions of spiritual experiences (Estanek, 2006). For observers like Estanek, the lack of a consensus on what constitutes spirituality requires the construction of definitions to be an essential element of the research project on the topic.


Purpose of the Study

This study is a contribution to the dialogue in the literature of higher education regarding the definition and the nature of spirituality. It is a phenomenological study that examines how traditional-age college students of conventional monotheistic faiths experience a challenge to their conception of God, which can be more broadly understood as their center of value and power (CVP). A purposeful sample of eight, traditional-age, college students who attend a large, public university was selected for the study. Diversity in gender and ethnic representation was sought for the sample, but priority was given to selecting a diverse group of students who represented various traditions within the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Extensive, in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with the selected students to collect their narrative descriptions of having experienced a challenge to their conception of God. Phenomenological methods of bracketing personal and theoretical perspectives, reduction of collective narratives to central statements, imaginative variation of discerned themes, and synthesizing textual and structural descriptions were employed to describe the essence of participants’ challenges (Moustakas, 1994).

Traditional-age, college students of monotheistic faiths who have experienced a challenge to their conception of God were selected for the study in order to address an identified gap in the higher education literature on spirituality. The gap is the relative absence in the dialogue of the role a perceived, transcendent and personal entity (i.e. God) plays in the spiritual experiences and commitments of some students. The most common definitions found in the literature of spirituality typically identify only two
components: the inner exploration of one’s self that leads to a more authentic realization of who one is; and the transcendence of one’s self toward a more intimate relationship with the *other*, which is defined as any material entity outside of the self (Chickering et al., 2006; Love & Talbot, 1999; Palmer, 1998; Tisdell, 2003). The primary deficiency with this perspective of spirituality is that it fails to account for qualitative differences in the relationship between the self and the other as perceived as that which stands upon equal ground to the self; and the self and the CVP, which is an entity outside of one’s self that holds a position of authority over both the self and the other of equal standing.

Although the concept of the CVP does not assume theistic spirituality (Fowler, 1981), discussions distinguishing it from the other of equal standing are often avoided in the literature due to its traditional connection with a personal, supernatural entity. Speck (2005) and Estanek (2006) have attributed this tendency to a bias held by most researchers that presupposes natural materialism as the only reality. This paradigm casts a shadow of doubt on truth claims made by theistic forms of spirituality, especially those grounded in monotheistic religions that assume the existence of an active, personal deity. Speck has argued that the bias against theistic spirituality and the possibility of a transcendent reality has not only resulted in the conflation of the other and the CVP, but also in the literature’s predominant focus on the development of the self. It is the neglect of the relationship between self and the CVP and the conflation of the other and the CVP that informed this study’s research question.

The decision to focus on experiences that raise questions about students’ conceptions of the CVP is grounded on the expectation that they commonly experience
such a challenge during the traditional college years as has been shown by Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000). For Fowler and Parks, faith is defined as an individual’s conception of the relationships that exist in a “triad of truth.” This triad consists of the relationships between self and other, self and CVP, and other and CVP. Fowler has identified the catalyst for faith development in individuals during the traditional college-age years to be encounters with experiences and perspectives that either illuminate existing contradictions in their views about the “triad of truth” or that raise awareness of how one’s faith is informed by one’s group identity. Fowler has identified the early twenties as the age when the transition between received, conventional faith and self-authored faith most commonly occurs. Building upon his work, Parks has shown that the college experience provides an ideal opportunity for these types of challenges to occur. She also contends that the lengthening of the young-adult years, which she defines as the period of time between adolescence and full-adulthood, has resulted in the emergence of a unique developmental stage where one transitions from a received conventional faith to a self-authored faith. This transition typically occurs during and after the traditional college-age years. Fowler’s and Parks’ writings suggests that these challenges are a frequent experience among traditional-age, college students and should be expected to be a key component to their spiritual experiences. Based upon this expectation, this study focused on the phenomenon of such challenges as they relate to the conception of the CVP.

**Significance**

The need to develop a more comprehensive definition of spirituality within the higher education community is discerned quickly by a review of the data collected by the
Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) regarding college students’ interest in the topic. HERI’s preliminary and final findings confirm the preoccupation many students have with their spiritual identity (Astin, Astin, Chopp, Delbanco, & Speers, 2007; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). Two-thirds of surveyed students report a strong interest in spiritual matters and a similar number have demonstrated a substantial commitment to religious engagement. Perhaps even more important than the interest indicated by many college students are the personal, spiritual struggles self-identified by students. Among surveyed students, 21 percent have admitted that they frequently struggle with the concepts of evil, suffering, and death; 18 percent frequently question their religious or spiritual beliefs; 16 percent felt unsettled by religious and spiritual matters to a great extent; and 46 percent experience anger toward God occasionally or frequently (Bryant & Astin, 2008). Such struggles have been found to be associated with students feeling overwhelmed, depressed, stressed, and anxious; poor physical health; and low self-esteem. On the positive side, such struggles have also indicated a greater acceptance of otherness. In light of these results, higher education administrators, faculty members, and researchers need to be more informed of what constitutes spirituality in order to better address students’ interests and needs in and out of the classroom.

Students of monotheistic faiths were selected for this study due to the predominance of these traditions among college students and projected growth in their populations over the next 50 years. According to HERI, 73.7% of American freshman at four-year colleges in 2009 self-identified as belonging with a monotheistic faith (“This Year’s Freshman,” 2010). Of these students, the overwhelming majority of them
identified with Christian traditions (95.1%), compared to the Jewish (2.6%) and the Islamic (1.0%) traditions. Despite the growth of non-monotheistic faiths (e.g. Buddhism and neo-pagan religions) in the United States over the last couple of decades (Fowler, 1999), predictions of population growth over the next half century indicate monotheism, and especially Christianity, will remain the dominant faith of the overall population in the United States (Jenkins, 2007). Demographic projections indicate that the Christian population in the United States will increase from its current estimate of 225 million to 330 million by 2050. Jenkins has argued that this increase will be primarily the result of immigration patterns to the United States from Latin America, East Asia, and Africa where the growth of Christianity vastly outpaces its progression, and in some instances regression, in the West. In addition, Islam is expected to continue its rapid growth on the global stage. If Jenkins’ demographic projections are correct, although the college classrooms of the future will be more ethnically diverse due to increased internationalization and immigration from non-Western countries, they are likely to become more homogeneous when considering religious commitments as global Christian and Muslim populations continue to outpace the growth of other religions and faith systems.

**Personal Significance**

Phenomenological studies, such as this one, require the researcher to bracket his perspectives in order to approach an experience with as fresh set of eyes (Moustakas, 1994). As such, my own motivations for this study are important to recognize. Spirituality and religion have always occupied a central concern for my studies. My
religious faith and the relationship I have with God are cornerstones to my life experiences, perspectives, and identity. It was during my Master’s program at Ohio State from 2000-2002, that college student spirituality became a specific concern for me. While studying student development theory I was curious as to why none of the theories specifically addressed spiritual or religious identity development. I recall the frustration of its absence as I view my spiritual development and my religious commitments as the central components of my identity. When I approached my professors on the absence of spirituality in the higher education literature, they agreed that it was a neglected area; and while they were able to direct me to the work of James Fowler in human development, they did not inform me that individuals like Robert Nash, Sharon Daloz Parks, and Patrick Love were laying the foundations to address the issue in higher education.

When I returned to graduate studies in 2005, this time at Kent State, I was pleasantly surprised to find that spirituality had become a principle concern among many student development researchers. However, as I began to read the writings of many authors in the field, I discovered that what they described as spirituality did not capture my experiences. The first element that appeared to be neglected was the role religious teachings and traditions had played in my own spiritual development. Instead of recognizing the considerable impact organized religion can have on one’s spiritual development, most of the writers divorced the two concepts. Acknowledging that spirituality can exist outside of religious traditions and structures has benefited the field’s understanding of the concept, but I felt the distinction being made was too pronounced as it created the view that religion is a phenomenon distinct from spirituality. Particularly
troubling in the separation of the two concepts was what I perceived as an assignment of beneficial self-exploration and actualization as the domain of spirituality, while religion was diminished to a definition of restrictive indoctrination. The second aspect I found troubling in regards to the discussion of spirituality in the higher education literature was its failure to address how a perceived, transcendent being (i.e. God) might impact one’s spiritual development, or even to acknowledge the more inclusive concept of the CVP. The absence of a serious discussion or exploration of the CVP has remained a troubling aspect in the literature for me as the personal relationship I have with God is the core of my spiritual experiences and how I conceive my identity. Unfortunately, I have found very few authors who have adequately addressed this component of spirituality. Addressing these identified deficiencies have been an important motivator throughout the progress of this study.

**Setting the Stage**

The next chapter looks at historical and current conceptions of spirituality in the higher education literature. In particular, the works of Fowler (1981), Parks (2000), Speck (2005), and Estanek (2006) are described in detail as their works inform the questions of this study. Alternative understandings of spirituality are also outlined as they provide additional lenses through which the individuals’ experiences can be understood. Finally, an overview of phenomenology as a methodology for accessing the meaning making processes of individuals and why it was the chosen for this study is provided.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the dialogue in the higher education literature regarding the definition and the nature of spirituality by describing how traditional-age, college students of conventional monotheistic faiths experience a challenge to their conception of God. In order to position this study in the literature of the field, this review describes the current discussion and the definitions used by researchers and commentators, as well as criticisms of the dominant conversation. The historical and current positions spirituality holds in the American higher education system is also outlined to discern how the current dialogue in the literature developed into its present construction. In addition, current theories and approaches to spirituality, and the interrelated topics of faith and religion, are described under the three dominant approaches to the subject as discerned by the researcher: behavioral, cognitive, and relational. Finally, a review of the literature on various forms of phenomenology looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the methodological approach used for this study.

Defining Spirituality in Higher Education Research

Religion, religiosity, faith, faith development, and spiritual awareness are terms found in the higher education literature that are included in or linked to the definition and use of the term spirituality. Although the differences between these concepts are often unclear and some authors use them interchangeably, the most frequent distinction made among them is the one constructed between spirituality and religion (Chickering et al.,
In the majority of the literature, spirituality is defined as the personal experiences and commitments to one’s self, to the human and the natural other, and in some occasions, to a center of values and power (CVP). Contrasted to this definition, is the one commonly assigned to religion, which is limited to institutional doctrines that define corporate practices of worship and daily living. This division of spirituality and religion has been beneficial to the dialogue in the literature as it acknowledges that individuals can experience spirituality outside of traditional and formal religious institutions. This distinction has not always been acknowledged in the past (e.g. Astin, 1977; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969), and consequently the spiritual experiences of many individuals were neglected, missed, or ignored.

Despite the benefits of separating the concepts of spirituality and religion, there have also been disadvantageous consequences. The first consequence is that it fails to recognize the implications of the relationship between the two terms in many religious traditions and for many individuals. Robert Nash (1999) has been a vocal critic of the creation of the spirituality-religion dichotomy because it fails to acknowledge the interrelationship traditionally understood between the concepts. It also fails in his judgment to seriously consider how the narratives, doctrines, moral teachings, and rituals of religion inform and mobilize the emotions and spiritual imaginations of an individual. My own perspective leads me to be uncomfortable with this dichotomy for the reasons expressed by Nash, but also because many authors fall into the habit of assigning
negative attributes of spiritual-religious experiences to the concept of religion, while attributing positive aspects to the concept of spirituality.

The second disadvantageous consequence of dividing the concepts of spirituality and religion is that it has caused more ambiguity and greater confusion in the language used to discuss the topic. Although the two terms have been described differently, the terms and definitions of both concepts have not been parsed out according to this dichotomy. In his own attempt to grapple with the amorphous definitions used in the higher education literature on spirituality, Speck (2005) contends that competing worldviews, which are often not voiced by authors, determine how words like religion, spirituality, and faith are used. These competing worldviews lead researchers and commentators to conceptualize and use each term as it relates to their own perspectives. Speck continues by asserting that their failure to acknowledge that “words with metaphysical import both arise from and inform worldviews” (p. 4) results in the lack of a consensus of common definitions. Speck continues his exploration of definitions by then turning to what he considers the greatest divide of worldviews by those who have addressed the topic of spirituality in higher education: those who define themselves as naturalists and those who hold the ontological view that a supernatural realm exists in relationship with the natural. According to Speck, naturalists who hold that the supernatural does not exist speak of a spirituality that is devoid of aspects transcendent to the natural word, and therefore they limit it to the internal experiences of the individual. From such an understanding, the focal point of authority is the individual coming to understand his or her relationship with the other. Contrasted to this view are those who
hold a supernatural view where authority within relationships rests entirely outside of the individual or is shared between the individual and a transcendent entity.

The competing worldviews of the naturalist and the supernaturalist therefore create confusion when trying to use the same language to describe spirituality or spiritual experiences. Speck uses the example of how each side employs the term god in their discussions of spirituality. For the naturalist, it would be preferred if the term was not used at all; but if it must be discussed, it should only be used if it is inclusive of all forms of higher power. As the higher power cannot be personalized, but must remain only a concept, the individual becomes the sole author on defining the relationship between one’s self and the higher power. In contrast to this view and use of language, the supernaturalist uses the term god to describe a transcendent entity that at the very least has self-consciousness, but more commonly is involved in the authorship of the relationship between itself, the natural world, and individuals. The ontological disagreement between naturalists and supernaturalists causes confusion when using the term god as they mean radically different things. Speck contends that this same confusion occurs over other metaphysical terms like soul, transcendent, and sacred because unless the author explicitly states his or her worldview, it is unknown to others whether or not these terms point to, or at least allow for, the existence of the supernatural. The division of spirituality and religion reflects this confusion as the terms point to radically different assumptions by each paradigm.

The confusion Speck sees as a consequence of unspoken worldviews is also addressed by Estanek (2006) in her review of the higher education literature on
spirituality. However, rather than focusing on the confusion created by competing paradigms using the same language, she seeks to clarify where higher education has positioned the discussion and what are its consequences. Estanek holds that the redefining of spirituality as a concept related to an individual’s self-authorship was necessary for the topic to become accessible to both researchers and practitioners within the profession. Estanek continues that what has been lacking in the dialogue is recognition that by recasting the term to fit within the higher education profession’s values and language, something very different is being discussed than what has been conventionally understood by religious and other academic traditions. Since higher education researchers and practitioners are engaged in a dialogue regarding something new, the construction of definitions becomes an essential element to the research project according to Estanek. With this perspective in mind, an awareness of both historical and current approaches to the study of spirituality in higher education is necessary for researchers.

**Historical Position of Spirituality in American Higher Education**

Spirituality occupied a central place in American higher education from its inception. One of the first priorities of the Puritan settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was the establishment of a college for the purpose of ensuring an educated clergy among its churches (Ringenberg, 2006). From the founding of Harvard in 1636, until the middle of the nineteenth century, higher education would remain wedded to Protestant religious denominations (Burtchaell, 1998; Chickering et al., 2006; Marsden, 1994). This is not to say that every institution founded before the Civil War had sectarian ties or
embraced tradition Protestant values. Institutions like the University of Virginia and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, founded in the early antebellum period, foreshadowed the more secular pursuits that would come to dominate American higher education after the Civil War. Nevertheless, as George Marsden (1992) asserts, American colleges prior to 1860s were “thought of as a religious enterprise, as well as a public service” (p. 10).

Although American higher education was primarily a religious enterprise during its first two centuries, caution must be used when making conclusions about the nature of the relationship between spirituality and college missions during the time period. On the one hand, the existence of denominational ties and an encompassing religious character does not automatically imply that spirituality, as understood and used by contemporary higher education researchers, was or was not the predominant concern of the typical antebellum college. Burtchaell’s (1998) work on the decline of religiosity in American higher education demonstrates that most institutions paid little attention to students’ personal spirituality. Instead, they focused on teaching an intellectual and moral tradition informed by a Protestant worldview. On the other hand, the relative lack of concern regarding students’ development of authenticity and the transcendence of one’s centricity should not automatically lead to the postulation that spirituality was not a concern for higher education. Raper (2001) makes such a conclusion when he questions the role spirituality played in the early American colleges despite their religious identity. Criticizing the early institutions’ restriction of spiritual exploration in favor of propagating an institutionalized religion, Raper argues that American colleges have never attended to the spiritual development of students. Rather than helping students address
their spiritual growth, most institutions suppressed doubt and questioning in favor of adherence to religious doctrines. The problem with this type of analysis is that it fails to account for differences in the understanding of spirituality between the antebellum era and our own. It limits the understanding of spirituality to the one commonly used today: an individual’s exploration and personal commitment to their authentic self. This definition fails to properly analyze the role of spirituality in American higher education in previous generations as it neglects corporate understandings of spirituality that religious doctrines narrate and foster. This error has led researchers like Burtchaell and Raper to apply anachronistic definitions of spirituality to colonial and antebellum American higher education.

In contrast to the colonial and antebellum periods, the last third of the nineteenth century witnessed the erosion of the traditional, Protestant hegemony over American higher education as concern for the moral and religious development of students was replaced with a new mission that focused on the creation of material knowledge that benefited industry, government, and society. The secularization of the historic colleges and the research orientation of the emerging universities of the time was the result of several social and intellectual movements that arose during the nineteenth century, which then came to dominance in the early decades of the twentieth. Non-theistic Darwinism and biblical higher criticism, which held the Bible as merely a historical, literary document, undermined the authority of the Protestant-informed assumptions of the earlier centuries (Marsden, 1994). Also at this time, institutions began to rely less on their founding denominations for financial support as they turned increasingly to leading
industrialists and state governments for funding. The increasing diversity of the United States during this period also contributed to the marginalization of traditional Protestantism in higher education. Presbyterian and Congregational dominance in higher education first began to erode after the Civil War as other denominations began to establish their own colleges, and was replaced by the outset of World War II with the emergence of public universities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Marsden, 1994; Ringenberg, 2006; Veysey, 1965).

As secular concerns such as economic advancement, national protectionism, and scientific exploration of the material world become the principle pursuits of higher education, spirituality was increasingly marginalized as a concern for university faculty and administrators. The secularization of institutions under the guiding philosophies of positivism and rational materialism regulated spirituality to the personal sphere of the individual, which was considered irrelevant to the work of the university researcher and instructor. In the new environment of twentieth century, American higher education, spirituality became a subject viewed as unworthy of consideration by the academy (Marsden, 1992). Although the emerging field of student personnel services during this time continued to acknowledge the role of religion and spirituality in students’ lives as evidenced by the The Student Personnel Point of View of 1937 and of 1949, the use of the terms had shifted from the institutional goals of the university to an individual’s choice to pursue them. By the 1960s, even the inclusion of spirituality as a component of students’ holistic lives had been almost abandoned by the student personnel field as it
became increasingly defined by the social science research of the student development movement (Chickering et al., 2006).

The 1950s through 1990s mark the nadir of spirituality’s role in American higher education. Not only had positivistic empiricism and emerging post-modern theories deemed the subject irrelevant to the institutional missions of many American colleges and universities, the student personnel profession had come to neglect spirituality as a component of holistic education and the student’s development. Social commentators Jencks and Riesman (1968) saw the diminishment of religion in higher education as a forbearer of the secularization of the American society. In their assessment of the history of Western civilization, universities stood at the forefront of cultural and intellectual progression, and they had relegated spiritual concerns to the private lives of individuals, making them increasingly irrelevant to the organization and advancement of society. During this time period, two sociologists, Glock and Stark (1965), conducted a meta-analysis of the research on religiosity to test if the assertions of individuals like Jencks and Riesman were correct regarding the secularization of American higher education and society. Although they found a number of studies supporting the trend of secularization, they found a relatively equal number of studies that suggested America was experiencing a religious revival in the post-War War II era. A third, large group of studies offered yet another alternative, indicating that religiosity was in a static state. Glock and Stark’s attempt to explain the disagreement among these three groups of sociological studies provides an important lens to understand the discourse on spirituality within higher education over the last four and half decades.
Glock and Stark’s examination of the divergent findings of researchers lead to the discovery that fundamentally different definitions of the term religiosity were being used. The two researchers opened their study of American religiosity with the following statement that underscored this theme: “The difficulties of finding abstract, transrhetorical, and cross-culturally applicable definition of religion have vexed scholars for generations” (p. 3). One of the examples used by Glock and Stark to illustrate the problem of definitions was the phenomenon of prayer. In their meta-study they found some researchers had viewed frequency and duration of prayers as a measure of one’s religiosity; however, these studies failed to account for qualitative differences that could exist between individuals who participate in prayer. Such differences would include the prompts that lead one to the act of prayer, the content of the prayers, to whom or to what the prayers were directed, and the intensity of the experience felt by the individual involved in prayer. The solution to this problem for Glock and Stark was the development of a taxonomy that broke religiosity into more basic components that accounted for varying levels of intensity. The specifics of these taxonomies are not relevant to this review of the literature, but the conceptualization of religiosity as being composed of various components illuminates the different approaches used in higher education literature on spirituality over the last four decades: the behavioral, the cognitive, and the relational, which are describe in detail in the ensuing sections.

**Current Position of Spirituality in American Higher Education**

Positivism was the initial, intellectual philosophy that marginalized spirituality by discrediting it as a legitimate means of knowledge creation (Sloan, 1994), but post-
positivistic, post-modern, and critical theory researchers have likewise dismissed its relevance until reconsiderations of the phenomenon recently emerged. Marsden (1994) argues that the academy’s dismissal of spirituality as a subject worthy of research ultimately lies in the unspoken agreement among the competing philosophies within higher education that evolutionary naturalism should guide all serious pursuits of knowledge creation. This bias against religious and spiritual traditions that address the relationship between the natural and supernatural has started to be noticed by researchers from various perspectives. Arguing from an eastern, Islamic paradigm, Shahjahan (2005) has been critical of how Western higher education gives credence to positivism and post-modernism despite their disagreements, but rejects any knowledge system that holds a spiritual or faith-based perspective. Brandner (1999) has likewise argued that positivistic science and post-modern philosophy’s rejection of religion and spirituality is ultimately predicated on its rejection of Western religions’ answers to soteriological questions of liberation. Finally, counseling researchers Zinnbaur and Pagament (2000) have documented the hostility in the academy toward perspectives not rooted in evolutionary naturalism and how many faculty members agree with the Freudian dismissal of spiritual experiences as illusory wish fulfillment.

Although spirituality remains marginalized as a research subject by the majority of the academy, the last two decades have witnessed the rise of voices calling for an examination of higher education’s devaluing of it. There are at least six reasons for this new interest in higher education. First the 1990s saw a number of religious critics emerge who were willing to question the secularization of American higher education
Although these critics were concerned primarily with the marginalization of a Christian worldview in the academy, their criticisms brought to light the unspoken assumptions of evolutionary naturalism and its rejection of alternative systems of knowledge creation. Second, the unprecedented growth of minority groups in higher education since the 1980s has brought attention to the Eurocentric bias of viewing empiricism as the only valid form of inquiry (Tisdell, 2003). Third, new findings from the field of quantum physics have suggested that universal connections do exist, which have raised interest in transcendent issues related to the individual’s connectedness to the universe (Rogers & Dantley, 2001). Fourth, as materialism has become more predominant in Western culture there has been a reaction by individuals to look for spiritual transcendence as an alternative (Rogers & Dantley, 2001). Fifth, Parker Palmer’s (1983, 1998) call for educators to turn inward to find their true self and to turn outward to encounter otherness has resonated with many professionals in the field (Dalton, 2001). Finally, educators have increasingly been confronted by students in the classroom who are demanding that spiritual issues be addressed (Astin & Astin, 2003; Tisdell, 2003).

All six of these identified sources have contributed to the re-emergence of spirituality as a topic for discussion in the academy, especially in the field of student development research and in the student affairs profession. The dialogue of this discussion typically views spirituality as being understood through one of the three lenses: behavioral, cognitive, and relational; which are reviewed in the subsequent sections.
Behavioral Lens to Spirituality

The earliest studies on college student spirituality focused predominantly on the behavioral aspects of the phenomenon as typically expressed through specific rituals and traditions associated with Judeo-Christian, religion practices. Astin’s (1977) analysis of the existing literature on student religiousness in combination with his own findings indicated a diminishment of the spiritual aspects of students’ lives since the end of World War II. On the surface, these studies appeared to confirm the conclusions of Jencks and Riesman (1968) and Feldman and Newcomb (1969) who held that the academy’s effect on students was to increase secularization. Astin’s research demonstrated that the religious, ritualistic behaviors of students consistently declined over their four years in college. These behaviors included attending religious services and educational programs, praying, and saying grace before a meal.

When Astin (1993) revisited and updated his earlier findings from 1977, he radically altered the function spirituality played in the relationship between in-puts, environment, and out-puts in determining the effect of the college experience on students. The most recognizable difference between the two works is the comparative lack of concern regarding students’ spiritual lives in the second book. Differences in the conception and use of spirituality between the two studies help to explain the decrease in attention. The first conceptual difference between the two works is that in 1977 spirituality had been treated as part of the in-puts students brought with them to college that would be affected by their experiences; whereas the 1993 work conceived of it as an environmental variable that impacted the development of students in other aspects of
their lives. No longer was a student’s spirituality followed and mapped over their four years of college; instead, the religiosity of students was seen as a variable that affected non-religious behaviors and attitudes. The second conceptual difference between Astin’s two works is that in the earlier analysis, religiosity was seen as the beliefs and attitudes of students and their self-concept of identity within a religious tradition (this approach to spirituality will be explored later); whereas in the later analysis the concepts were separated. Most notable about this conception is that spirituality as viewed behaviorally was absent in this work. Student beliefs and attitudes became identified as values while self-concept became an aspect of personality; but behaviors disappeared altogether.

Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) meta-analysis of the literature on student spirituality reflects much of the earlier work in higher education research (Astin, 1977; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969) in its classification of the subject within the behavioral approach. The literature of the 1970s and the 1980s focused on activities within religious traditions. In these studies Pascarella and Terenzini discerned the same results Astin had found in that the religious behaviors of students declined during the college years. The studies also indicated a positive, significant relationship between educational attainment and secularization. In their second and more recent volume on how college affects students, which reviews the literature of the 1990s, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) present a very different situation. Contrasting against the secularizing trends found in the research of earlier decades, the more recent studies were indicating an overall increase in the value students placed on spirituality. This conflicting conclusion is not so much the
result of a change among students, but the result of researchers’ re-conceptualization of spirituality along other lines than behavioral.

Although the more recent trend in higher education research has been to view spirituality through cognitive and relational lenses, studies that take a behavioral approach continue to be conducted. A considerable portion of this research comes from UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), which has been funded by the John Templeton Foundation to continue the assessment of students’ attitudes, behaviors, and activities as related to their spirituality (Astin & Astin, 2003; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). The findings of these researchers are indicating a need to adopt new, more complex approaches or to combine current approaches to the study of spirituality if the role it plays in students’ lives is to be accurately accessed and understood. For example, Lee (2002) has found secularization to be minimal among students who completed the 1994 Freshman Survey and the 1998 College Student Survey administered by HERI. Lee’s research demonstrated that over a third of respondents indicated a strengthening of their religious convictions during their college years while almost half experienced no change. Byrant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) reported similar ambiguities finding that although students became less religiously active after one year of college, they were more committed to integrating spirituality into their lives. Researchers not affiliated with HERI have found similar results. Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield (2001) have found that students are actively constructing their own spirituality divorced from traditional religions and their practices.
Cognitive Lens to Spirituality

While higher education researchers were focusing primarily on the behavioral dimensions of student spirituality during the 1970s and 1980s, other researchers from the fields of theology, human development, and educational philosophy were offering alternative perspectives on the topic. Rather than analyzing the religious behaviors of individuals as understood through a particular religious tradition, these researchers focused on the cognitive aspects of spirituality. Due to the considerable influence of James Fowler (1981) in laying the foundation for this area of study, subsequent researchers have often adopted his terminology and referred to the cognitive aspects of spirituality as faith development. Although Fowler’s research speaks to the experiences of traditional college students, as well as other age groups, it remained on the periphery of higher education research and practice throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Sharon Daloz Parks (1986), who focused on the aspects of Fowler’s faith development model that addressed the traditional college years, experienced this neglect directly when her first book on the subject went out of print a few years after its publication. It was not until researchers in student development theory began to advocate for the consideration of spirituality in higher education conversations that faith development was given serious consideration (Love & Talbot, 1999; Temkin & Evans, 1998).

Fowler’s stages of faith. James Fowler began to develop his theory of faith development as a graduate student and professor at the Harvard Divinity School. Drawing from his liberal Protestant background, Fowler (1981) conceived of faith as the epistemological phenomenon of how one constructs meaning in one’s life. The most
important component of meaning-making for Fowler was how individuals came to understand the relationship between self, others, and a center of value and power (CVP), commonly referred to as God in Abrahamic, religious traditions. The CVP component of this “triad of truth” was considered the most important aspect of meaning-making in that it sets the framework for understanding one’s values, beliefs, and the images and the rituals one finds significant (Fowler & Dell, 2006). Fowler (1984) further contends that the process of meaning-making as a response to our understanding of self, others, and the CVP is a universal experience for all humans. Hence, even atheists and post-theists engage in faith development as they work to make meaning of the concept of a center of unifying power outside of themselves, while they confront the universal experiences of what it is to be human: awareness of death; awareness of life-defining choices under conditions of uncertainty and risk; encounters of the unknown and the unknowable; struggles with trust and loyalty within a community; and the use of language, symbols, and stories to communicate ideas.

Despite Fowler’s (1981) insistence on the universality of faith development among all humans, he tried to remain sensitive to the diversity of narratives that can arise to explain the relationship between the self, the other, and the CVP. This sensitivity led Fowler to focus his research on the construction of faith rather than individual faith narratives. In his research on faith construction, Fowler drew extensively from the fields of behavioral, cognitive, and moral development. Specifically, he relied on the ideas of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, and Levinson to create a stage model of faith development. As with the stage models of earlier developmentalists, Fowler conceived of various
stages of faith construction where individuals held qualitatively different understandings
of how knowledge is created, where the locus of authority rests, and the role of
community in one’s meaning-making experiences. Likewise, Fowler used the previous
models to explain movement though the various stages as a result of dissonance that
arises within the contradictions of each stage. Progression through the stages relies on
the resolution of the conflict, which can only occur by adopting the constructions of the
next, higher stage. Fowler also borrowed from the theories of the earlier
developmentalists to explain why transitions between stages typically occur within
specific time intervals of the human life-cycle.

Fowler’s (1981) model posits that there are six stages of faith development.
Higher education is rarely concerned with the first two stages of Fowler’s theory, called
the intuitive-projective and the mythical-literal stages, as they represent constructions
through which the vast majority of matriculating college students has already progressed.
This is not to say that individuals in these two stages are not encountered in higher
education as Fowler has found instances of adults who remain in the mythical-literal
stage, in that they cannot recognize or resolve conflicting narratives to which they adhere.
The solution for these individuals is to incorporate competing perspectives into a single
construction without discerning inherent contradictions or the lack of consistent
standards. Fowler argues that for one to progress beyond this central conflict of the
mythical-literal stage, one has to adopt a single perspective from an authority outside of
one’s self. This resolution results in the third developmental stage, which Fowler labeled
as synthetic-conventional and which represents the position of many individuals when
they arrive on campus as first-year college students. The transition from the synthetic-conventional stage to the individuative-refletive stage thus represents the experience of most college students within Fowler’s framework.

The synthetic-conventional stage of faith development is marked by the existence of an external authority that provides the understanding of one’s self, one’s position to the other, and one’s relationship to the CVP. Fowler (1981) holds that reliance on an external source results in individuals adopting symbols and stories from outside of themselves in order to express their faith. Transition to the fourth stage, referred to as individualistic-reflective, occurs at the point that the adopted authority’s perspective fails to provide a cohesive narrative that explains the experiences of the individual. According to Fowler’s research a considerable number of adults never experience or address this crisis; but for those who do confront and resolve it, the development of an internal voice that defines one’s meaning-making is established. This transition provides one explanation to the researchers who have found ambiguous results regarding the spirituality of college students (Bryant et al., 2003; Cherry et al., 2001; Lee, 2002). The decline of interest in traditional religious activities and behaviors while maintaining an interest in personal spirituality among college students could be a consequence of the transition from relying on an external, authoritative source for their faith to creating an internal voice for it.

Conjunctive faith and universalizing faith, the final two stages of Fowler’s (1981) theory, are troublesome for higher education researchers for two reasons. The first problem is that Fowler contends that individuals who progress beyond the individuative-
reflective stage are rare in society and the few who do transition to it are not expected to be found at the traditional age of college students. Consequently, these stages are not often analyzed by higher education researchers as they would be relevant to an extraordinarily small number of individuals. The second and perhaps greater problem is that Fowler’s advanced stages are not definitively established. Although Fowler (1984, 2006) contends that the conjunctive and universalizing stages exist, he admitted in his original work the difficulty he had in describing and understanding the structures of these two stages (Fowler, 1981). Upon reading his descriptions of these two stages, it remains somewhat unconvincing that these stages actually represent a different structural understanding of faith from the individualistic-reflective construction. Of even greater concern is Fowler’s confession that the universalizing stage was a normative conception he already held before he conducted his research. This admission raises doubt about whether or not Fowler was projecting his own ideals onto the individuals he identified as representing the universalizing phase.

**Parks’ big questions.** Fowler’s writings on faith development significantly influenced Sharon Daloz Parks’ (1986, 2000) approach to spirituality as she adopted his model of faith development to inform her own perspective on what it means for a student to become an adult during the college years. Parks sees the development of a self-authored understanding of one’s self, the other, and the CVP as the central component of the activities of young adults. She borrows the language of Fowler to call this activity of meaning-making faith development. Like Fowler, she also recognizes the significance of story, image, and vision in the understanding of truth for the individual, whether imposed
from external sources or derived from internal, personal reflections. Where Parks’ perspective varies is she is exclusively interested in the young adult period of Fowler’s model, when individuals typically move from a synthetic-conventional construction of faith to an individuative-reflective perspective. Her narrower focus leads Parks to focus particularly on how individuals answer the “big” questions of meaning this transition prompts. These questions include who is the appropriate author of one’s understanding of reality, how does one participate in a dialogue with others regarding issues of truth, and how does one cultivate a life that is both satisfying and just.

Parks (2000) highlights three aspects of spirituality that are unique to her thinking about faith development in the young adult years. First, she contends that she found two components to Fowler’s individuative stage that are qualitatively different enough to justify calling them separate constructions. Rather than envisioning individuals as moving directly from reliance on outside authorities to a self-authorship of faith, she contends there is a period of testing the salience of new constructions in order to determine if they can withstand outside objections and disagreements. It is only after successfully implementing and defending one’s self-authored perspective that one gains the confidence necessary for inner-dependence to be stabilized. During this time of testing, individuals are likely to retreat to the older constructions of the conventional perspective they received before finding their own voice. Parks’ justification for seeing this period as a unique stage rather than just the transition between two stages rests upon Kegan’s (1994) idea that transformation of the self does not occur in linear stages as
suggested by Fowler (1981) and the developmental traditions on which he relied, but instead is a constant motion through orders of consciousness.

The recognition of a possible intermediate stage between conventional and individualistic stages informs Parks’ (2000) other two important contributions. The first is the acknowledgment of the imagination in the intellectual process. Recognizing the significance of the self-authorship of one’s story to explain the self, the other, and the CVP in the individualistic stage of meaning-making, Parks contends imagination plays a central role. Parks argues that imagination has three dimensions that contribute to meaning-making and the development of one’s voice: it is the process by which individuals move from one contextual faith to another; it is the act of naming, which allows images to hold different meanings within particular contexts; and it is the creation of life and the realities we see within it. According to Parks these dimensions of imagination place it as the highest power of knowing and it demands that higher educational practitioners are ready to tend to the students’ operations of it. The other important contribution by Parks is her call for mentoring environments in higher education, by which she means a space where experienced adults can provide support and challenge without imposing their own perspectives to students who are testing their inner-dependence.

**Love’s synthesizing work.** As previously mentioned, the work of Fowler and Parks was for the most part unnoticed within the fields of higher education and student development theory until the end of the 1990s. One of the earliest advocates for including their perspectives in higher education research was Patrick Love. Although
earlier calls had been made for the inclusion of spirituality in the discussion of student development by Collins, Hurst, and Jacobsen (1987) and Temkin and Evans (1998), such messages were for the most part ignored until Love demonstrated the spiritual components already present in the predominant theories in the field (Love & Talbot, 1999) and the inherent compatibility between cognitive and faith development theories (Love, 2002). By making connections between faith development and the accepted body of student development literature used in higher education research, Love was able to point out the risk of avoiding spirituality as an aspect of human development if the holistic education of the student was a desirable outcome. Pointing out that the development of the entire individual for the purpose of an emergent, self-authored identity was an essential value and goal of the student affairs profession, Love successfully argued that spirituality was a key component to the development of students with an authentic identity.

In his first article on why spirituality should receive attention from higher education researchers and practitioners, Love, along with Talbot (1999), demonstrated how Maslow’s (1971) and Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) writings already contained elements of spirituality. Love and Talbot pointed out that Maslow had contended that spirituality was an active component of the entire development process and that he had conceptualized the pinnacle of the developed person as one who achieved self-actualization that went beyond the centricity of the individual to a state of being self-transcendent. In regards to Chickering and Reisser, Love and Talbot demonstrated how their vector of developing integrity pointed toward the spiritual concept of establishing
congruence between humanizing values and one’s personal values. In a later writing, Love (2002) went about synthesizing cognitive development theory with aspects of Fowler’s (1981) and Parks’ (2000) conceptions of faith development. In this article, he demonstrated that the two research traditions held similar assumptions about forms of knowing, dependency, and community throughout the developmental stages typically associated with college students. The articles by Love demonstrated to higher education researchers that components of spirituality were already present within the dominant theories of the field and could easily be incorporated into the dialogue of researchers and practitioners.

Love’s work to incorporate spirituality into the field of higher education had a notable impact on how the term would be used in the research dialogue. Whereas in the past, spirituality was viewed as being wedded to religious activities and beliefs, Love demonstrated how one could conceptualize and study the subject separate from religion. This distinction can be found in the list of the five propositions Love and Talbot (1999) assigned to spirituality, where religion is absent from the language used:

1. Involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development.
2. Involves process of continually transcending one’s current locus of centricity.
3. Involves developing a great connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community.
4. Involves deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life.
5. Involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing.

This new definition of spirituality, which downplayed connections to religious traditions, helped to facilitate the transition from behavioral and certain relational understandings to cognitive conceptions of the subject. The reconstruction of the term has also played a fundamental role in the development of new understandings of spirituality in the higher education literature, which are divorced from religious traditions, rituals, and identity.

**Nash’s competing narratives.** Robert Nash’s (1999) contributions to this area of study vary from Fowler, Parks, and Love in that he focuses on contextual rather than structural components of one’s spirituality; nevertheless, his writings fall within the cognitive approaches to the subject. In his well received work by the higher education community, Nash analyzes the structures of four predominant spiritual narratives he has identified among college students in his classes: fundamentalist, prophetic, alternative spiritualities, and post-theistic. By examining the structures of meaning-making contained within these narratives, Nash outlines what he perceives as the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective to create meaning for individuals who are confronted with the demands of modern life in a democratic and pluralistic society.

In Nash’s description, those who hold the fundamentalist perspective do so out of a rejection of modernism, which they criticize for fostering a negative ethic of individual autonomy, relativism, secular humanism, and hedonistic lifestyles. Individuals with a prophetic perspective are those who are disenchanted with modernism’s material
excesses and who seek social justice, especially for those who are seen as abused or neglected by the society. Those individuals who embrace what Nash calls alternative spiritualities are individuals who are dissatisfied with traditional institutions, especially religious ones, and seek a transformation of individuals and humanity through self-empowerment and self-healing. Finally, there is the post-theistic worldview whose adherents search for alternatives to the other three spiritual means of knowing, seeing such attempts as misguided or malicious means to preserving power structures based on the false conception of universal truth.

**Relational Lens to Spirituality**

Along with the behavioral approach to studying college student spirituality, religious affiliation was often studied by earlier researchers (Astin, 1977; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Religious affiliation is a simplified version of the relational approach to spirituality in that it asks the individual to identify solely with a denomination or religious tradition rather than within the cumulative effect of spiritual experiences and relationships. The studies in the 1960s and 1970s only tracked students’ self-perception of being affiliated with a particular religious tradition, such as Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. Similar to the findings of the earliest studies on spiritual behavior, a consistent decrease in student affiliation with religious traditions was found to occur over the four years of college. In Astin’s (1993) later work, religious affiliation was no longer tracked across the four years, but rather became an aspect of student personality that influenced other behaviors and attitudes.
Although religious affiliation is still measured by researchers such as those at HERI, relational approaches typically use a more complex description of the phenomenon that takes into account how one conceives their identity in relation to the experiences they have with others. Although the cognitive approach to spirituality accounts for these experiences, it remains primarily concerned with the meaning making processes and the structural narratives of them, rather than the identity one develops from them. Drawing from the faith development theories and placing them within the context of the existing student development theories that addressed identity development, Love (2002) brought these other experiences to the attention of researchers. Four of Love and Talbot’s (1999) five propositions of spirituality reflect this new concern with identity development. The four propositions address knowing one’s true self, transcending beyond centricity, creating relationships within community, and making meaning of these connections. The writings of Parker Palmer (1983, 1998) and Elizabeth Tisdell (2003) reflect these other domains of spiritual experiences.

**Palmer’s true self.** Parker Palmer’s (1983, 1998) search of the authentic self predates the current, relational approach to spirituality in higher education; however, it entails the type of transcendent experiences researchers have been addressing over the past decade and a half. Palmer first began writing about spirituality in education as a result of his own struggle to find a place where he could be his true self within educational institutions. In regards to educational institutions, his chief criticism was that Western education operated on the assumption that knowledge was neutral and should be limited to the description and application of facts. For Palmer, this prevented people...
from encountering truth because it failed to recognize that human passions, both positive and negative, guide the pursuit of knowledge. The failure to account for our passions resulted in knowledge being perceived as an external entity, which creates the view of the knower as a manipulator of the objective known. The alternative approach to education, which Palmer advocated, was to recognize that knowledge does not end in the discovery of facts, but continues with an engagement of the truth. Engaging the spiritual aspects of one’s self and others allows us to then move beyond facts and to approach truth.

Palmer’s (1983) use of the term truth is central to understanding his conception of spirituality, which he describes as the individual’s engagement with it. At the core of Palmer’s understanding of truth is the idea that it is personal and relational: “to say that truth is personal is to affirm the image of truth that lies within each person, regardless of creed or institutional affiliation” (p. 50). However, Palmer cautioned that the radical subjectivism of truth as conceived within the post-modern paradigm was also incorrect as such a position neglects that truth is engaged through relationships. The relationships Palmer had in mind when seeking truth were those between the individual and one’s authentic self and between the individual and the other. Although the other can be the CVP, Palmer focused primarily on the experience of creating relationships with other human individuals in a communal effort. In the relationships an individual has with one’s authentic self and with others, Palmer argued that truth emerges when open dialogue is present for the true self to speak in its own voice.

**Tisdell’s concern for culture.** Elizabeth Tisdell (2003) has also contributed to the perspective that spirituality is primarily a relational experience with one’s authentic
self and with others. She contends that these relations subsequently contribute to the formation of community. As she states in her most comprehensive work on the subject:

Spiritual experience is not only about constructing knowledge through image and symbol. Spiritual experiences and the manifestations of these significant experiences anchor our lives in specific ways, and are generally related to how we live with others in the world (p. 63).

Tisdell’s assertion that spiritual experiences tie an individual to others within a community led her to conclude that a deep connection exists between spirituality and culture. The connection between the two topics is important for Tisdell, who from her critical, feminist perspective contends that the shared beliefs, values, languages, symbols, and stories that compose the essence of a culture inform individuals’ spiritual experiences. In turn, those experiences guide the process of making meaning of relationships with the other. Hence the process of spiritual development is tied directly to the experiences one has with one’s culture as the individual examines past events in one’s life in order to make sense of the nature of one’s relationships and the present state of who one is.

**Phenomenology**

The principle purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the essence of a lived experience by a small group of people (Schram, 2005). Phenomenological studies in the human sciences seek to accomplish this by looking into how individuals make meaning of their experiences. In such studies, the researcher attempts to discover and describe the universal essence, or common structure, of how individuals’ commonly
experience a phenomenon or concept (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is based primarily on the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl who rejected the object-subject dichotomy of the empirical sciences in favor of a paradigm that interprets a phenomenon through the experiential relationships with which individuals encounter it. Since phenomenology is concerned with the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived, it provides a methodology that allows for the description of consciousness; specifically, how individuals perceive a phenomenon and make meaning of their experience with it. Within phenomenology, three approaches have traditionally been identified: empirical, transcendental, and hermeneutical.

Empirical phenomenology was born out of the field of psychology by researchers who began to question the value of experimental designs’ ability to reveal individuals’ lived experiences outside of a research project (Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi (1985) describes this interest in lived experiences as the researcher going “to the everyday world where people are living through various phenomena in actual situations” (p. 8). Giorgi contends that this approach to psychological research moved the field beyond the “context of verification” into the “context of discovery”. Although the adoption of a phenomenological perspective allows researchers to move psychology into the lived experiences of individuals, scientists like Giorgi remain committed to other empirical assumptions. Primary among these assumptions is the assertion that the psychological researcher should determine the underlying structures of an experience by translating the original descriptions of the phenomenon into psychological terms and concepts. The belief that only researchers should interpret the essence of an experience without any
input from the participants beyond their original description is what distinguishes this approach as empirical.

Giorgi (1985) defines phenomenology as a method containing four phases rather than a methodology that guides how one approaches the study of lived experiences. The first phase is description, which consists of the researcher gaining a sense of the whole narrative by first reading an individual’s description of a lived experience through a naïve lens that does not account for theories or biases. The second phase, called reduction, consists of the researcher going back through the narrative and discerning meaning units that fit within the perspective the researcher holds about the phenomenon. The third phase requires the researcher to transform the language of the participant into the psychological language of the phenomenon being studied. In the final phase, the researcher synthesizes and integrates the meaning units of the narrative into a consistent description of the essence of the phenomenon.

Although Creswell (2007) groups Giorgi’s (1985) empirical phenomenology with Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental perspective, there are important differences between the two. These differences are expounded upon by Moustakas and are rooted in the transcendental approach being more congruence with Husserl’s criticism of the subject-object dichotomy found in empirical research. The primary distinction Moustakas draws between empirical and transcendental phenomenology is the systematic efforts to achieve what Husserl called *epoche*, which is the suspension of prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated. Rather than translating the descriptions of experiences into the language and expectations of the researcher as prescribed by Giorgi,
transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to move as far as possible from preconceived beliefs and knowledge regarding a phenomenon. The other major distinction Moustakas makes regarding the transcendental approach is the emphasis it places on intuition and imagination in understanding the essence of participants’ lived experience with a phenomenon. Feelings, thoughts, and sensual awareness are all important descriptors when understanding the consciousness’ experience with a phenomenon from this perspective.

The distinctions made by Moustakas (1994) underscore the different methods he prescribes to conduct phenomenological research. Central to Moustakas’ process are the concepts of phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation. Phenomenological reduction is defined as describing what one sees in terms of both the external object and the internal consciousness. This is accomplished by the researcher first bracketing his or her own experiences and expectations in order to achieve *epoche*. This is followed by the researcher treating all statements made by participants as being equal, which Moustakas calls horizontalization. Finally, after all data are considered, the researcher begins to create cluster horizons by eliminating statements that are either redundant or irrelevant to the topic. At this point, the researcher begins the process of imaginative variation, which is the utilization of imagination, varying frames of reference, and divergent experiences in order to seek possible meanings embedded in the narratives of the participants. According to Moustakas this is accomplished by looking for various structural meanings, recognizing underlying themes and contexts that emerge across the various structures, narrowing the possible structure meanings by identifying universal structures, and then
going back to the original narratives to find exemplifications of the universal structures. These universal structures then become the identified essence of a phenomenological experience.

The third approach to phenomenology is referred to as hermeneutical and is outlined in the writings of van Manen (1990). Like the other forms of phenomenology, this approach attempts to uncover the essence of a lived experience, but it accomplishes this by viewing individuals’ accounts of the experience as a text to be analyzed using practices borrowed from hermeneutics. Unlike Giorgi and Moustakas who establish a set of methods for empirical and transcendental phenomenology respectively, van Manen offers no such prescription. The reason he does not offer a set of methods and favors an unstructured approach is that van Manen contends that the lived experience cannot be accessed immediately, but only through a reflective process. Since the product of any reflective process is a narrative, there are multiple interpretations that can arise from it just as the reading of a book. Thus, when a participant describes an experience, there are multiple texts in play, including the objective experience, the interpretation of the experience by the participant, the interpretation of the experience by the researcher, and the interpretation of the experience as negotiated between the participant and the researcher.

To negotiate the multiple interpretations of a reflective text, van Manen (1990) suggests six research activities for the hermeneutical phenomenologist to engage when seeking to describe the essence of an experience through participants’ reflective narratives. The first is the researcher selects a phenomenon to study that interests him
and commits him to the world. Second, the researcher needs to investigate an experience as one lives it, rather than conceptualizes it. Third, the researcher should reflect on the essential themes that constitute the nature of the phenomenon. Fourth, the phenomenon should be described through the process of multiple rewrites. Fifth, the researcher should maintain a strong and focused relation to the phenomenon and not allow participants or one’s self to be distracted by irrelevant speculations. Finally, the researcher must consider the context of the described phenomenon through a continual process of considering parts and the whole against each other.

**Summary of the Literature**

As this review of the literature of spirituality in higher education demonstrates, a single, clear definition does not exist; and despite the increased attention the subject has received over the past decade, there has been a conflation of the language used to describe and discuss spirituality rather than the development of a consensus of definitions. According to Estanek (2006), the lack of a uniform definition or common language is the result of higher education’s break with traditional definitions of spirituality and religion. Consequently, the construction of definitions becomes an essential element to the research project. The purpose of this study is to engage in the construction of such definitions by describing how traditional-age college students of monotheistic faiths experience a challenge to their conception of God. And while this review of the literature reveals the structure of this study’s research question to be positioned primarily within the cognitive lens to spirituality, especially as conceived in the writings of Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000), all three lenses to spirituality were found
to be relevant for understanding its findings. Utilizing the transcendent phenomenological approach, as outlined by Moustakas, proved beneficial for this study’s purpose in that it allowed the participants to describe their experiences without locking them into a particular understanding of spirituality limited by the use of only one lens or one set of assumptions.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study investigates how traditional-age college students of monotheistic faiths experience a challenge to their understanding of God. Creswell (2007) defines a phenomenological study as one that “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). The purpose of such an approach is to get at the universal essence of an experience, which is the common interpretation held by individuals within a selected group when experiencing a particular phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon is a challenge to one’s understanding of God, the challenge is the events and the process of meaning making associated with them; the individuals are traditional-age college students of conventional monotheistic faiths; and the purpose is to describe the collective meanings made by the individuals of the experience.

As outlined in the literature review, there are three traditions of phenomenology from which to select when conducting a phenomenological study: empirical, transcendental, and hermeneutical. The transcendental phenomenological approach as advocated by Moustakas (1994) was used in this study as it focuses on individuals’ consciousness of the internal experience of a phenomenon and it requires the researcher to work towards *epoche*, which is the elimination of suppositions to the greatest extent possible. These two foundations of transcendental phenomenology were important to this study as it sought to describe students’ experiences regarding a particular aspect of
spirituality in order to contribute to the conversation surrounding the use of the term in the higher education literature. In order to allow the participants to describe in their own language the meaning they have constructed around their experiences of having their conception of God challenged, while limiting the degree of interpretation through my lens as a researcher, the internal consciousness of the students had to be gauged free from my understanding of the CVP as described in the literature, how I expected traditional college students to understand it, and the active role I personally assign God in my personal life. Transcendental phenomenology provided the best methodology to account for and achieve the suppression of my presuppositions as a qualitative researcher.

**Sample Selection**

For this study a purposeful sample of eight, traditional-age college students at a large, public university in the Midwest were selected. A purposeful sample was used as it provided a selection of participants that were believed to best facilitate the exploration of the research question (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The primary concern in selecting the participants for this study was their representation of diverse theological perspectives within the monotheistic traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Phenomenology assumes there is a common essence to the experiences of individuals to a phenomenon and the meanings they attach to them. As such, a diverse representation of the lenses through which participants experienced and interpreted challenges to their conception of God was sought in order to capture a variety of experiences over which to discern a common essence.
A large, public university in the Midwest was selected as the home institution for the participants due to the diversity of the student population and the variety of traditional monotheistic faiths represented. The institution’s main campus, from where the participants were selected, has a sufficiently large population (approximately 21,000 undergraduate students) whose demographics provide a diverse body in terms of gender (58% women, 42% men) and ethnicity (1.3% Asian, 8.9% African-American, 4.8% International, 2.7% Hispanic, 1.8% Multiracial or Other). The presence of Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Mormon, Jehovah Witness, Jewish, and Muslim religious organizations associated with the campus community insured that there was sufficient diversity of monotheistic traditions present on the campus.

To achieve theological diversity among conventional monotheistic faiths, student participants were selected from among the three Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. As noted in the Introduction, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has found that the majority of students (70.1%) at four-year institutions self-identify with a Christian tradition (“This Year’s Freshman,” 2010). This is in comparison to only 1.9% of students self-identifying with Jewish traditions and 0.7% with Islamic traditions. Although these numbers might have suggested a need to select only Christian students for this study, a diverse representation of traditions was deemed as more important in order to capture the shared essence of the phenomenon across the greatest number of perspectives within the defined parameter of monotheism. Among the eight students selected for this study, four of them represented Christian traditions, which reflected the faith’s greater representation in the population, while two students from Judaic traditions
and two students from Islamic traditions were selected in order to increase the diversity of monotheistic faiths represented in the study.

Diversity was sought between various theological stances within each of three major traditions, but due to the difficulty of finding participants from several of the faiths, minimal compromises were made. Initially, a student representing the Orthodox perspective of Judaism and one representing the Conservative/Reform view were sought; however, only two participants could be found and both represented the Conservative/Reform tradition, but to varying degrees. Although both participants had been raised in Conservative synagogues, only one of them continued to identify with such a perspective at the time of her participation in the study. The other student identified with the more progressive, Reform and Reconstructionist perspectives within Judaism. Similarly, diversity among the Muslim participants was initially sought by selecting representatives from both the Sunni and Shi’a schools of thought. Due to the limitation of finding only two individuals willing to participate in the study, both of them ended up representing the Sunni perspective. Nevertheless, some diversity existed between the two in that one participant grew up in a united, devout Muslim home, while the other one was raised in a divided home in which his father was a devout Muslim and his mother was a non-devout Catholic. From the Christian traditions, students were selected from the three largest denominational groupings: two from Protestant traditions, one from Catholicism, and one from a non-traditional Christian sect, specifically Mormonism. Although the initial goal was to have the Protestant participants represent liberal and conservative views, due to the inability to find a participant that identified with the liberal, mainline Protestant
tradition, both students were selected from more conservative, Protestant backgrounds. Table 1 provides a summary of the monotheistic faiths represented by the eight participants in the study, as well as ethnic and age demographics.

Gender and ethnic diversity were secondary considerations in selecting the participants for the study. Just as religious diversity was used in the selection of participants to include the greatest variety of experiences, gender and ethnic diversity were sought in order to achieve the greatest array of contexts in which a challenge to one’s conception of God is experienced. Among the eight participants, five of them were women and three were men. The sample also consisted of five White students, two Lebanese-American students, and one African-American student.

Traditional-age college students typically include those in the age range of 17-23, but preference was given when selecting participants to students who were in the upper-half of this range. Older, traditional-age students were sought as they were more likely to have experienced a challenge to their conception of God due to the greater likelihood of entering the transition between received, conventional faith and self-authored, individuative-reflective faith (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Despite this preference, religious diversity and the participants’ ability to identify and describe a challenge to their conception of God remained the primary factors in participant selection. The participants in the study ended up ranging in age between 19 and 23.

In order to identify participants who were a good fit for this study, spiritual leaders and professional advisors of churches and religious, student organizations were asked to serve as informed insiders who could recommend individuals who had likely
Table 1

*Demographics of the Eight Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religious Background &amp; Current Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>Raised as a Conservative Jew; now identifies closely with Reform/Reconstructionist Judaism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>Raised and identifies as a Conservative Jew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nesreen</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Lebanese-American</td>
<td>Raised and identifies as a devout Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadid</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Lebanese-American</td>
<td>Raised in divided home (Muslim/Catholic) as a Muslim; now identifies as a devout Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Raised and identifies as a devout Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Raised in a non-denominational home; now identifies as an Apostolic Pentecostal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Raised as a nominal Christian; now identifies as a devout, non-denominational Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Raised and identifies as a Mormon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

experienced a challenged to their conception of God. These insider informants were instructed on the purpose of the study and the nature of the research question in order to help them make informed recommendations based upon their interactions with the students and their knowledge of the students’ spiritual backgrounds. Although I maintained the right to drop a recommended participant for not meeting the criteria of the study, this only occurred in one instance in which the individual was too old to be considered a traditional-age college student.
Ethical Considerations

During the recruitment of participants, actions were taken to ensure that students entered the study voluntarily, that they did not feel coerced to discuss subjects they would prefer to keep private, and that they did not expose themselves to risks that were greater than the gains they might receive from their participation. In order to prevent coercion, or the appearance of it, the informed insiders who identified potential participants were instructed to not place any pressure on the students they recommended for the study. The recruitment script and instructions provided to informed insiders can be found in Appendix A. This instruction was necessary as most of the informants were community leaders or religious mentors, and thus held the potential as being viewed as an authority figure by the participants they recommended. Selected participants were informed of the nature of study and asked to sign informed consent and audio consent forms (see Appendix B) acknowledging their agreement to the nature of the questioning and the time commitment of the interviews. This informed consent form also instructed participants that they could choose to not share information and that they held the right to quit the study at any time. Finally, the form informed them of how their privacy would be protected, which is outlined in the subsequent Data Collection and Management section.

In order to address any potential risks the participants would experience as a result of their participation in the study, they were provided a contact list of religious leaders and counseling services offered by various offices and affiliates within their university’s community (see Appendix C). The list was provided in acknowledgement that a discussion of the challenge to one’s conception of God could potentially lead to a
need for additional dialog to make further understanding of it beyond the parameters of
the study. None of the participants indicated a need for such services during the
interview process, although several of them admitted to discussing issues raised during
the interviews with family members, friends, and religious mentors.

**Situating Self as Researcher and Instrument**

In qualitative studies it is expected that the researcher will be involved with the
participants in a sustained and intensive experience (Creswell, 2009). As already
discussed, the nature of the research question and the methodology employed in this
study required participants to share experiences and thoughts that related to the core of
their beliefs and how they make meaning of their faith and their identity. This level of
involvement required me to assess myself as a researcher and as an instrument in the
research process in order to identify biases, values, and personal background that inform
the lenses I brought to this study. Transcendent phenomenology also places a demand on
the researcher to reflect on personal biases and judgments that are brought to the research
question. Achievement of *epoche*, which is a state of being free from judgment and
restrained from the ordinary explanations of our perceptions, is the first step in
conducting a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). Although it is doubtful pure
*epoche* is possible to achieve, accounting for my biases and looking at the phenomenon
through a fresh set of eyes, at least to the greatest extent possible, was required to get at
the genuine essence of the participants’ experiences.

To achieve *epoche* in phenomenological research, bracketing is required.
Bracketing is the process by which a researcher works to set aside one’s own experiences
with a phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) offers a couple of broad approaches to bracket one’s biases and become a more receptive individual. The first approach is what he calls gazing on the object or phenomenon, by which he means consideration of it through observation over a prolonged period of time until multiple new perspectives become part of the researcher’s awareness. The other approach is to engage in reflective-meditation in which the researcher reviews current thoughts and feelings regarding a phenomenon over a sustained period of time in order to become aware of preconceptions, discard them, and receive them again with a new level of consciousness.

Two actions were employed in order to bracket my experiences and practice gazing and reflective-meditation. First, a research journal was kept during the collection and analysis of the data and the write-up of the findings. The journal helped me to account for my own perceptions, especially the empathy I shared with many of the participants, but also the disagreements I had with several of the spiritual interpretation they had applied to their situations. The journal facilitated the identification and development of patterns among the participants as categorizations and concepts were able to be tested, discarded, and sometimes resurrected in altered forms. The second action employed was subjecting myself to the interview protocol that was used to guide the discussions with the participants. Although I could not identify a clear example in which my conception of God had been challenged due to a specific event, having to examine the evolution of my own thoughts about the nature of God and my relationship with Him helped to clarify the personal experiences that were driving the research question for this
study and my desire to see spirituality discussed in more inclusive terms in the higher education literature.

**Data Collection and Management**

The typical means of investigation for a phenomenological study is the intensive interview. Phenomenological interviewing involves informal, interactive dialogue in which open-ended comments and questions are used (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of interviewing is to elicit a comprehensive account of the participants’ experiences. Therefore, even though a protocol of questions was developed and used in this study, it served primarily as a catalyst to facilitate discussion and it was not utilized strictly once participants opened up to sharing their experiences. Allowing the participants to determine how they described their experiences and what they related to them was given priority over having specific questions about the experience answered.

Phenomenological research requires participants to ground the descriptions of their experiences in their perspectives. In addition, this study sought to have students use their own language when describing their conceptions of God, spirituality, and religion. With these goals in mind, it was necessary to avoid preconceptions embedded in the interview questions that might nudge participants’ accounts in a particular direction or limit how they think they should respond. Thus my primary responsibility as the researcher was to elicit sufficiently deep and broad descriptions from the participants while limiting my influence on their responses. For this reason, open, unstructured interviews were conducted with participants and a strict interview protocol was not used for the interview. However, anticipating that a participant might have trouble remaining
focused on a particular experience or describing it, a guide of broad questions was developed and used to draw out participants’ descriptions. Modifying the suggestions in Moustakas’ (1994) interview guide in order to have them fit the research question of this study, a protocol was developed and employed strategically throughout the interviews in order to elicit descriptive and deep responses. The protocol is provided in Appendix D.

Moustakas (1994) recommends that research interviews for phenomenological studies begin with either social conversation or a brief meditative activity in order to help the participant relax and trust the interviewer. Once trust is established, the participant should be asked to take a few minutes to reflect on the experience being examined and then describe it as fully as possible. Following this advice, interview sessions with the participants started as conversations about their personal histories, academic interests, current social activities, and future career ambitions. During these conversations, I also shared my own answers to these topics in order to help establish trust with the students. After the social conversation, participants were asked to describe their current religious identification and their conception of God. This was done to both shift the direction of the conversation to the phenomenon being studied, but also to determine the context in which they would make meaning of the challenges to their conception of God (Speck, 2005). Once participants had fully described their conceptions of God, they were asked to reflect upon past conceptions and if they could identify challenges to either their past or current understandings of the divine being. Throughout the process of gauging current and past conceptions of God, participants were continuously reassured that they were the authority in determining what constituted a challenge and what was important to share
about it. This reassurance was necessary as most of the participants asked on multiple occasions whether they were providing “helpful” answers or if they were sharing relevant experiences that I wanted to hear about.

A second, follow-up interview was conducted with each participant within one to two weeks of the initial meeting. Prior to the second interview, the previous conversation was reviewed in order to discern important comments or topics that required further description. The second interviews were open-ended, but a list of questions developed during the review of the first conversation was used in order to seek qualifications or elaboration on unclear statement and ideas that needed additional development.

All interviews were conducted on the students’ campus in a controlled, semi-private location agreed upon by the participants. These locations served two purposes. First, participants were made to feel safe and relaxed in a familiar environment over which they felt some sense of control. This was done in order to help them feel more comfortable with sharing intimate details related to their experiences. Second, the controlled privacy of the location helped to ensure the anonymity of the students by preventing outsiders from overhearing or interrupting the interviews.

Audio recordings were made of the interviews for the purpose of reviewing them to identify lines of additional inquiry and for transcribing the conversations for analysis. Participants’ identities were protected by keeping the audio tapes in a secure file cabinet at my home and on my personal computer. During the transcription process, pseudonyms assigned to the participants were used, and at no time were the students’ names or identity revealed in the audio or written materials. Although transcripts did not contain
the students’ identities, they were also secured in the same file cabinet as the tapes at my home.

**Data Analysis**

Transcendent phenomenology as outlined by Moustakas (1994) derives its method of data analysis from modifications of Van Kaam’s system and the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen system. Moustakas’ modifications are meant to incorporate the four major processes of phenomenological research: *epoché*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variance, and the synthesis of meanings and essences. As already discussed, *epoché* is the process by which the researcher attempts to eliminate one’s bias by abstaining from personal, pre-conceived judgments. Phenomenological reduction is the process of examining and shifting through the telling of an experience until only the meanings attached to the phenomenon remain in the description. Imaginative variation is the identification of the structural dynamics that exist within the description of an experience. Finally, the synthesis of meaning and essences is the integration of the textual and structural elements of a set of described experiences into a single concept that expresses what is common to the experience itself. These four processes are woven throughout the nine-step process of data analysis outlined by Moustakas and used in this study.

The first three steps of the data analysis method employed in this study required a thorough and extensive review of the transcripts collected from the interviews of the eight participants. The first step in the review of each transcript was to identify each unique statement made by the participants. Commonly referred to as horizontalization,
this process required that all statements were treated initially as being equally valid in the description of the experience with a phenomenon. Judgment of each statement’s relevance was withheld during this initial stage in recognition of the multiple ways in which an individual might attach meaning to an experience. Once all unique statements were identified, a second review was made in which repetitive statements by an individual or those statements I determined to be clearly irrelevant to the experience of the phenomenon were eliminated. An example of an irrelevant statement was a participant’s elaborate description of her dislike of conflict, which was already present in other statements she had made about experiences related to the phenomenon. Once the repetitive and irrelevant statements were eliminated, the remaining ones, referred to as invariant horizons, were clustered together into predominant themes I was able to identify.

The second phase of the data analysis was the development of textual and structural descriptions of the phenomenon for each participant. The first step in the development of these descriptions was to describe the portrayal of the themes that were identified for an individual. Once the thematic portrayals were constructed, then a textual description summarizing the experience was developed. In constructing the textual description it was important to maintain the participant’s voice in the description rather than replace it with mine. Therefore, exemplifying statements from the interviews were used throughout the textual descriptions. Appendix E provides the textual description developed for Ben as an example of this step in the analysis of the data. Once the textual descriptions for all of the participants were completed, structural descriptions that
identified the underlying dynamics of the experience were constructed. It was during the development of the structural descriptions that my voice, as the researcher, took precedent over the participants’ voices. Appendix F provides the eight structural descriptions that were developed for the participants in this study. They are provided as a contrast to the example of Ben’s textual description, but also to provide the context of each of the participants’ distinct experiences.

In the final phase of the data analysis, composite textual and structural descriptions were constructed. Drawing from the described experiences of the eight participants, a textual description of experiencing a challenge to one’s CVP was developed that accounts for the uniqueness found in each personal telling. Likewise, a structural description of the dynamics that played out across the accounts of the eight participants was developed. Once the composite textual and structural descriptions were complete, they were synthesized in order to identify the common, or universal, essence of the experience for the eight participants. The findings of this study, which are provided in Chapter 4, are the synthesized, textual-structural description of the participants’ experiences and meaning-making processes of having their conception of God challenged.

**Reliability**

Two strategies were employed during the collection of data and the data analysis process to ensure the reliability of the findings of this study. The first strategy was bracketing, which has been described above as an essential component of phenomenological methodology. Attempting to eliminate my own biases to the greatest
extent possible as a researcher was an essential component to the employed methodology; however, clarifying the biases should also allow readers of this study to better understand my position and what interpretive lenses I bring to it (Creswell, 2007).

The second strategy was member checking, in which the participants’ views regarding the credibility of my interpretations and findings from their descriptions were sought. Following the advice of Creswell (2007), participants were not asked to review transcripts or the constructed thematic portrayals developed during the data analysis. Rather, they were asked to look over the preliminary constructions of the textual and structural descriptions of their experiences. The foremost concern when asking the participants to review the descriptions was to have them determine if I had accurately portrayed their experiences and to identify any elements I had missed. All eight of the participants confirmed that I portrayed their experiences accurately. The changes that were made due to their review of the textual and structural descriptions were minor and focused primarily on misunderstood facts about their experiences.

**Generalizability**

It is understood that the findings of a qualitative study cannot be generalized in the empirical sense in that the same results would be expected to be found in other individuals and other settings. Nevertheless, as a phenomenological study, it falls among those qualitative projects that are concerned with describing universal statements about social processes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This study falls into this group in that it describes the common essence of experiencing a challenge to one’s conception of God among the selected participants. The decision to employ a transcendental
phenomenological approach to the topic reflects this goal in that the methodology assumes there is a common essence to the experiences among the selected group of individuals. Therefore, this study concerns itself “not with the question of whether [its] findings are generalizable, but rather with the question of to which other settings and subjects they are generalizable” (p. 32). The findings are therefore presented as an offering to higher education researchers and practitioners to consider how they might be applicable to their own students. The fundamental rationale that drives this study is the perceived need to broaden the concept of spirituality in the higher education literature, especially as it is understood in traditional monotheistic faiths that hold to the co-existence of the supernatural. By describing the phenomenon of one’s conception of God being challenged, it is hoped that this study will encourage others to consider the role a divine, transcendent entity plays in some students’ spirituality.

In determining to what extent the findings of this study are generalizable to their own students, readers should consider the nature of the students selected for this study. The students selected were traditional-age for college and identify strongly with a conventional monotheistic faith within the Abrahamic traditions. Those who work with non-traditional-age students will need to consider if their students experience God, or more broadly their center of value and power (CVP), in a different manner than described. The students selected for this study also attend a large, public university in which spiritual concerns are peripheral to the mission and culture of the institution. Higher education professionals who work at institutions with a more or less intimate campus climate or a culture more or less open to spiritual and religious exploration will
want to consider if their students are likely to experience and conceptualize challenges to their CVP in a similar or different manner.

This study limits its focus to students of conventional monotheistic faiths who conceptualize the CVP as a personal, transcendent deity (i.e. God). Despite his own background in the liberal Protestant tradition, Fowler (1981) contends that the CVP is not limited to Christianity or the Abrahamic religions, but is a universal condition of the human experience. As such, pantheistic, panentheistic, and polytheistic faiths as found in many East Asian, Indigenous American, and neo-pagan religious traditions would also have a center of value and power. Likewise, the metaphysical positions of atheism, posttheism, and secular humanism would have a CVP, although there would be no transcendent essence to the value or power that is conceptualized as guiding the self and the other. As such, the reader will have to determine to what extent the participants’ experiences and meaning-making processes can be generalized to the students of non-monotheistic faiths with whom they work.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The eight participants in this study were selected on the basis of having experienced a challenge to their conception of God in order to determine the phenomenological essence of such an experience among traditional age college students who identify with monotheistic faiths. Although the challenge and the specific, surrounding events to it differed among the participants, common themes were identified across their individual stories. These themes include a temporal nature to the challenge in which there was an initiating event, a period of disruption, and an eventual movement towards formulating a resolution; a challenge to the assumptions they held about how God exercises authority, which led to a re-conceptualization of how God exerts control over events; a sense of isolation during the period of disruption, which led them to seek out allies and a supportive community; and attempts to make meaning of the experience after they began moving towards a resolution. Underlying all of these themes, a perceived disruption to their relationship with God was identified as the phenomenological essence of the students’ experiences.

All eight participants in the study are traditional age college students, but not all of them experienced the challenge to their conception of God and the events related to it during their college years. Three of the participants—Elizabeth, Nesreen, and Sadid—experienced the challenge exclusively as college students, while the other five had their challenge start during their high school years. Of these five, three of them—Leah, Philip,
and Shannon—identified the initiating events as occurring during their high school years, but the overall challenge carrying over to their second year of college or beyond. One of the participants, Susan, felt the challenge to her conception of God had occurred during both her high school and college years, but it was a qualitatively different experience in both settings. Finally, Ben spoke of his challenge occurring exclusively during his high school years.

Initiation of the Challenge

An identifiable event or series of events initiated the challenge each of the eight participants experienced to their conception of God. These occurrences varied considerably among the participants, but each of them posed a considerable challenge to the assumptions they held about God in regards to His nature and the role they expected Him to play in the events that impacted them. Each of the participants acknowledged that similar doubts had occurred to them prior to the initiating events, but none of them had reflected on these questions to any considerable extent. Elizabeth captured this shared sentiment among all of the participants in her statement:

So it’s like a beginning to question your faith…‘why would this be able to happen?’ kind of thing. But nobody actually, like, goes beyond that. It’s just kind of like, okay, and then you move on from it and you forget about that whole thought.

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1 Masculine pronouns are used to refer to God due to all participants using them in their descriptions, whether out of a personal belief that God is masculine or out of the conventional use of them in their religion’s tradition. Likewise, the pronouns are capitalized as is the convention in their religious traditions.
The difference between such previous thoughts and the ones that were raised in association with the initiating events was that the former ones were hypothetical and could be forgotten easily. In contrast, the questions elicited by the initiating events forced the participants to confront their doubts because they perceived them as affecting them directly and personally. A statement by Nesreen was exemplary of this perspective:

That concept of ‘what did I do to deserve this? Why?’ That is a question that probably, you know, everyone thinks it. ‘Why does this happen to me?’ And like, yeah, life is not fair, we understand it. But what’s this reasoning…what am I gaining out of this?

In line with these types of questions, the majority of the participants’ perplexing feelings and doubts were reactions to negative, initiating events that they could not explain in congruence with their original conception of God. However, two participants spoke of positive events that precipitated the challenge to their beliefs about God.

**Detrimental Events**

Six of the participants described a negative event or a series of events that initiated the challenge to their conception of God. Although they varied considerably and included the loss of a family member or friend, the onset of illnesses, and the failure to achieve a goal, each of the participants described the events as a time when God did not meet their expectations. For five of the six participants, the consequence of these unmet expectations was a situation that they perceived as detrimental to their well-being. Elizabeth spoke of her experiences as a life that was collapsing around her: “So my dad left, and like, my family was completely falling apart. I was failing out of school. I’m
like, ‘how the hell could this be happening? How is God letting this happen?’” While not as direct or personal, Leah expressed similar anguish in regards to terrorist attacks she would see in the news: “It also made me question my, you know, how can there be a God that lets this kind of stuff happen? Is there a God at all?”

Sadid’s reaction to the accidental death of his college roommate generated the same sense of shock felt by the other participants who experienced negative events in their lives, but his experience varied from the others in that he did not make an automatic link to God’s lack of involvement in the occurrence. Instead, Sadid’s thoughts centered on the unexpected death of his close friend. Previously, death had been an abstract reality to him, but the unexpected passing of his roommate made it a reality that impacted him. Sadid shared,

You start to see it, um, it’s actually happening to you. Like, you don’t think these things had like, for example, oh, you watch the news. You hear about, oh, okay, car accidents. You know? You know, a kid and a parent or a mom dies in a car accident. You think, oh, you feel bad for them for about ten seconds, and then you go on with your life. This was different. I had one of my close friends pass away. He was like a brother to me.

The lack of a connection in Sadid’s mind between the personal devastation he was feeling about his friend’s death and the involvement of God in it can be attributed to his vague conception of God at the time of the accident. This will be discussed further in the section that covers the participants’ assumptions about how God exercises His authority.
Positive Spiritual Events

For two participants, Ben and Philip, the initiating event for the challenge they experienced to their conception of God was a positive, spiritual incident that occurred during times of personal meditation and prayer, respectively. Ben’s experience occurred during a youth trip to Israel, which included mandated, extended periods of silence in wilderness areas in order to encourage meditation. During these times, Ben’s thoughts turned to the nature of God:

I remember thinking about God then, the idea that, um, I always go back to the creation story when it comes to God. That something created what I was looking at and what I was feeling…that was beautiful to me…but for me, it wasn’t so much that I, I started to realize that it wasn’t like God created the earth. It was that the earth had gotten to this point over time and that I’m feeling this because I know there is history here…and I thought about what, what was bigger than me that made all this happen, but didn’t make all this happen. That created this, but that it evolved here.

Similar to this experience, Philip’s reflections about God occurred during a set-apart time at a youth retreat that had designated times for personal reflection and prayer. It was during one of these times, while he was praying to God about the negative thoughts and feelings he was experiencing, that Philip believes he received a response. Philip shared,

I remember one time…I had felt the Spirit move and I prayed. And I was like, God, I feel alone. I don’t feel like there’s anyone there for me. And He spoke to
me and said, ‘I am here for you, child. I am your Father. I will not leave you comfortless.’

Regardless of whether the participants perceived the events that initiated the challenge to their conception of God as detrimental or positive in nature, the phenomenological essence shared among them was the events challenged their assumptions about the nature of God’s authority and how He exercises it.

**Assumptions about How God Exercises Authority**

The central conception about God that was challenged by the initiating events was the participants’ assumptions about how He exercises authority. Although the participants varied considerably in their expectations of how God intervenes in the lives of people, each of them had their assumptions contested by an event or series of events that did not align with them. In each of these instants, the participant assumed that God would exercise control over the event in a specific manner, but they discerned that what occurred did not meet those expectations.

The challenge to the participants’ expectations of how God exercises His authority played out across several themes. Four of the participants had their assumption about God’s ability and willingness to protect them from harmful events challenged. For three of these four participants—Elizabeth, Leah, and Susan—the events that challenged them were perceived as negative experiences from which God had failed to protect them. The fourth student, Philip, experienced the events that challenged him as a positive occurrence as he came to view God as a protector rather than an indifferent being. Closely related to the concept of protection was Shannon’s experience of God failing to
rescue her from the negative situation in which she found herself. One of the participants, Nesreen, viewed God as not granting her the rewards she felt she had rightfully earned. Finally, the last two participants, Ben and Sadid, experienced epiphanies about how God exercised His control over their own lives and world events; however, they came to completely different conclusions in deciding how God exercises His sovereignty.

**God as Protector**

The four participants whose challenges centered on the dissonance between their expectations of God as a protector and what they were experiencing provided the most emotionally charged stories among the group. The three participants who perceived God as failing to protect them from negative situations and harm expressed resentment as they felt betrayed by God and their expectations of Him. For Leah, her resentment towards God grew out of a general sense of frustration that no person should have to experience what she was going through due to the onset of several illnesses. Leah shared,

> It was just the combination of a lot of things and I was like, ‘this is awful.’ No kid should have to do this. No kid should have to compromise their education or their well-being. It’s not fair to anyone. So that was rough.

> I know this is kind of a put-down to God, but He kind of gave me someone to blame. He let me be mad at Him. Which, because there’s no one else, there’s nothing else to blame. I didn’t get Crohn’s because I wasn’t eating right or any other issue…but, He gave me someone to blame.
Leah acknowledged the irony that her anger towards God was what allowed her ultimately to keep her faith in Him. Seeing that God had not protected her from the illnesses she contracted, she began to question His existence; however, once she became resentful towards Him for allowing her misfortune, she concluded that He must exist because she perceived Him as a real target for her anger.

Elizabeth and Susan’s resentment towards God for not protecting them from harm included a more personal sense of betrayal due to their perception of a close relationship existing between Him and themselves prior to the initiating event. For Elizabeth, the betrayal was viewed as a close friend who had failed to protect her from negative events when He had the power to do so. Elizabeth stated,

I was angry with God. I was very upset and resented everything, and I was like how could He betray me like this and how could this be happening…Like your friend is supposed to do this or not supposed to do that kind of thing. So, like growing up you have all these standards of your physical friends, like, oh, you’re not supposed to stab me in the back kind of stuff. It was the same type of thing with God with me. It was like, I have expectations that you’re supposed to care for me, and show me the way, and be comforting, and always be there for me kind of thing. Then it was like, bam, He was gone kind of thing…that’s what I felt like and I was like, He’s disappeared. I was like, how could you leave me when I need you the most?
Susan’s sense of betrayal mirrored Elizabeth’s in seeing God as a friend who has failed to protect her when she was being questioned about her Mormon faith by a group of outsiders. Susan stated,

I’ve always been told, you know, if you are asked questions about your faith you can, you know, like say a quiet prayer in your head and the answers are going to come…I couldn’t answer the questions, and then it was just one thing after another. I’m like, ‘why aren’t you helping me?’ I guess I was expecting this loud voice to give me the answers, you know? Like a partner helping you cheat on a test. I’m just like, you didn’t help me. You know, it’s like your partner left you when it’s suppose to be a two-man team. So, it’s frustrating.

In addition, Susan also spoke of God as a parent who had failed to protect her during a time in her life when she began to rebel against the moral teachings of her religion.

We are always taught that God is a loving and heavenly father and He wants us to return to Him. So, by following these standards we are told, you know, you’re going to return and you’re going to be able to see His son, Jesus Christ, again. And so, I’m like, well if He wants me to return, shouldn’t He be giving me these warnings and telling me don’t do that. I want you to come back. And so that was, always been in my head, like, your’ going to help me. That’s what you want.

Philip’s positive, initiating event, which caused his perspective of God as a protector to be challenged, shared the same structure as the other three participants, but it moved in the opposite direction. Whereas the other three participants experienced events
that led them to question why God did not protect them from unfortunate events; Philip’s experience led him to abandon his previous mind-set that God did not care about him and replace it with a new perception in which God was his protector against negative thoughts and feelings. Describing his previous frame of mind, Philip stated,

I had a lot of thoughts of where’s God? If He truly is, if He truly loves me, why am I going through this? Why would He put me through this? What’s His purpose of putting me through this? You know, even if I didn’t really have many friends or I was bullied, that wouldn’t have been as bad, I wouldn’t have thought it as much. But, whenever I started having thoughts of suicide, and like nobody really cares, it was just, why would God put me through this sort of trial, um, and harden my heart to a lot of different situations?

In contrast to this initial perspective of doubting God’s willingness to protect him, once Philip had his spiritual encounter during a youth retreat, he perceived God as wanting a relationship with him. Philip stated, “And that really, really started, like, wow! Even though I might not want anything to do with Him, He still wants to have something to do with me. And that really touched me and that really blessed me.” Perceiving God as his protector led Philip to desire a closer relationship with him. Philip continued,

I had started realizing maybe I need to get more serious with God. This isn’t just, uh, put it on the back burner and pull it off whenever I need it…and that made me start to go, well maybe I need to actually start trying to change these heart-attitudes, to start getting on fire for Him.
Despite the similar structure of Philip’s experience with the other three participants who perceived God as a protector, his desire to draw closer to God was in the opposite direction of the others who sought to pull away from Him due to the anger they felt in response to His failure to act as a protector. The desire of the other three participants to pull away from God will be addressed further in a future section.

**God as Rescuer**

Although Shannon’s dissonance between what she was experiencing and what she expected of God centered on her view of Him as a rescuer, she held the same sense of resentment towards Him as the three participants who viewed Him as a protector and had experienced negative, initiating events. Shannon’s negative feelings were the result of a similar dissonance between the expectation that God would act in a certain manner, but not perceiving evidence of such actions in her life. The primary difference between Shannon and the three participants that viewed God as a failed protector is that she did not hold any expectation that He would protect her from harm because she viewed Him as a vague and distant entity that did not intervene on behalf of individuals unless invoked through prayer. When Shannon prayed to God to relieve her of her depression, and subsequently, she felt she did not receive an answer, she became resentful. Shannon shared,

I was dealing with so much emotion…and I couldn’t understand why, um, I was experiencing all of this. So, that’s what really made me angry. And my expectation of God was that He would see that I was, um, burdened, and that He would do something about it…I was angry. Like, why me?
The similarity between her perception of God as a failed rescuer and the three participants who viewed Him as a failed protector led to similar feelings of anger by Shannon due to her sense of abandonment. This will be explored further in the section that addresses feelings of abandonment by God.

**God as Reward Giver**

Nesreen’s expectations regarding how God exercises His authority centered on her belief that those who behave correctly are rewarded justly. Two teachings from Islam informed this perspective of God. First, Nesreen believed that when she asks God for something, she would receive it, receive something better, or receive it in the afterlife. Second, the means by which she would receive what she asked for was to engage in hard work and righteous behavior. When Nesreen did not achieve the test results necessary to advance in her academic program, despite her belief that she was a diligent worker and a righteous person, she began to question the reasons God had for not allowing her achieve success. Nesreen shared,

> Now granted, I was a pretty spiritual person in the beginning, so this adds a little more to the frustration. It’s like what else could I be doing wrong? You know, because as a Muslim you, now this not necessarily correct thinking, but as just, how I get through things, you know, I did what I had to do. I proved, you know, like I pray to God. You know, I don’t do bad [things]. I help my mom out when she needs to. I try to put others before me. So, why isn’t, why isn’t this working out for me? Like, what could I be possibly doing wrong? So like, this entire
semester, I’m always questioning, like, did I do something wrong? Is there anything else I can do? Like, what else can I do to better in my life?

The lack of resentment towards God while experiencing dissonance between her expectations and her reality distinguishes Nesreen from the other individuals who had a negative, initiating event that challenged the authority they expected God to exercise in their lives. The difference is explained by where she placed blame. Nesreen placed the blame for the failure on herself, instead of God; and rather than questioning why God was not acting as she expected, the question for Nesreen was what more did she need to do in order to receive the rewards she expected from Him.

**Epiphanies about God**

The remaining two participants, Ben and Sadid, differed from the other six participants in that the dissonance they observed between their conception of God and what they were experiencing did not result from a perceived failure by Him or themselves in carrying out a specific role. Instead, these two participants experienced the dissonance during times of reflection, which led to an epiphany that re-conceptualized God as exercising His authority in a different manner than they had previously conceived. For both participants, their re-conceptionalization centered on the amount of control God exercises over events as grand as the act of creation and as common as daily occurrences in individuals’ lives. Where the two participants diverged was the opposite directions their new perspectives went in understanding the level of control God exercises.

Ben’s conceptualization of God went from tacit acceptance of the traditional Jewish teaching that God exercises His sovereignty over every action taken in His
creation, to a more paradoxical view that sees God as the sovereign creator, but does not view Him as controlling, manipulating, or intervening in it. This new conceptualization occurred to Ben during set-apart times when he was reflecting on the nature of God. During these times he came to acknowledge the dissonance that existed between his childhood beliefs of God as the ultimate sovereign of creation and his acceptance of a more naturalistic worldview that accepted undirected evolution and history as the causes of humanity’s current existence. Reflecting upon the news he received about his grandmother’s terminal health condition while he was abroad in Israel—the time during which he was reflecting upon the nature of God—Ben acknowledged how his epiphany about the nature of God affected his reception of the tragic news:

I don’t think that there’d be any Being that would decide, okay, Ben’s going to be in Israel and he’s going to be at the bottom of Masada, and that’s when he’s going to get a phone call that his grandmother is going to die. Like that just, I think, just happens. That’s not a decision that’s been made.

In contrast to Ben’s epiphany, which re-conceptualized God as not exercising control over life events, Sadid’s challenge led him to see God as being an involved authority over individuals’ lives. Previous to the initiating event that raised this challenge, Sadid had not reflected to any considerable extent on the Islamic teachings about God that he had received as a child. Instead, these teachings were just abstract, theological concepts about God, who seemed vague and distant to him. When his roommate died in an unexpected accident, Sadid began to consider the ramifications of the teachings about God he had received in childhood and adolescence. Sadid stated,
I moved out of the apartment, I was back home, living at home for the summer, and I thought about it. And was like, I thought, and I thought, and then, you know, God ultimately plans when we’re going to live, and when we’re going to pass away. He plans when. He plans how. You know? And it could happen at any minute. And like I said before, uh, you don’t know when it’s going to happen, you don’t know how it’s going to happen. So you need to think about how you were taught your faith, and really start to abide by that.

This epiphany led Sadid to become more devout in his religious practices as he decided it was time to take Islam’s teaching more seriously.

**Sense of Isolation**

During the period of time between the initiating event that challenged their conception of God and how He exercises His authority and their movement towards a resolution to the challenge, all of the participants described feeling a sense of isolation. Seven of the eight participants shared how a perceived lack of empathy or support from specific individuals or their religious community contributed to their sense of isolation. In addition, half of the participants spoke about a sense of abandonment by God as a primary cause of their isolation. In recognizing these shared experiences, it is important to note that the lack of empathy and support the participants felt did not always relate directly to their conception of God being challenged, but also originated from the events that initiated the challenge. Shannon shared how her depression would lead her to isolate herself from friends: “It affected some friendships…sometimes I would go into isolation. So, they didn’t know everything that was going on with me. I would try to hide it or I
would just try to keep to myself.” Regardless of the origin, a common feeling expressed by all of the participants was that individuals in their communities did not genuinely care about the hardships they were experiencing or their well-being.

The sense of isolation was partially self-inflicted by seven of the eight participants who acknowledged that they pulled away from individuals or their religious community during the period of time in which their conception of God was challenged. The decision to pull away from others was related to their perceptions that no one genuinely cared about them or understood what they were experiencing. Rather than engage with individuals they perceived as unsympathetic, they would disengage from activities and social gatherings in which they would have to interact with them. Elizabeth summed up these feelings when she stated,

And like, they’re just like, ‘Oh, it’ll get better,’ and you’re just like, ‘No it won’t. Stop telling me it will. Like, you don’t know.’ So, it’s almost insulting in a way… I mean, I understand that everyone is just trying to comfort you, so like, I don’t get too upset about it, but the more you like dwell on it and the more people tell you it, you’re just like, okay, can you please just shut up now.

Although there was one participant who did not express similar, negative feelings of isolation from others, nor a desire to isolate himself from others, his experiences run parallel to the other participants in that his challenge was accompanied by a period of isolation. What sets his experience apart from the others is that the isolation was intentional and helped initiate the challenge rather than being a result of it.
Lack of Empathy from Others

Six of the eight participants discussed the lack of empathy they perceived among members of their religious and other communities as a source of the isolation they felt during the time their conception of God was challenged. Although the lack of perceived empathy could relate to the specific experience of having their conception of God challenged, it was more common for the participants to associate the lack of understanding and concern with the initiating event or series of events that raised the challenge.

Only two participants, Sadid and Philip, spoke of the lack of empathy from individuals who were not receptive to the changes they made in their lives due to the new perspectives and lifestyles they were adopting as a result of their conception of God being challenged. In both of these situations, the relationships between the participants and the other individuals ended up being damaged. Sadid found that as he became a more devout Muslim in response to his epiphany of God’s involvement in his life, he had to end his friendship with several individuals who were not respectful of his religious practices. Sadid stated,

Some of my college friends…I’ve let them, let them go, um, just for the reason they, they’re big partiers and they don’t understand that, you know, it’s against my religion to drink. And they try to get me to drink and stuff, and like, I mean, I’m cool with it…I’ll make a joke out of it or something, but it gets old after, like they don’t, they have to, at some point they need to get the message. You know,
like stop, like trying to pressure me because it’s not going to happen. So, um, and they haven’t. So, I just let them go.

Although Philip has not ended any relationships due to the lack of understanding for his new religious beliefs and the way he practices Christianity, it has severely strained his relationship with his parents. Philip shared how he has been mocked by his dad and has had numerous arguments with him as a result of his decision to attend a new church of a different denomination:

And before they would ask me, like, ‘why did you leave [Philip’s former church]? Why did you do this?’ And when I’d start giving my reasons, they would basically shut it down and say ‘that’s not what we want to hear.’ And, I’m like, ‘you’re asking me why I did it, I’m trying to give you the reasons. Whether it’s what you want to hear or not, whether it’s brutally honest or not.’ Like one time me and my dad were talking about me leaving the church and I’d asked him for numerous times to stop saying rude comments about the church, like, that I’m going to get excommunicated for driving a truck…I don’t care if he wants to question the doctrine and say that that’s wrong, because I mean, that sparks some debate, but he wants to make comments like that. And I’d ask him numerous times, and he had say, okay, I will, I’m sorry, and nothing had really changed. And then finally, like one time, he started yelling at me and I just yelled, we got into a screaming fight, and he told me basically that I’m going to hell for my doctrine and I said you’re going to go to hell for your doctrine. Like, if you’re really going to pull that card, I’ll pull it back.
For the other four participants who spoke about the lack of empathy from others, both within and outside of their religious communities, their focus centered on the lack of understanding about the events in their lives that initiated the challenge to their conception of God. These events included depression, illness, academic setbacks, and personal failures to uphold their religion. The sense of isolation that they felt during these times damaged their relationships with others. Speaking about how others responded to her depression, Shannon stated,

My parents didn’t really understand, you know. It affected my relationship with my parents, and it also affected my relationship with my brother and sister because I seemed like that typical, angry teenager in the house. And you can get real misunderstood in that state of mind and existence.

Shannon’s sense of isolation from her immediate family was accentuated when her parents sent her away to live with her grandmother. Shannon identified the action as a “move of desperation” to address her depression, but at the time it led to a greater sense of her being alone.

Unlike Shannon, who experienced isolation from her family as a result of the direct measures they took, most of the participants’ perception of a lack of empathy was based on assumptions they made about other individuals being preoccupied with their own concerns or not having the ability to relate to their situations because they did not possesses similar experiences. Nesreen spoke of the peers in her academic program as uncaring about her failures due to her perception that they were preoccupied with their own academic and career pursuits. Nesreen stated,
I had a lot of support from my friends, but it doesn’t necessarily mean the same…At the end of the day you also know they’re your friends, but, you know, they’re moving on too. They have to worry about themselves, they don’t care, necessarily, if you fail. They’ll feel bad for you, but they won’t care…at the end of the day, they move on and they can feel sorry for me, but their pity won’t help me…My friends, they knew I was going through a lot, but, you know, they have their own things to worry about. They have other classes. They have other tests to worry about.

Similar to Nesreen’s doubt about the sincerity of those who expressed concern towards her, Elizabeth stated, “It was kind of insulting, kind of. So, it’s like you’re going through this really hard time and like, everyone says that they understand, but they don’t because they’ve never been in your exact shoes.”

**Lack of Support from Others**

Related to the lack of empathy that many of the participants perceived from others, half of the participants also discussed a lack of support from particular individuals in their religious communities that they identified as spiritual leaders. For these participants, their sense of isolation extended beyond perceiving a lack of understanding and care by others, and included a lack of action from them to intervene effectively in their religious struggles. Four of the participants discussed incidents in which they felt there was a distinct lack of support, which left them feeling discouraged about the absence of a safe place to discuss their conception of God or the events that initiated the challenge to their faith. It also caused several of the participants to question if the
religious leaders and personal role models in their communities truly had their well-being in mind.

Two of the participants, Leah and Philip, perceived a lack of support from official leaders in their religions, who did not encourage them in exploring different ideas about the nature of God. Leah felt her religious instructors presented Judaism as only having one correct set of answers to various questions about God, which could not be debated or questioned unless one had appropriate credentials. Leah shared her frustrations with not having an environment supportive of her questions about God:

I had some bad teachers, which also had an effect. The stuff they were teaching and the way they were teaching it I didn’t agree with… I had some bad Tanakh and Rabbinics teachers who just like, oh, this has to be it. Like, this is the right way. And it’s like, what about debate? Like, all the rabbis debate? I was tired of the environment.

Philip’s experience was more personal as it was not just an environment that did not support his religious questions, but his pastor discouraged him from exploring his faith or pursuing ministerial roles. Philip stated,

When I really started studying and asking questions, I even asked the founding pastor, um, I told him I wanted to get into ministry, and he told me don’t do it. ‘You don’t want to go into ministry, too much heartache’… And then I told him that I wanted to get my pastoral and have a degree in theology, and he told me there was no need to even study out what theology is. And when I asked him
why, he said because as long as you know what you believe, that’s it. And that just kind of, that didn’t sit well with me either.

The lack of encouragement from his pastor to enter into a ministerial role resulted in Philip feeling isolated because of the lack of support from an authority figure in his religion to pursue commitments he wanted to make and to serve God and others as a result of his new conceptions about Him.

Shannon and Susan were the other two participants who spoke about the lack of support they received from individuals in their religious communities. For each of them, it was the lack of support from family members that led to their feelings of discouragement. Shannon spoke about the lack of support from her grandmother, who is viewed as a spiritual role model by many people in her church. Yet, despite her reputation and her intentions to provide assistance, Shannon felt that her grandmother could not provide the support she needed to address her depression or her spiritual struggles. Shannon stated, “I was so ready to get out of that household, because I was really not in agreement with my grandmother and a lot of things she valued.” In contrast to Shannon’s view of her grandmother as not being capable of supporting her, Susan viewed several of her family members as acting against her religious and spiritual well-being by contributing to the challenge she experienced to her conception of God. Susan shared,

I was really close with one of my brothers. Um, he’s always been like the black sheep of the family, so I’d go to parties with him…Then my brother puts this thought into my mind, and he’s like, ‘well how do you know [God]’s actually
there? Wouldn’t He have stopped you? Wouldn’t He have stopped you from drinking?’ And I’m like, ‘oh yeah, probably.’

And my dad even questioned my faith. He asked me why I was in church and he told me…you don’t have to go to church anymore if you don’t want to. And that offended me a lot more than I thought it would because on the way out here [college], I didn’t even think I was going to be going to church, but when he said that to me I was like, ‘why would you say that?’ You should be encouraging me to stay strong to something…I feel like your parents are supposed to be pushing you in the right direction, you know? At least put the idea of the faith on the table and let you explore it yourself; but my dad was like, yeah you shouldn’t do that, you should go and have fun. I’m like that’s not okay.

Susan expressed disappointment with both her older brother and her father for their words, which she saw as adding to her doubts about Mormonism’s doctrines about God. In contrast, she had expected them to encourage her to remain faithful to the Church’s teachings and to support her against the temptation she felt to question them.

**Sense of Abandonment**

Four of the participants spoke about the sense of abandonment they felt when God did not exercise His authority to protect or to rescue them from the negative situations in which they found themselves. The belief that God should have authority over a situation as a protector or a rescuer, but He was perceived as not acting in that role, led these four participants to feel as though He had abandoned them during an important time in which they needed His involvement. Of the four participants who felt abandonment by God,
Susan’s sense of it was the most prominent in her experience. Referring to her feelings after being unable to defend her religious beliefs to a group of outsiders, Susan stated,

After that happened I was in tears. I was questioning it [i.e. her faith]…after that, I was a little weary about when people would ask me questions. I’d avoid it.

Because I didn’t want to have those thoughts or just feel abandoned again.

The four participants who felt abandoned by God experienced two reactions: a feeling of intense anger towards Him, and a desire to pull away from personal and communal activities that reminded them of Him.

**Anger at God.** The intensity of the anger felt by the four participants who saw themselves as being abandoned by God cannot be overstated. During the interviews with them, their voices became louder and the fervor of their past feelings resurfaced as they described their experiences. This behavior was even observed among the two participants who believe they have repaired their relationship with God after they worked through the challenge to their beliefs, and by the participant who felt she established her current, strong relationship with God as a result of the her conception being challenged.

The intensity of the anger expressed by the four participants stemmed from a combination of feeling betrayal by God for permitting what they perceived as a personal injustice to occur and the dissolution of their concern about what God thought of them. Elizabeth mentioned both of these factors when discussing her anger at God:

I was angry with God…it was just bad and I started blaming God…I stopped caring about what God might think of what I’m doing. And actually depression and self-pity is kind of like a sin, but um, I stopped caring about it all. I didn’t
want to have anything to do with it…I was just literally angry, like completely, like almost disgusted with the fact the He would let this happen, even though He probably didn’t let that happen. I don’t know, but I was just so angry.

Similar, intense statements were made by the other participants. Leah shared,

I was just really, I was angry. I was really angry…and it was like…I was really angry at God for letting that kind of thing happen…I mean, screw you God for making me sick. You gave me these genes. You put me in this position. Screw you!

Susan also shared,

I remember feeling angry, like afterwards. I’m just like, He’s supposed to be helping me. And I think out of frustration, I’m just like, I was just mad. I think I was doing it out frustration you know. I’m like, well, if He’s not going to stop me, if He’s not going to direct me, then there can’t be a God.

The anger these participants felt towards God resulted in three of them expressing a strong desire to pull away from Him.

**Pulling away from God.** For three of the four participants, their sense of abandonment led them to pull away from activities that reminded them of God. On the personal level, this included not wanting to engage in internal prayer, where they were speaking their own thoughts and feelings to God. Susan shared her desire “to tune God out” when she stated,

It’s more of when I get overwhelmed I just start to tune everything out and then it’s like putting up that spiritual wall. So, it’s like I don’t want to talk to [God].
don’t want to hear from Him. And I was the one who put myself in that abandonment situation. I was the one who put up that wall, or like made myself feel that way.

Disengagement from God also occurred at the communal level, where they pulled away from their involvement in religious services and activities. Leah shared how the anger she felt towards God for abandoning her also led her to disengage from religious activities that reminded her of Him:

   I think my anger towards God kind of manifested itself in me pulling away from my religion. Um, so it’s like, I’m pissed at God. I’m not going Saturday morning to spend three hours praying to Him. That’s not happening. I’m angry.

This line between the personal and the communal was not always clear to the participants as their engagement with God spanned both types of activities and the two were often mixed together. For example, Elizabeth saw her personal prayer life intertwined with her communal activities as she pulled away from both. Elizabeth stated,

   And I fell away from the church. I stopped going to Wednesday night masses…I just pulled away from everything. Like, I stopped praying. I stopped attending any kind of extra masses that I had to…I make it a habit, or at least I try to make a habit of praying every single night, whether it’s just like talking to Him or praying certain prayers of rosary or anything. I stopped doing everything complete. I just shut down from religion all together. I didn’t want anything to do with it.
Although these three participants desired to pull away from God due to their anger, none of them disengaged completely from their religious community. This will be discussed further in the next section on their connections to their religious communities.

Shannon was the exception among the four participants who felt anger over their abandonment by God in that she did not pull away from God and she did not try to disengage from Him. Rather, she desired to engage Him more in order to express her desperation in regards to what she was experiencing with the hope that she would receive a response. Shannon stated,

I couldn’t understand why I was suffering…and I couldn’t understand why things were going downhill for me. And so I wrote a letter to God and that like changed, I don’t know where I got the idea, but it challenged my perception of God. And, um, I was very honest because I also spoke aloud to Him. And I wasn’t using any, um, sugar-coated words or anything. I was just kind of being really real.

This difference can be contributed to Shannon’s lack of engagement with God previous to the challenge she experienced. Shannon admitted she only prayed to God, prior to the experience, when she needed something. Likewise, she was not an active member of her family’s church.

**Distance from the Religious Community**

Five of the participants indicated that during the time period of having their conception of God challenged, they experienced a sense of distance between their religious communities and themselves, which manifested in either a decline in their religious involvement or a complete break with it. While creating distance between their
religious communities and themselves was intertwined with pulling away from God for several of the participants, distance in this section is distinct as it addresses the relationship of the participants to their communities rather than their relationship to God as expressed through their religious communities. Three of the participants experienced the distance by decreasing their involvement in communal, religious activities. The other two participants made clean breaks with their religious communities due to the lack of support they received from them in regards to their evolving beliefs about God.

For the three participants whose communal involvement declined, two chose to place some distance between their religious communities and themselves, while the third one had the distance imposed upon her. As already discussed in the previous section, Elizabeth and Leah purposefully sought to decrease their involvement in religious activities as part of their desire to pull away from God. Pulling away from God led them to distance themselves from the community where their relationship with God was expressed; however, the distance it created was limited due to the importance of their communities in their perceived identities. Both participants spoke of how they could not give up all of the traditions of their faith despite their desire to pull away from God as they saw them as an essential part of what they did as an expression of themselves. Leah described how the traditions of her faith kept her connected to the community:

It’s kind of funny because now looking back...I still did all of the holidays. And the holidays are still my favorite part. And there’s a lot of praying in the holidays. So, the Passover Seder, it’s like six hours of praying...but I would say the prayers and not think anything of it. But I wouldn’t go and ‘pray.’ So, I would, I wasn’t
taking an active role...So, I was like, oh yeah, Seders, let’s go; but when it came
to going to Saturday morning services I was super resistant.

Elizabeth described her continuing, but reduced involvement in similar fashion: “I still
maintained my Sunday masses because that’s just something, an obligation that I feel the
need to fulfill every single week no matter how upset I am with God.”

Susan’s experience with distance from her religious community occurred in two
phases with the first being on her own accord and the second being imposed by the
community. During her period of rebellion against the moral teachings of Mormonism,
Susan pulled back from her involvement in the religious community due to a lack of
interest. This withdrawal stemmed from the lack of value perceived in the activities due
to her evolving questions about the nature of God. Upon her decision to once again
follow the moral teachings of Mormonism, Susan was prohibited from participating in
ceremonies that occur in a Mormon Temple until she went through a period of
repentance. Susan accepted this decision as a just punishment as she no longer
considered herself worthy of entering the sacred space of the temple due to her rebellious
actions. Susan shared,

It’s interesting going inside the temple and not being worthy. You just feel like
your trudging through mud. You just feel dark. You feel bad and you just don’t’
want to go in there...I just felt ashamed and I felt I wasn’t worthy to pray, or I
wasn’t worthy to go to church.

Philip and Shannon were the two participants whose sense of distance from their
religious communities resulted in a complete separations from them. Philip’s decision to
leave his old church was based on two factors. The first was the lack of support he had received from its leadership to explore his questions about their teachings on God and to become more involved in ministerial work in the community. The second factor was that he considered several of their foundational teachings about God and salvation to be in error. Philip stated,

In March of 2012, I left my old church full-time. Um, step down off the team, said I had been going, that I was done with um, food bank, with worship team...we were even going to plan a Guatemalan missions trip and I even stepped off that team because I did not feel right in my spirit and go there and accept that they were going to tell them that you just have to say a prayer to be saved, and know that I don’t believe that.

Philip saw the need to demonstrate his break with his old community and their doctrines by being re-baptized in the new church he started attending, which supported his new found beliefs.

I could feel a substantial difference from when I was baptized in the triune name and baptized in Jesus’ name. I just, I felt clean. I felt cleansed. I felt, actually I felt revived in my spirit and I felt that there was a change and I knew that there was in my spirit. It felt refreshing, rejuvenating, renewing. I just felt a complete joy.

Shannon’s separation from a religious community was not as clear-cut as Philip’s as she was not an engaged member of an organized church or group of people. Prior to her challenge, Shannon’s primary sources of spirituality were mysticism and astrology that
she accessed through television programs, books, and other media. Nonetheless, once Shannon rejected her former beliefs as deceptions, she made a complete break with the community of teachers and spiritualists to which she was connected through those media. Shannon explained,

Like with the psychic, I read one of her books and she had like so much falsehood in there and I didn’t recognize that until I was believing in the Bible again. So, around, at the, around the time I denounced like even liking her and what she had to say.

The distance participants created between themselves and their religious communities was not expressed exclusively through actions. Two individuals spoke of their challenge being experienced in silence.

**Experiencing the challenge in silence.** In addition to the students who consciously placed distance between their religious communities and themselves by decreasing their involvement or by making a complete break with them, two participants spoke of how they explored their conception of God in silence rather than seeking assistance from their religious community. Leah shared how she kept the anger she was feeling towards God private: “I don’t think I really voiced my anger to anyone else. I didn’t voice it period. I didn’t say, oh, I’m angry at God and that’s why I’m not going to synagogue.” Sadid was the other participant who spoke about his challenge being a solitary one in which he did not discuss his thoughts about God with anyone else from his religious community. Sadid stated,
I just realized it on my own. I didn’t really talk to anyone about it. Uh, I just started doing more reading. Reading the Quran more helped me a lot actually. Understanding what’s going, about faith and stuff. Uh, so that really helped me get, get to where I am now. I mean, I really didn’t like ask too much about it. I was taught a lot during my teenage years and stuff, my adolescent years. Um, but, I wasn’t really, like I said, it was on my own.

It is difficult to determine whether additional participants experienced their challenge in silence. While none of them spoke directly about it, Philip and Susan were the only two participants who acknowledged that they actively sought out a forum in their religious communities where they could express their thoughts and feelings as it related to their conception of God being challenged.

**Purposeful Isolation**

At first glance, Ben appears to be the exception among the participants in that he did not speak about any of the identified themes related to isolation that the other participants experienced. This difference can be explained by the unique setting in which Ben experienced his challenge. While the other participants had their conception of God challenged by events that occurred within the context of their everyday lives, Ben’s challenge occurred during an extended visit to Israel, in which he was separated from everyone he knew and routine, day-to-day experiences. Furthermore, the organization with which Ben traveled to Israel purposefully established times in which individuals were to have spiritual, wilderness experiences. During these times, Ben was intentionally separated from all distractions in order to give him space to reflect upon his Jewish
identity. It was during these times that Ben’s thoughts would go to his conception of God and his previous beliefs began to be challenged because of the dissonance he identified among them. Ben described these times of isolation as follows:

My particular trip started out with a three day hike in the Negev, the desert in the main part of Israel...And it’s like on minute you’re leaving New York and you are plugged into everything and the next minute you are literally walking through the dessert...We had all sorts of points in that trip where like things were silent and it was just you and your surroundings, and you could just like see for miles...[and] I remember thinking about what I thought God was.

Due to Ben’s unique circumstances, the challenge to his perception of God differed from the other participants as it relates to isolation in that it helped to facilitate the challenge by providing a space for it to occur. In contrast, the other participants experienced their isolation as a result of the challenge as they sought to pull away and create distance from those whom they perceived as lacking empathy or not capable of providing the support they needed.

**Identifying Allies**

Despite the sense of isolation that each of the participants experienced during the period of time in which their conception of God was challenged, each of them eventually identified individuals who served as sources of support and empathy. For several of the participants, the sense of their being a lack of empathy and support from some individuals overlapped their perception that they had an ally who provided those same things. Rather than being a contradiction, this occurrence appears to emphasize the
importance for the participants to find individuals who could help them through the challenge so that they would not have to face it alone. Half of the participants identified these allies as supporters who helped them explore their conception of God; while the other half saw their allies as individuals who provided assistance in managing the events that initiated and surrounded the challenge to their beliefs. For all of the participants, these allies were viewed as playing a vital role in their ability to cope with the disruptions that were created by experiencing a challenge to their conception of God and in developing an eventual resolution.

Support in Facing the Challenge

As identified in the earlier section on the sense of isolation, one of its causes among four of the participants was the perceived lack of support they received from specific individuals within their religious communities whom they looked to for encouragement and guidance. An unspoken assumption by these participants—specifically Philip and Susan who expressed their frustration regarding the lack of support from some individuals, but also their gratitude for support from others—was their desire to find allies who could support them in exploring the questions they had about God and in making sense of the events in their lives. Four of the participants viewed their allies as supporters who helped then address various aspects of the challenge they were experiencing to their conception of God. Most important to these participants was the support they received when addressing various thoughts they were weighing in their minds as they worked to reconcile the dissonance between their expectations of how God should be interacting in their lives and what they saw occurring in the events that were
impacting them. Also important to the participants was finding role models in their religion whom they could trust to address their questions without judgment while remaining firm to the teachings and principles of their faith.

**Exploring thoughts about God.** The allies identified by two of the participants, Ben and Philip, were those individuals who helped them to explore their thoughts about God through engaged dialogue. These individuals were considered helpful because they were exploring their own conceptions of God alongside the participant and they provided a safe place where ideas could be tested and discussed without the perception of being judged. For Ben, his allies were several members of his traveling party throughout Israel who were also engaged in personal and spiritual reflection. Ben shared,

> There were like three American girls who became, like, my very good friends…we had so many, like, late night, deep conversations, about, um, everything from spirituality, to God, to everything like that. And I know those people helped me shape my inner dialogue when I was in Israel.

Similar to Ben, Philip’s ally in testing out his thoughts about God was a peer who was on her own journey of exploration.

> And at this time, me and Rachelle were dating, um, and she was really a help and a blessing because she really helped push me. We pushed each other to help draw each other closer to God and we helped jumpstart our relation with Christ, even made it stronger. Um, we would pray with each other, we would read the Bible together, we would just, we would talk about the Bible and different ideas and we
would, we would bounce stuff off, and um, it was, we had a really good relationship.

Philip also found allies in the leadership of the new church he started attending once he decided that his old church’s doctrines about the nature of God were no longer compatible with his new beliefs. In joining the new church, Philip not only found a community whose teachings about God were in closer alignment with his own beliefs, but he found spiritual leaders who encouraged him to continue to ask questions and pursue the study of Christian doctrines and theology. Philip stated,

But then, whenever I got involved with the Bible studies and got to know [the pastor] even more, um, he was, it would offer that opened mindset, um, opinion and be able to help me out and would ask me questions and would lead me through things to help me come to the answer of what the truth was.

Furthermore, Philip found support to become involved in the religious community from the church’s leadership. This support was important to Philip who had left his prior church and was looking for a new community to which he could connect and in which he felt welcomed. Philip shared,

And I grew in the church and I went to [the pastor] and I asked him, what can I get involved in? I want to help in every way that I can, because I knew that the only way I could really stay in that church was to get connected and, and it would help me draw in.

The pastor at the new church Philip began to attend became an important ally for Philip for two reasons. In addition to the support he provided to explore theological questions
and to connect to the community through activities and service, he also served as a role model for Philip, who has an ongoing interest in pursuing ministerial work.

**Role modeling the ideal.** Supportive allies for two other participants, Sadid and Susan, served as role models of their religion as they explored their conception of God. These individuals served as markers to which the participants could measure their spiritual development as their conception of God was challenged. They were also individuals the participants could access when they had questions or doubts about their beliefs. This description was particularly true for Sadid, who described his thinking about God as primarily a solitary endeavor. Despite this view, Sadid identified his father and his research mentor as important models of the Muslim faith for him to emulate.

Reflecting on his research mentor, Sadid stated,

> My mentor…is actually, he’s uh, one of my, he’s a family friend of ours, and we became really good friends and he’s also Muslim. And he’s taught me a lot…I’ve recently become, began to question whether or not I wanted to go into medicine for the reason being if someone were to die between my hands, how would that make me feel? You know, I would feel like I failed them in a way. But then he brought up a very good point…he’s like, ‘well if you as a Muslim you believe that ultimately it’s up to God whether or not someone lives or dies.’ So how can you argue with that? You know, it’s like yeah, it’s true. He’s like, ‘you can do everything in your power to save that person, but you’re not God. It’s up to God to figure it out.’ He’s right. You know?
Similar to Sadid, Susan looked to role models she had identified in Mormonism who could provide answers to the doubts with which she was struggling. However, rather than finding her role models among older members she respected, she found them among her most pious friends. Susan shared her experiences with one friend who was particularly influential:

I met this girl…and she was just like super strong in the faith…It was just, you know, the more I was around her, the more I wanted to be as happy as she was. I couldn’t remember a time in my life that I was that happy…I wanted to be the kind of person to give off that light, and make people feel like they want to be around me because I gave off this glow or this light.

And she called me out on stuff that I do. She was like, well I don’t really think you should be doing that. And so I just kind of made me second guess it and I got a lot of my strength from her.

Shared Experiences

Similar to the participants who spoke of instances where they perceived a lack of support from some individuals while finding support from other people who became their allies, other participants spoke about the lack of empathy they perceived among many in their community, while also finding a few individuals whom they believed did empathize with their experiences. This apparent contradiction also suggests an unspoken desire by some of the participants to find allies who could empathize with them during their struggles and feeling disappointment towards other individuals who did not meet those expectations. The allies of the other four participants who appeared to empathize with
them were individuals who helped them cope with the events that initiated and surrounded the challenge to their conception of God rather than the challenge itself. The empathy manifested as actions that helped them address their situations and as being a receptor that attentively listened to them, so that they felt they were genuinely being heard. The common impression the participants held about their allies was that they had the ability to share the experience and they cared enough to want to share it.

Each of the four participants spoke affectionately of their allies and saw them as people with whom they continue to have a strong, emotional connection. All four of them identified parents or family members who took on parental roles as allies who provided both practical and emotional support. Elizabeth and Leah both identified their mothers as an ally to whom they grew particularly close due to their shared experiences. Elizabeth stated,

And then when I went through my depression, my mom was the one that was strong…and so my mom would just like talk to me and sit there and hug me…when I went through my depression I become neurotic. I’m going to cry all the freaking time and my mom was the one who was my rock. She’d calm me down. She was the one to comfort me.

Leah spoke in a similar, appreciative manner about her mother:

My mom. Oh, my God. Oh, you get me all teary-eyed. Um, she’s fantastic. [Starts crying]…She is so, she was there every step of the way, every doctor appointment. She, when I was at my worst bat with depression and I was afraid to be alone, she would sleep with me in my bed at night. Um, when I had my
Crohn’s, I was going in for a plethora of tests, my colonoscopies, it was a mess.

She stayed up with me all night, every night. She’s just fantastic.

Nesreen, who also expressed positive feelings for the close relationship she had with her mother, spoke more broadly about both of her parents, whom she viewed as sharing in the experience of her academic failures and successes. Nesreen shared,

After four times of failing the MCAT, it’s like a downer for the entire house. As sad as this is, that my success and failure had an effect on other people, it did. I saw that immediately. Because they were sorry for me…The day I passed, it was like the whole family passed. It was just, it meant more than a score. It meant a future.

Finally, Shannon identified her grandfather as the ally who provided her the support and the empathy she needed while she battled depression. Although she did not speak of him in terms of sharing her experience as directly as the others, Shannon did state that her grandfather was the first person to understand what she was experiencing because he took the time to allow her to speak what was on her mind. Shannon related, “Then my grandfather, like I could call him and he would listen. And he would help me if I really needed him.”

In addition to their parents, two of the participants, Elizabeth and Leah, also identified close friends who shared their experiences with them. Like their parents, they saw these allies as genuinely caring about them and being able to relate to their experiences either because they listened to them or they had relatable occurrences in the
past. Leah’s closest friend during this period of time was seen as the person she could go to at anytime of the day in order to discuss her most personal thoughts. Leah stated,

She was just always there. She would, 3:00 am calls, when I was freaking out, and she would be there in school to smile at me and make me feel better. She would, if there was something I couldn’t talk to my parents about, she would always sit and listen…She just always listened, always cared, was like literally always there.

For Elizabeth, her close friend and her boyfriend were the allies she turned to for support with her depression. What made them particularly trustworthy in her mind was that both of them had similar experiences to what she was going through. Elizabeth stated,

And it was mainly that, what brought my entire depression on from the very beginning was my dad leaving. And so she knows about a parent leaving. Her parents just got divorced last year, but her mom moved to Tennessee when she was a senior in high school, so she knows about a parent leaving and what that feels like…she was like, ‘I understand that this is really hard’ and she gave me that. She’s the reason I got counseling.

But then my ex-fiancé came around. And he’s the reason I got out of my depression and off my medication. He was going through a similar thing except suicide was an option for him…We kind of pulled each other out…He had been through previous experiences. He had been to counseling. He has been through the whole depressing thing. He’d done the anxiety attacks and so he knew exactly what to do.
In addition to finding individual allies who shared their experiences, as well as those who supported the exploration of new ideas and who served as role models, each of the participants eventually found a religious community that they perceived as a source of support for their evolving perceptions about God.

**Finding Support from the Religious Community**

Regardless of the nature of the initiating event, of the challenge to one’s conception of God, of the sense of isolation they felt, and of the allies they found to help them with their uncertainties and difficulties, all participants spoke of ultimately finding support from a religious community. This finding is understandable as the participants were recruited from campus religious organizations and area religious institutions. As such, they all identify strongly with their religion and are active members in its local community. Nevertheless, not all of the participants returned to the same place in their community or even returned to the same community when they resolved the challenge to their understanding of God. Connecting to a religious community that supported them as they moved towards resolution of the challenge was a common experience for all of the participants.

Connection to a religious community was important for the participants for several reasons, which they associated with a supportive environment that would accept them and show concern for them. The need for a community environment that fostered positive thoughts and feelings could be found among all of the participants. For some of them, this was a reconnection to the original community from which they had distanced
themselves. Elizabeth spoke about the positive feelings she felt when reconnecting with her church:

It was this whole burden and then slowly coming back to the church and doing this little baby steps to try and get my normalcy back. I felt the cloud get lighter and slowly dissolve. And I started feeling like this whole, like, yellow kind of happy presence in me again. So it was like, this whole like, awakening, happy, warm feeling and that was just really nice to be back in the church.

For other participants, the connection they made was to a new community that provided the positive, supportive environment that was lacking in their former one. Among the participants, Philip’s experience with this change was the most dramatic. He spoke of the importance of finding a new church in which he could be himself:

They welcomed me very well. They were very kind, courteous…They invited me to a Friday night revival service at the [church]…I came in a secular band t-shirt, jeans, work boots, West Virginia hat, and I walked in there and saw all the suits and I’m like, this is not my place to be…I thought I was going to be condemned and looked down upon, but nobody was like that. Everybody received me and was very happy. I felt welcomed.

All of the participants identified with their communities in similar fashion due to seeing them as places where people truly cared for them and where their beliefs would be supported.
A Place Where People Care

All of the participants expressed the idea that their religious community was a place where they felt the people cared about their well-being. However, the participants who spoke the most about the importance of their community as a source of care were the three that had experienced the greatest separation from their former communities during the time their conception of God was being challenged. For Leah and Susan, the separation from their former communities occurred as a result of moving a considerable distance away from them to attend college. Although the move was a separate event that did not relate directly to their conception of God being challenged, it created a sizeable disruption as they had moved away from their allies.

Having moved away from her mother and best friend to attend college, Leah was separated from her allies who had supported her in her battles with depression and Crohn’s disease. In the absence of these allies, she found a new support network through the university’s Hillel center. Leah shared,

Hillel and the Jewish community has been really important to me…Example, the first semester I was here…I was super homesick, I didn’t know anyone here and I was having a Crohn’s flare. So, I was, it was a mess. I was like, ‘I hate everything, oh my god’…So, I took a taxi to the emergency room and I was there by myself, in the emergency room feeling like I was going to die. And my mom, because my mom knew where I was…she called the Hillel and someone came and met me at the hospital. I didn’t know, they just kind of walked into the emergency room and that was just the most relieving thing, just to have
someone…And it’s, if I ever need anything they’d be there for me in a heartbeat.

I don’t know if it’s because they’re Jewish or if they’re just really good people, but the fact that we are all Jewish kind of cements our sense of community.

The support Leah has received from the Jewish community has been an important source of contentment for her during her college years, even more than her thoughts and feelings about God. Leah continued,

The two main aspects of Judaism that I appreciate the most are the culture and traditions and the community it creates. It’s the Jewish community that makes me really happy here as opposed to the things God has done for me.

Susan, who had also moved a great distance from her religious community and the allies within it in order to attend college, also spoke about the importance of having a place where she felt the people cared for her not just an individual, but as a Mormon. Susan stated,

I don’t want to be alone. Like, I don’t have any friends here. Like, it was the first couple weeks and I didn’t know what else to do. And I called up my family and my mom sat there and tried to calm me down…and a few minutes later the bishop of my church called me and he goes, ‘I heard you’re struggling,’ and he goes, ‘let me see if I can get someone to help you,’ and within like a half hour I got a phone call from a guy asking me where I lived, and he and another person came and they gave me a priesthood blessing, and I just immediately felt relief after it. And they sat there and talked to me for a few hours after that, and started to invite me to things…just being around people that I felt had the same standards as me, or I
mean, someone that I actually knew even for a little bit…It made me feel a little bit better and it brought me back to the church because I started to go back to the church here because I wanted friends and I wanted to associate with people again.

Philip’s separation from his former religious community was the most stark as it was not the result of an unrelated, physical move, but it was a direct response to his experiences in his former religious community as he worked through the challenge to his conception of God. Seeking a place where he felt appreciated and loved, Philip found a new church community that demonstrated their care for him on a routine basis. Philip spoke of one such experience:

I never miss a service at the church…I’ve only missed twice. One because I was sick on a Wednesday night. And that night and the next day my phone got blown up with calls and texts of ‘Where are you?’, ‘We missed you!’, ‘Are you okay?’ So, just the fact that, it really was a blessing to know that I really am missed and that I really am wanted and needed in a church, even a church of enormous size with 600, 700 members. It’s nice to know that one person is really important, is really needed to the well-being of the church.

A Place Where Their Beliefs are Accepted

Alongside a community that expresses concern for them through their words and actions, each of the participants spoke about the importance of having a place where their re-conceptualized beliefs about God were supported. For some of the participants it was important to have a community in which their beliefs and associated religious practices were carried out. This was of particular significance to those participants who felt their
religious beliefs were not supported well by those outside of their community. Sadid’s decision to become a more devout Muslim as a result of his re-conceptualization of God demonstrates this importance. Sadid stated,

Like the community aspect, you being community together more, to pray, to eat together, it’s more of that, uh accumulative bonding, and I think that’s really important, especially when it comes, when it comes to the Muslim faith because we are minority here, so that’s important, that um, coming together as a community.

Not all participants were looking for the conformity of practice and support for their specific beliefs about God; but rather, they desired a place where their beliefs would be tolerated and could co-exist with varying understandings of God. Ben’s recognition that Judaism can be experienced in multiple ways served as a reassurance that his questioning of traditional doctrines about God was an acceptable expression of his Jewish identity. Ben stated,

Whenever I think about the idea that you’d question Judaism and question religion, like for me…I know those people on Masada were questioning everything…I struggle with the idea that, when, the mishna was written, which is like the big book of commentary on the Torah, they were questioning things. That’s why they wrote commentary. But, I always wonder, did they have thoughts that God wasn’t this being, that God was, that they thought about God the same way I do. Every single person, then, couldn’t have thought about God in the classic way. I just know that.
Having a place where their evolving thoughts about God were supported was important for all individuals as each one of them moved towards a re-conceptualization of the extent of God’s authority and how He expresses it.

**Re-Conceptualizing God’s Authority**

As participants experienced the challenge to their conception of God, each of them identified a movement towards resolution of the dissonance they perceived between their expectations of God and the events in their lives. All of the participants described their movement towards resolution as a re-conceptualization of how God exercises His authority in their lives and the events around them. The recognition by the participants that the control God exercises in the world had to be re-conceptualized in order for them to resolve the dissonance they were experiencing is not surprising since God’s authority and how He exercises it was a common essence among their experiences. Despite the shared structure of these experiences, each participant re-conceptualized God according to the context of their original beliefs and the specific events that challenged them. Nevertheless, the participants’ re-conceptualizations can be grouped into three general categories: less control, more control, and control re-defined.

**Less Control over Events**

For two of the participants, Ben and Leah, the challenge to their conception of God was resolved by re-conceptualizing Him as having less control in their individual lives and the events surrounding them. Despite this similarity, they came to this conclusion for very different reasons. For Ben, the re-conceptualization of God as not exercising control over his creation was the answer to resolving two sets of beliefs that he
held, which were in conflict: that God is the creator of all things and that evolution and history explain why things exist as they do. In contrast, Leah’s re-conceptualization was more personal and related to the anger she felt towards God. Unable to discern why God had allowed her illnesses, Leah’s anger only began to subside once she re-conceptualized Him as having less control over the situations in her life. Leah stated, “The way I kind of explain it is He just, He’s not, He doesn’t have control over aspects of our lives. He’s kind of watching and observing.” Despite the shared Jewish background of Ben and Leah, which informed their original view of God as an active, creative entity, their shared religious heritage did not appear to have any influence on them arriving at the same structural re-conceptualization of God exercising less control over His creation.

**More Control over Events**

Two of the participants re-conceptualized God as exercising more control over the events that surround them. Like those who re-conceptualized God as exercising less control, these two participants’ resolutions are understood best in the context of their previous beliefs and the events that challenged them. For these two participants, Sadid and Shannon, their re-conceptualization of God related to their personal beliefs that He was a vague and distant being, which was contrary to the respective religious doctrines that had received in their youth; but when overwhelming events occurred to them, they found comfort in seeing God as an entity that exercises control over His creation. This re-conceptualization helped both of them cope with the negative events they experienced because they believed there was a greater reason for them occurring even if they could not perceive it. As Shannon expressed,
I learned that God is there through it all, but we have a choice to rely on Him or to acknowledge Him to be our solace when just feel like we can’t help ourselves anymore…actually having Him in your life when you’re going through these emotional ups and downs, and makes it better than if you don’t have Him…I mean even today when I struggle with emotional ups and downs and things that are not in my control, it’s easier when I make the choice to rely on God.

The other shared experience between Sadid and Shannon was that their re-conceptualization of God led them to become more serious about the practice of their respective religions. Both individuals saw a need to take the teachings of their religion more seriously once they saw God as an active, sovereign entity in the events that surrounded them. This desire to become more serious about the practice of their religion related to a desire to live a life that would bring them closer to God.

**Control Re-Defined**

The remaining four participants’ re-conceptualization of God and how He exercises His authority did not pertain to the amount of control He has over the events in their lives, but rather how He exerts it. As with the other participants, their former beliefs about God and the specific events they experienced shaped their re-conceptualization. Two of the participants, Nesreen and Susan, always believed that God had considerable control over their lives; therefore, they had difficulty understanding why God allowed them to experience adversity. In re-defining how God exercises control in their lives, they came to see His allowance of adversity as a means of giving them something more than they originally anticipated. For Nesreen, the adversity she experienced led to even
greater rewards for her hard work and righteous living than what she had originally expected. As Nesreen stated,

I’m trying to figure out why was I supposed to fail…from what I can gauge from it, I learned how to study…I learned to cope with stress. I got closer to my God. I was forced to take a third year in which, this third year, I was able to take harder classes to prepare for med school. I have done a year’s worth of research that has gotten me into two awesome internships because I was, because of that MCAT problem.

Similar to Nesreen’s perspective of God allowing adversity to occur in order to give something more, Susan sees the difficult times in her life in which her conception of the divine has been challenged as intentional acts to strengthen her faith and personal resolve. Susan stated,

I think it’s made me stronger. Just, they’re both been tests and looking back at them, I just think how stupid I was. I know I’m going to get questioned again. It’s inevitable. And I think it just kind of gave me this power or want to learn more so that I can answer difficult questions when they’re asked me again…I definitely feel like I strengthened my faith.

The remaining two participants, Elizabeth and Philip, also re-conceptualized how God exercises control in their lives; but for them, their new conception centered on how God uses His authority in His personal relationships with them. For Elizabeth, God’s authority over her was originally conceived as Him being a friend who would protect her from negative events. Once she experienced adversity, she re-conceptualized her
friendship with God as a source of strength to help her persevere through difficult times. Elizabeth summarized her feelings as: “it brings you back to the whole footprints story, like during the most trouble, that’s when I carried you.” Philip’s re-conceptualization of God’s authority in His relationship was similar to Elizabeth’s; but for him it was a matter of perceiving God as an entity that would exert His control because of His love for him, rather than withholding it due to indifference.

Interpreting Their Experiences

Although not every participant felt as though the challenge to their conception of God had reached a final resolution, each of them were able to reflect upon their experiences and formalize interpretations of them. The participants’ interpretations focused primarily on answering two questions: (a) why did they have to go through the set of experiences that challenged their conception of God; and (b) has the challenged been resolved? In answering the first of these questions, five of the participants spoke about their search for God’s purpose for either allowing or directly causing the events that precipitated the challenge to their beliefs. The consideration of God’s purpose behind the events was absent from the other three participants due to their new conceptions, which hold that God does not act directly in the lives of individuals in order to test or strengthen their faith. The answers to the second question of whether or not their conceptual challenge has been resolved varied considerably among the eight participants. Two of them held that it was complete, three viewed it as nearing

2 Allegorical story in which a pair of footprints in the sand depicts how God supports an individual during the most difficult times in the person’s life by carrying him or her.
completion, two believed they were still confronting the challenge, and one expressed uncertainty about her current position.

**God’s Purpose in the Experience**

Five of the eight participants attributed the events that initiated and surrounded the challenge to their religious conceptions to the direct involvement of God in their lives. Reflecting upon their experiences, they held that although they could not see it at the time the events were occurring, they now perceived God as orchestrating or influencing them in order to achieve a greater purpose. Each of the five participants spoke of God’s influence over their experiences in terms of it generating a positive benefit that came about by overcoming adversity. Four of the participants spoke of how the experience made them a stronger individual who was better equipped to face future challenges. The other participant spoke about his experiences benefiting not only himself, but others in the future.

Three of the four participants—Nesreen, Shannon, and Susan—who felt they had become a stronger individual as a result of the events that initiated their religious conceptions being challenged viewed the adversity they overcame as being allowed by God in order to achieve such a result. For these three participants, God had allowed them to struggle through adversity, rather than grant them immediate rewards or exercise protection from harm, in order to strengthen their personal resolve and their skill sets. Looking forward to the future challenges she will face in medical school and her preparation for them, Nesreen stated,
I have grown as a person. I have taken harder classes that’ll help me in medical school. I’ve learned how to officially study. Like, I know what works for me and I know what doesn’t. Which I think is key in medicine…entering medical school, I will be a better student. I’ll be a better person because of this third year than I would have been if I had asked to pass the MCAT in two and it happened just the way I wanted it, in a perfect, ideal world. I wouldn’t have had this…[God] gave it to me better.

The strength Susan has received from her experiences is tied more directly to the practice of her religion as she believes the adversity she has overcome has helped her to see the benefit of obeying the moral standards taught in Mormonism. Susan shared,

I think it just kind of comes back to parents set rules for a reason. Obviously, kids are going to break it because you are going to test the waters and try to find yourself…I think that’s why [God]’d give us free agency. He wants us to make mistakes and be like I should probably never do that again. That hurt me or I feel bad about that. He just wants us to figure out the rights and wrongs for ourselves.

In similar fashion, Shannon reflected upon her own experiences:

There are things that God, um, puts us through, or that He allows us to go through…I think God was there all the time, but He allowed a lot of things because He knew where I would be on this day. That I would be stronger, and that I would have a trying experience under my belt that would, if that were to arise again, that I would be better equipped to handle that.
In contrast to these three participants, Elizabeth saw her experiences as a means by which God strengthened her as an individual, but she did not see Him as purposefully setting up the events in order to achieve such a result. Instead, Elizabeth views the negative events in her life as natural occurrences that everyone has to confront from time to time. Elizabeth’s greater resolve and personal strength is the result of having survived the events and her depression, and her new-found confidence that God will not leave her side when faced with similar, negative events in the future. Elizabeth shared,

And really, God doesn’t have a particular say. He knows what’s going to happen to you and he’s going to help you through what’s going to happen to you, but I don’t really think that He has a complete, like, of course He has the ability to, I don’t really think He’s going to completely change your life and make all these events happen…just realizing that that is life and that is going to happen throughout your entire life like, all these things are going to happen…I realize now that it was just something I had to go through to become the person I am, kind of thing. And what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, kind of retarded to say, but it’s true.

Philip viewed God’s involvement in the events surrounding the challenge to his religious conceptions similarly to Nesreen, Shannon, and Susan in that he believes the events were deliberately orchestrated to achieve a particular result. However, from Philip’s point of view, God’s purpose was not to strengthen him for his own benefit, but to equip him with an experience that would allow him to help others in the future. Philip stated,
Maybe it’s even that if somebody else is going through a similar experience of depression or thoughts I can say, hey, I was there with you, to connect with them, and help lead them out of there and be a friend to those who are in need.

Among the three participants who did not associate their experiences with God helping them to become stronger individuals, their new conception of God explains the lack of a perceived connection. For Ben and Leah, their conception of God as a distant entity who watches over His creation rather than interacting with it disqualifies any consideration of Him orchestrating or using the events in their lives to achieve a particular purpose. Likewise, Sadid did not recognize any link between the events in his life and God exercising control over them in order to achieve a particular result; but the absence of a connection is explained by Sadid’s belief about what is important to God.

Although Sadid’s experiences led him to believe that God exercises a considerable amount of control over peoples’ lives, he does not see Him as being concerned with the faithfulness of individuals to the point that He would purposefully influence individuals to move a particular direction in their faith. Speaking of how he did not see God orchestrating the events that initiated the challenge to his religious beliefs and led to him becoming a more devout Muslim, Sadid stated,

> I feel like God doesn’t care whether you’re committed to Him or not. You need Him, He doesn’t need you. So I guess not really, because, he’s um, I mean He has a, what’s the population of the world? Seven billion people? So he’s got seven billion other people. Yeah, so you’re just one person out of seven billion, so I feel like you need Him more than He needs you.
The lack of a perceived link between their experiences surrounding the challenge to their conception of God and a divine purpose behind the associated events reflected a broader absence in their reflections about there being any rationale to their experiences. While Ben and Sadid were both thankful for their experiences in that they helped them clarify their beliefs about God and the reasons they practiced their religion, their thankfulness was not directed at God or anyone else. In contrast, Leah does not see any value in her experiences and she would prefer that they had never occurred.

**Identifying the Journey’s Status**

All eight of the participants were able to look back on their experiences and make a judgment about how close they were to having resolved the challenge to their conception of God. In making these assessments, each of them spoke of how secure they felt about their current conception of God and whether or not it was static or still evolving. Just as their original conceptions about God and the events that challenged them vary considerably among the eight participants, so did their assessments of where they stand in having resolved the conflict between their expectations and what they experienced. Despite the individual context of each participant’s experience, they can be broadly separated into four categories: journey concluded, journey nearing conclusion, journey still occurring, and temporized uncertainty.

Two participants, Ben and Nesreen, clearly felt the challenge they faced to their conception of God had been resolved. Although they varied in their resolutions, with Ben adopting a new view of God as a distant observer of His creation and Nesreen confirming her belief that God is a just rewarded of the righteous, they both held that
their beliefs were now secure and no longer being challenged by the events around them. Having had their challenge resolved, both spoke confidently about their beliefs even when other aspects of their lives do not make sense to them. Nesreen spoke about this sense of confidence in her conception of God despite facing other unknowns in her life:

> It’s like trying to fit two pieces of the puzzles and by forcing them to fit. If they’re going to fit, they’re going to fit. If they’re not, they’re not. So, right now, I’m in the puzzle piece and I don’t know where it’s going. I don’t know how it’s going to fit, but I believe it will all be a big picture because my designer, my creator is perfect. So, I believe whatever He has, or whatever He chooses, will be perfect. Perfect in the sense that it’ll work out. It’s meant to be.

Three of the participants—Elizabeth, Philip, and Sadid—spoke of the challenges to their faith as nearing completion. Although these participants varied considerably in how their conceptions of God had changed, they shared a confidence about their current beliefs; but they also acknowledged the potential for further refinement as they continued to pursue religious engagements at both the personal and the communal levels. For Elizabeth, whose resolution has accompanied her reconnection to both God and the campus, Catholic community, it has been a gradual process of returning to “normaley”.

Elizabeth shared,

> I’m slowly getting there, and I pray every night, just to make a habit out of it and just, I don’t know, I’m slowly getting stronger and stronger, and stronger in my religion…I was on retreat last week actually. We had a busy first retreat. So it
was me, my director, and she was like, oh, you seem so much happier than last year. I’m like, yeah I do, so everyone has seen a significant change.

Philip’s experience with his parents further illustrates the impact others have on these participants’ ability to reach a final resolution. Philip feels confident about his new religious commitments, stating, “The positive effects would be myself being able to come to a truth and to an understanding of myself and what I believed and what I knew and understood;” however, he also acknowledges that the conflict between his parents and him has not been resolved.

My parents were not very receptive or pleased with my decision and they’re against it 100 percent and they still are...I gave [my dad] our doctrine and why I believed ECA, my old church, was wrong and what I believe now. And after he got done reading it he told me that I was going to hell and that I was believing wrong. And I was like, ‘well that’s definitely going to get me back into church by you condemning me.’ But in my heart and my spirit, I knew that I was doing right.

For Shannon and Susan, although they feel they have made considerable strides in working through the challenges to their conception of God, both of them spoke about how it was still ongoing. Likewise, although they both felt that they were moving towards a closer relationship with God as a result of the challenge, neither of them spoke with confidence on what the final form or shape of that relationship would be. Despite these similarities, the tones of the two participants were different. Shannon spoke with hope and excitement about the new commitments she was making in her life in order to
become more devout in the practice of her religious beliefs. Shannon’s recent decision to become more serious about how she practices her faith mirrored her evolving conception of God, in which He expects her to not only embrace a correct set of beliefs, but to live a life style that reflects them. As Shannon shared,

I think I was coming to a point that God had brought me to, a breaking point, so that I would become more devout or serious about my faith…and that challenged my knowledge of God and perception of God, because I thought I could just live life and not have to do too much on the spiritual side; but I realized that it is important to pray, it is important to attend church, and to hear God’s word.

In contrast to Shannon’s up-beat tone, Susan vacillated between confidence in the Mormon Church’s teachings about God and frustration due to the doubts that continue to nag her. Specifically, Susan worries that she is missing out on experiencing the full richness of life or career opportunities due to the restrictions she believes God has placed upon her because she is a Mormon. Susan expressed these frustrations as follows:

You know, what if after I die there’s not really a judgment day? Well then, I just wasted my life not having fun…I look at all these people who, they don’t go to church, like they believe in God, but they don’t go to church, and they don’t have religion. I’m just like, they’re happy and they don’t have to set these things aside and they are still doing as good as I am. You know? Or if not, I’m struggling more than they are, and so sometimes I have these thoughts like, well how do I know that this, like I’m doing the right thing?
I’m a local model. And I have to turn down some of the modeling jobs because we like have to have our shoulders covered and our shorts can’t be shorter than our finger tips. So, I feel like I’m missing out on jobs…I’m missing out on the fashion stuff.

Leah was the only participant who expressed uncertainty about whether or not she had reached or was reaching a resolution in regards to the challenges she experienced to her conception of God. Reflecting on her current thoughts and feelings about God, she could not state with confidence whether the challenged had been resolved or if she had merely temporized a resolution in the absence of the negative events that had typified her teenage years. Expressing her uncertainty, Leah stated,

I think right now I’m feeling really good. I’m not depressed. My Crohn’s is under control. The seizures have subsided. Um, I’m doing well in school. I have good friends and family…I’m content, and things are looking good. So, I don’t really have a reason to be angry. Um, but I’m not sure if something else were to happen, I would get re-angry. But, I think, contentment is a good word. I’ve reached this stage of contentment, which means that my relationship with God is content. I have no reason to be angry with Him, so I’m not angry with Him.

Leah also allowed for the possibility that the challenge has been resolved, but others might arise, which will constitute a new phase in her life; but she was uncertain on which of these interpretations is the correct one.
Summary of Findings

The eight participants in this study identified events during their adolescent and early adulthood years that challenged their conception of God. Despite the various types of events that occurred in their individual lives, the experiences challenged each participant’s assumptions about the authority that God possesses to influence their lives and how He decides to exercise it. The dissonance between their expectations and how they perceived God interacting in their lives disrupted their perceived relationship with Him and led them to re-evaluate their conception of Him. The period of re-conceptualization varied among the participants, ranging from several months to multiple years, during which they worked out new understandings of the nature of God, how He interacts with them, and the extent of their relationship with Him. The most important aspect of this re-conceptualization for the participants was the amount of control God actually has over His creation and how He exercises it in their individual lives.

During the period of time in which the participants were re-evaluating their conception of God, they spoke of their relationships with various individuals and to their religious communities as having an important impact on their experiences. All of the participants described a sense of isolation during the time in which their conception of God was challenged and being re-evaluated. The identified causes of the isolation the participants felt varied among them, but could be broadly grouped as perceiving a lack of empathy from others in regards to their overall situation; a lack of support from individuals in terms of helping them with their re-conceptualization of God; a sense of abandonment by God; a desire to pull away from God due to being angry with Him; and
a sense of created distance between themselves and their religious community, which resulted in either a decline in religious activities or a complete break with it. Despite this sense of isolation, each of the participants eventually found allies who were viewed as helping them by either sharing their experiences as they related to the events that initiated the challenge to their conception of God or by supporting them in the re-conceptualization of the divine. Finally, as the participants either resolved the challenge or moved towards a resolution through a re-conceptualization of God, they spoke about the importance of finding a religious community that cared for them as individuals and provided a space where their re-conceptualization of God was supported, or at least tolerated.

These findings about the participants’ lived experiences in regards to their conception of God and how they have made meaning of a challenge to it raises important themes about their spirituality and its tie to their religious identities and their perceived relationship with God. As identified in the review of the literature on spirituality in higher education, there is a deficiency in acknowledging the importance of the tie between spirituality and religion and the importance assigned to a personal, divine entity that is the center of value and power (CVP) for some individuals. Although there were varying degrees among the eight participants, the division often made in the higher education literature between spirituality and religion was not found. Similarly, the participants spoke to varying degrees about the central importance of God and their perceived relationship to Him in understanding their spiritual and religious connections to
the CVP and to others. These themes will be explored fully in the succeeding, concluding chapter.
CHAPTER V

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to determine how traditional-age college students of conventional monotheistic faiths experience a challenge to their conception of God. This was accomplished through extensive, open-ended interviews with a purposeful sample of eight students representing various traditions in the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Transcendental phenomenological methods of bracketing personal perspectives, reduction of collected narratives to central statements, imaginative variation of discerned themes, and synthesizing textual and structural descriptions were used to discern the common essence of the eight participants’ experiences. The shared essence of the participants’ experiences in this study was found to be a disruption in the perceived relationship they had with God as they struggled to make sense of the dissonance they observed between events in their lives and their expectations for how God exercises His authority.

By identifying the phenomenological essence of the participants’ challenges to their conception of God, this study demonstrates an identified gap in the higher education literature on spirituality: the relative absence of the role God plays in the spiritual experiences of students who identify with monotheistic religions. The most common definitions of spirituality within the higher education literature acknowledge relationships between the self and the other as a central component (Chickering et al., 2006; Love & Talbot, 1999; Tisdell, 2003); however, there is a dearth of concern with forms of
spirituality that perceive the presence of a relationship with God, especially where He is perceived as the central authority over the relationship. This deficiency has resulted in a failure to account for qualitative differences in the relationship between the self and the other, as potential equals; and the relationship between the self and the other, where there is a personalized, center of value and power (CVP) that holds a position of authority over both the self and others of equal standing.

A second concern with the literature on spirituality in higher education that this study demonstrates is the tendency to separate spirituality and religion as two, distinct concepts. Although the distinction between the two concepts is acknowledged as a beneficial development for understanding the experiences of many college students who see a clear distinction between the two, it fails to properly acknowledge the interrelatedness and conflated lines between the two concepts that exist for many other students. Even among writers who acknowledge that this connection exists for some individuals (e.g. Tisdell, 2003), the tendency is to divide the two concepts based upon the preconceived categories of the researchers rather than the expressed perception of the individuals. This leads to an under-emphasis of the interrelatedness or the conflation of the two concepts that exists for some individuals.

The findings presented in this study start the process of addressing these deficiencies by showing how students who identify with traditional monotheistic religions describe their experiences when confronted with a challenge to their conception of God. While some variance of degree existed among the participants, each of them described how they perceived the authority of God and how He exercises it as the central
essence to their challenge. Similarly, while they varied in the degree to which they saw the interrelatedness between their spirituality and their religion, each of them demonstrated the inseparability of the two concepts and spoke of the importance of congruency between their spirituality, how they practiced their religion, and how they fit within their religious communities. The various ways in which the authority of God and the conflation of spirituality and religion played out for the participants of this study will be discussed in this concluding chapter.

**Discussion of Participants’ Experiences**

In order to discern the various ways in which participants experienced the authority of God and the conflation of spirituality and religion throughout their challenge, it is helpful to view their experiences through the multiple lenses that are used to describe the concept of spirituality in the higher education literature. Throughout this section, participants’ experiences are examined through the behavioral, cognitive, and relational lenses that were identified in the literature review. Their experiences are also examined through several unique perspectives identified in the literature, including the relational nature of faith as described by Fowler (1981); the importance of a supportive, mentoring environment for spiritual exploration as advocated by Parks (2000); the natural-supernatural dichotomy in the literature of spirituality in higher education as described by Speck (2005); and the conflation of spirituality, religion, and faith among Christian students found in two other studies (Craft & Rockenbach, 2011; Love, Boch, Jannasone, & Richardson, 2005). Before discussing the findings of this study through these various lenses, it is important to recognize that the nature of the challenge to the participants’

A Period of Transition

The participants’ experiences of having their conception of God challenged by events in their lives and then, after a period of time, moving to a re-conceptualization of God meets Schlossberg et al.’s (1995) definition of a transition, which is “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27). Most prominent among these changes for the participants were those that occurred in their assumptions and their relationships. All of the participants described a change in their assumptions about God’s authority and how He exercises it in their lives. While half of the participants re-conceptualized God as possessing more or less control over their lives and surrounding events, the other half of the participants re-conceptualized how and when God exercises His authority. Likewise, each of the participants described a change to various relationships in their lives. These relationships extended to changes in how they related to God, to others in relationships that existed prior to the challenge, to others in new relationships that were formed as a result of challenge, and to their religious communities. Although not all participants experienced a change in their relationships in all four of these categories, each of them re-defined their relationships across several of them. While not as obvious, changes in routines and roles were also described by all of the participants across a wide range of activities. These changes included both increased and decreased involvement in religious activities—Sadid and Shannon exemplifying the former and Leah the later—and new engagements within their
religious communities, such as Philip’s ability to participate in ministerial functions in the new church he joined.

Viewing the challenge to the participants’ conception of God as a transition helps to explain the differences among them beyond the context of their individual religious beliefs and commitments, despite the shared structure of their experiences. First, acknowledging that a transition is a process that occurs over a period of time, it is understandable why the challenge ranged from several months to multiple years among the participants. Although each of them identified an event or series of events that initiated the challenge, the time needed for them to move from struggling with their conception of God to successfully forming a re-conceptualized understanding of Him varied considerably. Second, Schlossberg et al. (1995) holds that not all transitions lead to growth, but decline and ambiguity in development are also possible. Such variance was seen among the participants, who viewed themselves as either growing spirituality, as in the exemplary cases of Sadid, Shannon, and Philip; seeing their beliefs about God altered, but their spirituality remaining the same, as seen with Ben, Elizabeth, and Nesreen; or feeling uncertain about their spiritual and religious commitments, as was the situation with Leah and Susan.

A third insight provided by viewing the participants’ challenge as a transition is Schlossberg et al. (1995) identification of four sets of factors that explain an individual’s ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. Situation refers to multiple factors that describe the context in which the transition occurs and they range from the nature of the initiating event to the sense of control individuals feel over the
situation and concurrent sources of stress. There was a considerable degree of variation regarding the situation among the eight participants. For example, Ben and Philip experienced their initiating events during designed times and in places intentionally set apart for personal reflection and prayer. In contrast, other participants were confronted with negative, initiating events that were unexpectedly thrust upon them, such as the accidental death of Sadid’s roommate and the onset of Crohn’s disease by Leah.

Among the four factors that impact an individual’s ability to cope, self refers to demographic and personal characteristics and psychological resources available during the transition. The primary difference between the participants in this study as it relates to self was their devoutness to their religion going into the transition. Whereas several of the students were devout members of their faith—Elizabeth, Leah, and Nesreen being exemplars—in terms of religious participation and acceptance of doctrines, other participants, like Sadid and Shannon, showed little adherence to the received religion of their childhood. This difference correlated with the participants’ reaction to God as a result of the challenge. Whereas Elizabeth and Leah initially pulled away from God as a result of the challenge they faced, Sadid and Shannon were drawn to Him. Although the participants certainly varied in psychological resources, such as ability to cope, ego development, and self-efficacy, I decline to comment on them as none of the students were evaluated in these areas on a validated test and it would only be speculation where each of them stood in these areas.

As noted in the findings, support for the individual during the transition was a prominent aspect of the experience for the participants. Identified in their various senses
of isolation and their desire to find a religious community that cared for them as individuals and that provided them a place for their re-conceptualizations of God to exist, support from others throughout the challenge was an important factor sought after by all of the participants. The impact of the support the participants received or perceived as receiving cannot be understated and will be explored in the latter section that addresses Parks’ (2000) call for mentoring environments that facilitate spiritual exploration by college students. However, it is important to note here that the various levels and kinds of social support that the participants received during their challenge appear to correlate with the length of the experience. Ben, whose challenge lasted the shortest duration, experienced his transition during a trip designed to encourage personal and group reflection about one’s Jewish identity. In contrast, Leah’s and Susan’s challenges overlapped most of their high school and college years and both of them could not identify a definitive resolution to them. A likely reason for their prolonged experiences is that they both moved a sizeable distance from their adolescent sources of support in order to attend college, where they had to find new individuals and religious communities upon whom they could rely.

The final factor of a transition, as identified by Schlossberg et al. (1995), is strategies, which refer to the coping responses employed by individuals. Although a number of strategies are discussed by Schlossberg et al., the one that relates most to the findings of this study is the attempt to control meaning. As each of the participants eventually moved towards a re-conceptualization of God, they worked to reconcile the dissonance between their expectations of God and the events they experienced; however,
in viewing their re-conceptualizations, it is necessary to use caution with such an interpretation because it assumes that the participants exerted control over the meanings they gave to God and how He exercises His authority. In contrast, five of the participants spoke of how God guided them into their new conceptualizations of Him, thus authority over definitions and meaning was located with God, or at least shared with Him, rather than exclusively with themselves. This aspect of authority and control will be addressed further in the section on the relational nature of faith as described by Fowler (1981).

Recognizing the temporal and transitional aspects of the challenges experienced by the participants helps to illuminate the nature of the challenge and the various differences among their experiences. However, the structural similarities (i.e. the phenomenological essence) between the participants’ experiences best address the primary concerns of this study: the central importance of God, and more broadly the CVP, and the conflation of spirituality and religion for certain groups of students.

**Behavioral Lens**

The behavioral lens views spirituality primarily through the expression of religious rituals and traditions, although personal activities like meditation are also included in this perspective. As discussed in the literature review, studies in higher education over the past four decades have demonstrated that religious behavior declines significantly among students during their time in college (Astin, 1977; Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm; 2011). Originally, the decline of religious activity was interpreted by researchers as an indication of the overall secularization of students during their college experiences.
Starting in the 1990s, researchers began to question this interpretation as they began to make a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. Thus, while behaviors affiliated with religious rituals and traditions declined, spirituality and spiritual concerns were found to persist among many college students.

The findings of this study do not disagree with previous findings regarding the decline of religious behaviors as an overall trend among students during their college year. Nevertheless, they do indicate behaviors affiliated with religious organizations and traditions can increase for some students during their college years. An increase in religious behaviors such as prayer, attending religious services, and engagement with a religious community increased for half of the participants in this study during their college years as a result of their experiences surrounding a challenge to their conception of God. In addition, a fifth participant, Nesreen, remained consistent in her religious commitments throughout her transition. Religious behaviors were also seen as fluctuating as participants experienced challenges to their beliefs and religious assumptions. As was seen in the case with Elizabeth, her challenge initially led to a considerable reduction in religious behaviors due to her desire to pull away from God and her perception that her religious community was incapable of empathizing with her. Eventually, as she worked through her challenge and the events related to it, she returned to a state of normalcy and began to once again invest considerable time in religious behaviors and community activities at the campus Newman Center. Whether Elizabeth would be seen as declining or maintaining her religious behaviors and commitments would be dependent upon the times being compared, and a very different picture would
emerge if one looked at her six months versus a year and half after the initiating event to her challenge.

The findings of this study also suggest that for some students, a decrease in religious behaviors over a specified period of time may not be an indication of a decreased commitment to a religion’s teachings or their identification with a particular religion. Elizabeth’s temporary decline in religious behaviors was the result of the personal anger she felt towards God for abandoning her during a time of personal crisis. Yet, even during this time in which she pulled away from God and isolated herself from her religious community, she never questioned the received doctrines of the Catholic catechism or her identity as a Catholic. Examining the experiences of Ben and Leah, while they did question traditional Jewish teachings about the nature of God, neither of them questioned their religious identity as Jews. Quite the opposite, finding ways to incorporate new ideas through traditional, Jewish practices was an important component of their re-evaluations and eventual re-conceptualizations of God.

Cognitive Lens

The cognitive lens of spirituality focuses on how individuals construct meaning and view the relationships between the self, the other, and the CVP. These constructions are typically viewed in two ways. The first, which is often called faith development, concerns itself with structures of the conceptions that individuals hold. The second looks at the contextual narratives that inform the conceptions.

The structural, cognitive lens, which if informed primarily by the writings of Fowler (1981), is concerned with how individuals conceive knowledge creation, the locus
of authority, and the role of the community in one’s meaning-making processes.

Although the participants of this study were not evaluated to determine their place in the structural stages of Fowler’s faith development model, most college students are expected to operate within the synthetic-conventional stage. In this developmental stage, individuals look for external authorities to provide understanding of self, their relationships to others, and their relationships to the CVP. The participants of this study seemed to fit this stage in that they looked to external sources for their conceptions about God and they sought out support and guidance from individual allies to help them re-evaluate their understanding of God and from communities that would accept the re-conceptualizations they had formed about Him. This was true even for the students who changed their religious affiliations as a result of their challenge. Philip and Shannon left religious communities they felt had failed to provide a correct understanding of God; but in doing so, they sought out new, external sources to inform them about the nature of God and joined communities where their new views were held and taught.

The findings of this study also appear to support Parks’ (2000) contention that there is a transitional stage of faith development between Fowler’s (1981) synthetic-conventional stage (i.e. commitment to knowledge received) and individualistic-reflective stage (i.e. commitment to knowledge self-authored) in which new constructions and commitments are tested to determine their resilience to the individuals’ experiences. Despite the certainty expressed by six of the participants that the challenge to their conception of God had been resolved or was moving towards a resolution, there remains the question of whether they had moved towards a self-authored answer, they had
retreated to older constructions they had received, or they had substituted one received construction for another. The continuing importance of finding a place within a religious community that supports their current conception of God suggests that the participants have not moved unto Fowler’s individualistic-reflective stage; but, are instead working through Parks’ transitional stage of testing commitments. The importance of understanding this position of the students’ faith development in their overall spirituality will be explored further in the section on the importance of allies and a safe space.

The contextual, cognitive lens, which Robert Nash (1999) addresses, also helps illuminate the students’ experiences. Nash, a vocal critic of the separation of religion and spirituality as distinct concepts in the higher education literature, contends that individuals rely upon predominant, religious-spiritual narratives to inform their understanding of the self and the other. For this study, Nash’s identified narratives are not relevant; but the recognition of the role played by religious-spiritual narratives is beneficial. All eight of the participants sought out answers from the religious narratives they had received in childhood and early adolescence to make meaning of the events that challenged their conception of God. This tendency to seek answers from the received, religious-spiritual narratives was most evident in the experiences of Sadid and Shannon, who had not taken them seriously until initiating events raised a challenge to their conception of God. Lost for answers, they turned to the narratives they had from their father and grandparents respectively. Recognizing that contextual narratives are at play when students experience dissonance between received, religious doctrines and events that challenge those teachings can help identify the context of their spiritual experiences.
For example, if students, such as the ones in this study, adhere to a narrative in which God not only exists, but is a CVP with which they can have a personal relationship, it is essential to recognize this aspect of their spirituality if it is to be accessed and properly understood.

**Relational Lens**

The relational lens to spirituality concerns itself with how an individual views one’s authentic identity in relation to otherness, typically restricted in the higher education literature to other individuals or nature. Working primarily within this framework, Tisdell (2003) holds that spiritual experiences are about constructing knowledge that is anchored in how we interact with others in various communities. These interactions are composed of multiple, cultural expressions varying from shared beliefs and values to common language, symbols, and stories that convey meaning.

The relational connections that the participants in this study had to their religious communities can be seen throughout each of their experiences. For Elizabeth and Leah, their identity as a Catholic and a Jew, respectively, remained intact despite their desire to pull away from God. Although the challenges they experienced led to a temporary decrease in religious behaviors, they did not result in a complete cessation in religious activities. Their identity as expressed through the practices and stories of their religious communities was rooted in more than just their feelings towards God. Thus, Elizabeth could not bring herself to miss Sunday morning church services or not abstain from something during Lent; and Leah continued to look forward to the retelling of the Exodus story through the Passover Seder each year. Susan expressed a similar relationship to her
Mormonism when she spoke about the loss of her Temple Recommend. Although she struggled with questions about the existence of God and His expectations for a moral life, when she lost the privilege to participate in sacred events or enter into a sacred space, she felt an internal need to work towards regaining her standing. Sadid and Shannon also acknowledged the importance of relating to their religious communities through rituals and obligations once they made commitments to them. They each sought to spend more time in private and corporate prayer and more time involved with individuals of similar beliefs to their own, and to divorce from activities that disassociated them with their religions—for Sadid this was drinking alcohol, and for Shannon it was consulting psychics and using totems.

As already noted in several sections in this chapter and the previous one, establishing and maintaining a connection to a supportive, religious community was central to all of the participants’ experiences while facing a challenge to their conception of God. After experiencing the initiating event and recognizing the dissonance between their expectations of God and what was occurring in their lives, they expressed various senses of isolation from both Him, specific individuals, and their communities. Paramount in their movement towards a resolution of the conflict and successfully navigating the transition was a re-establishment of ties to their religious communities or forging connections with new groups of people, where they felt cared for as an individual and they felt their re-conceptualizations of God would be accepted. The relational lens to spirituality, which contends that its meaning-making processes are a corporate experience helps to explain why establishing connections to religious communities that accepted the
participants for their perceived, authentic selves was an important aspect to their transitions through the challenge.

**Relational nature of faith.** Often overlooked in the writings of Fowler (1981) is his contention that faith is fundamentally relational. This principle underlies all of his work and is implied in each of the structural, cognitive stages of faith development that he has identified. In holding to this conception of faith, Fowler sees it as a “covenant of meaning-making” in which relationships and the real and perceived power in them provide the structure in which meaning-making occurs. Thus, individuals commit to these relationships because they find value in them. As Fowler asserts, “we invest or devote ourselves because the other to which we commit has, for us, an intrinsic excellence or worth and because it promises to confer value on us” (p. 18). The structure of this covenant embodies the relational aspects of spirituality between the self and the other, but expands upon it to include the relationship between the self and the CVP, and the relationship between the self and the other to a shared center of values and power (SCVP).

The relational attributes of spirituality and faith illuminate the experiences of the participants in this study and why much of their meaning-making of the challenge centered on disruptions to the relationships that existed between them, God, and their religious communities. These disruptions played themselves out in multiple forms throughout the challenge, which included the initiating event that raised questions about God’s authority and His ability to exercise it, and the multiple forms of isolation the participants described between themselves and God, themselves and individuals, and
themselves and their religious communities. Figure 1 illustrates the disruption experienced in the participants’ various relationships as a result of the challenge they experienced to their conception of God.

The most prominent disruption in their relationships was the initiating event that created dissonance between participants’ assumptions of how God exercises His authority and what they saw occurring in their own lives when their expectations were not met. Inherent in the relationship between the individual and God was an expectation of where power resides and how it should be exercised for the benefit of both parties. As Fowler’s

Figure 1. Model of perceived forms of disruptions to the covenantal relationship between participants (Self), their religious community (Other), and God (SCVP) as described by participants. Forms of isolation to the left of the arc pertain to the participants’ actions in regards to the relationships; whereas those to the right of the arc pertain to participants’ perceptions of others’ actions in their relationships.
(1981) earlier statement alluded to, relationships are built upon the perceived value and benefit individuals see from them. When the participants recognized that God either did not possess the authority they believed He had or that He did not exercise it in the manner they expected, their relationship with God was disrupted, causing them to struggle with their conceptualization of who God was. And while it was not surprising that this disruption would play out in several ways within the relationship between self and God, such as the sense of abandonment or the desire to pull away as a result of their anger against Him, it also disrupted the relationships that existed between them and others in their religious communities with whom they perceived a shared relationship with God.

The disruption to the participants’ relationship with God appears to have disrupted their relationships with others as they reached out to individuals and their religious communities for personal strength and understanding, perhaps to compensate for their perceived loss of support from God. When that support was determined to be deficient due to a perceived lack of empathy and support, the students felt isolated from those relationships as well. Furthermore, it drove some of the participants to place distance between themselves and their religious communities by either withdrawing from activities or by making a complete break from them. Recognizing that the disruption of one relationship in the covenantal, meaning-making process can disrupt the other ones also helps to explain why Ben’s experience was unique among the group. Rather than having his conception of God challenged first, resulting in subsequent disruptions to his relationships with others, Ben was isolated from others intentionally to give him space for
personal reflection. The disruption of his relationship with family and friends by traveling to Israel and going through mandatory wilderness experiences may have been the trigger that caused a disruption in his relationship with God, which provided him the space to question the conception of God he had been taught from traditional Jewish perspectives.

Missing from the participants’ descriptions of their experiences is a recognition of any disruption in the relationship between others and God. While several participants disassociated themselves from individuals whom they identified as being hostile to the religious commitments they made as they progressed towards a resolution to their challenge, and several participants identified role models in their religious traditions who inspired them because of their relationship with God, none of them could identify disruptions to the relationships between others in their religious community and God. Even in the instances where the relationship was acknowledged, the students spoke about them in terms of how it impacted their own relationships with other individuals. The lack of acknowledgement of how the disruptions of their relationships may have impacted the relationship of others with God may be a result of their developmental stage of faith, in which they act as receivers of knowledge rather than creators of it. If this is the case, they may not have viewed themselves as possessing the ability to make such an impact due to such power and influence being perceived as a trait others possess. It is also possible that the participants’ inability to perceive the relationship between others and God in the context of their own struggles may have contributed to their perception of a lack of empathy and support from their religious communities. Several participants
acknowledged that with the benefit of hindsight they could see that there were individuals in their communities who tried to support them during their challenge, but they could not see it during those moments. Perhaps not seeing a disruption to the relationship between others and God is what led some of the participants to conclude that others in their community could not understand what they were experiencing.

**Search for mentoring communities.** Among the findings of this study was the apparent contrast between the participants’ descriptions of various forms of isolation, some of which were self-imposed, and their desire to identify allies who could support them. In addition, they also sought to find a place within their religious communities in which they felt cared for and their re-conceptualized view of God was accepted. As seen in the previous section, applying Fowler’s (1981) covenantal, relationship model of faith to their experiences provides a framework to understand these contrasting feelings and experiences by the participants. It also indicates the importance of finding a safe, non-judgmental environment in which their experiences and thoughts can be reflected upon and tested, and relationships can be re-forged without the risk of losing them. Such a place would be similar to what Parks (2000) refers to as a mentoring community. Parks describes such communities as “a context in which a new, more adequate imagination of life and work can be composed, anchored in a sense of *we*” (p. 134). Parks argues that such communities are essential for individuals in their early adult years, who are dependent upon a “network of belonging” that can confirm the value of their commitments and relationships.
While not explicitly identifying the need or desire for such a community as described by Parks (2000), the participants appear to have been seeking for something similar to it in their search for allies and supportive religious communities. In describing the allies they eventually found, the participants were looking for individuals who would both support and challenge them, which is similar to the roles a mentor might play. Specifically, Ben and Philip spoke about the benefit of receiving support from allies who participated with them in the re-evaluation of their understandings of God. In contrast, Sadid and Susan, spoke of the benefit of finding role models of their faith who both challenged and inspired them to live a life congruent with the new, individual and communal commitments they were forming. Finally, several participants spoke about the importance of finding individuals who provided both challenge and support to them by joining with them in a shared experience. Elizabeth’s interactions with her roommate and her boyfriend are an example of this dual role played by allies who shared the experience with her. The allies were able to draw upon their past experiences to show they understood what she was going through, but they also used them to hold her accountable for working through her problems rather than avoiding them or wishing them away.

In addition to these individual allies, a majority of the participants spoke about their desire to find supportive religious communities that cared for them as individuals and that provided a space where their re-conceptualized views of God were either encouraged or at least given room for acceptance. These two aspirations align with the two important aspects, alongside support, challenge, and inspiration, identified by Parks (2000) as essential to the mentoring process: recognition and a space for dialogue. In
developing mentoring relationships within a community, the importance of recognition from one who is viewed as capable of conveying value appears to align with the participants in this study who wanted to be cared about. Philip spoke about the joy he felt as a result of individuals in his new church recognizing his value as a member of their community. He saw this when they expressed concern about him missing a religious service and when they recognized his talents by asking him to join their worship team as a guitar player. The importance of a space for dialogue was exemplified by Ben, who acknowledged his need to find a place within Judaism in which his re-conceptualized views of God would have room to be discussed. Paramount in Ben’s resolution to the challenge to his conception of God was his discovery that his new views, which did not align with traditional rabbinic teachings, were not a betrayal of his identity within the Jewish community.

While all of the participants seemed to be seeking and eventually discovered aspects of Parks’ (2000) mentoring community, it is acknowledged that none of them can be said to have experienced their challenge within such an environment. Ben’s experience on his trip to Israel, with designated times for personal and group reflection came closest to the experience; but at least according to Ben, the adult guides on the trip did not encourage open dialogue. Instead, they favored quick fixes to disagreements between members of the community rather than true resolutions. In addition, the religious communities in which the participants found the allies, the care, and the space they were seeking did not meet Parks’ ideal of what a mentoring community should be striving to accomplish. Parks advocates for mentoring communities that help individuals
explore and test new commitments as they gain confidence to become a source of authority and an author of their faith. None of the participants appeared to accomplish this through the challenge to their conception of God; rather, they returned to the received conception of God from of their childhood and early adolescence, only modified, or they substituted one conception for another rather than authoring their own.

**Natural-Supernatural Dichotomy of Spirituality**

The experiences of this study’s participants viewed through the relational aspect of faith as described by Fowler (1981) illuminates the limitations of the natural-supernatural dichotomy that Speck (2005) identified in the higher education literature. As discussed in the review of the literature, higher education and student development researchers tend to approach spirituality with little consideration of how their worldviews concerning the supernatural influence both what they consider spirituality to mean and the language they use to discuss it. Dominated by researchers who hold a naturalistic worldview in which the supernatural does not co-exist with the natural world, much of the literature of the higher education field limits the definitions of spirituality to concerns of authorship and relationships that exist exclusively within the natural world. As Speck points out, this causes difficulties when discussing the role god/God has to play within spirituality. For naturalists, god can only be a conception of human imagination. (The lower case “g” is used here to indicate the restriction of a higher power to being only a conception; whereas a capital “G” is used to indicate a personal entity that possesses a name and a title, as in God.) If spirituality is restricted to viewing god as only a concept, then the individual holds the potential to become the primary author of defining their
relationships between the self, the other, and God. However, if God is viewed as a real, personal entity, then God also plays a role, and perhaps the most important role, in defining the relationships between the self, the other, and God.

The eight participants in this study can be identified as operating within the supernatural worldview in that they acknowledge a supernatural realm that co-exists with the natural one. Although they differ as to how and to what extent these two realms interact with each other, they all indicated that they viewed the supernatural as a reality. Likewise, each of the participants started from a worldview in which God exists as a personal, supernatural entity that interacts directly within the natural world and with whom they could have a relationship. As they moved through the challenge to their conception of God, their initial views of the interaction of the supernatural with the natural realms were either reinforced or they shifted to view the ties as being either weaker or stronger. This was seen in the differences among participants, some who viewed God as having more control, some as having less control, and some having to re-conceptualize how God exercised His control. Along these same lines, the participants, in re-conceptualizing how God exercise His control, had to re-work the nature of their relationship with God. Important to note here is that for five of the eight participants, God was viewed as playing a guiding role in the re-working of the relationship between them and Him. Having acknowledged this worldview of the participants, the question becomes whether or not a competing paradigm that dismisses the realities of these students can access their experiences and the meaning-making of them in order to accurately describe, categorize or evaluate their spirituality.
The three problems with using naturalistic definitions of spirituality for students who hold supernatural worldviews are misinterpreting the actions they take; neglecting the reality from which they operate, which sees a genuine relationship existing between the individual and God; and misunderstanding the terms they use to describe their experiences. The first two instances of misinterpreting the decisions and neglecting the reality of the relationship one has with God can be seen in the decision of several participants to decrease their activities in religious rituals, practices, and other behaviors. As noted in the previous section that examined the participants’ experiences through the behavioral lens of spirituality, Elizabeth and Leah both went through periods of time in which the frequency of their religious behaviors decreased. Past interpretations would have viewed this as an indication of secularization, a decrease in religious identification, or an increase in personal spirituality, separate from religion, due to the questions they were exploring in their inner thoughts. All three of these assumptions presume that religious behaviors are tied exclusively to the relationship individuals have with their religious communities; and therefore, a decrease in them is an indication of a weakening of that bond.

When one comes to Elizabeth and Leah’s experiences without such assumptions, they discover a very different reason that the naturalistic explanations miss. Elizabeth’s and Leah’s decrease in religious behaviors were primarily the result of the disruption of their relationship with God. They felt abandoned by God. They were angry at God. They wanted to pull away from God. Since their religious behaviors were a means to fostering their relationship with God by interacting with Him and reminding them of
Him, they decreased their participation in such activities. Nevertheless, both participants spoke about their continued identification with their religions throughout their challenges and their inability to give up all religious behaviors. The behaviors they continued to pursue, such as attendance at Sunday Masses or the Passover Seder, were ways in which they continued to keep their ties with their religious communities despite their anger with God. As both of these participants moved towards a resolution and their religious behaviors once again increased, they spoke of how their relationship with their religious communities either remained steady, as was the case with Elizabeth, or became stronger as occurred with Leah.

**Conflation of Spirituality, Religion, and Faith**

Misunderstanding the terms used by participants was the third problem identified when using a naturalistic perspective to describe, categorize, and evaluate the experiences of students with supernatural worldviews. This is particularly true when trying to describe and categorize specific actions, commitments, and orientations as falling under the concepts of spirituality, religion, and faith. Critics such as Nash (1999), Speck (2005), and Estanek (2006) are correct in pointing out that what is defined as spirituality, religion, and faith, and the distinctions made between them in the higher education literature is addressing something very different from the traditional meaning of these terms in other academic traditions and from a supernatural worldview. As was noted in the literature review, Estanek has argued that the dominant definitions of spirituality used in the higher education literature is related to an individual’s self-authorship and is a distinct concern separate, and sometimes in contrast, with religion. This definition is
problematic and foreign for individuals with supernatural worldviews, especially those informed by conventional monotheistic religions.

As one who possesses a supernatural worldview informed by traditional Christian and Jewish teachings, I identify with the incongruence between natural and supernatural understandings of spirituality. I understand spirituality as the process of surrendering one’s will in a relationship with God in order to allow Him to become the author of one’s life. Furthermore, religion and faith are both intertwined in an inseparable way with spirituality as the former facilitates the surrender of the self and the latter is the confidence I have that God is a better author of my commitments and relationships. With these personal definitions in mind, those predominantly used in the higher education literature often appear to be fractured and limited at their best, and at times completely foreign and contrary to my conceptions and experiences.

In regards to the participants in this study, while they were not asked directly to define any of these terms, they often spoke about their experiences using them. Seven of the eight participants made no distinction between the terms and often used them interchangeably when describing their experiences. Nesreen provides an example of this while speaking about the increase of her spiritual activities during her college years:

I would say that I’m a lot more *spiritually* connected at the end of the college than I was in the beginning…I feel like, because Islam is very regimented with the five prayers…and those behaviors, umm, is kind of how some people judge how *religious* you are. Umm, I feel more when I do those behaviors. Now I know I’m being *ambiguous*, but what I mean by ‘feel more’ is like, there’s meaning to my
prayer. Like, I personally feel, I’m not doing mechanically-like…Why do I, like, why do I have to pray it, because I feel better. ‘Well, why do you feel better?’

Because, as a Muslim, I feel a peace of mind when I have done my duty to my God. And it gives you just that peace of mind when I go out through my day…There will be hard struggles, there will be fun struggles, whatever, but eventually I’m at a goal: heaven. So, when you mean by more meaning, it’s just my personal, like, happiness; my personal connection with my God.

As can be seen in Nesreen’s statement, prayer is used as an example of a behavior expected of Muslims to fulfill, but it also used as an example of her spirituality and as a means to judging the degree of one’s religiousness. Most striking is the lack of any distinction and the apparent interchangeability between what is meant by spirituality and by religious. Both terms appear to relate to the beneficial connection she and others are able to form with God by fulfilling particular obligations as faithful Muslims. Even Ben, who was the exception in the group by explicitly stating that being religious and being spiritual were distinct concepts for him—he considered himself religious, but not spiritual—was unable to articulate clearly what separated the two concepts.

These findings align with similar findings from two other studies (Craft & Rockenbach, 2011; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005) that found a conflation of spirituality, religion, and faith among Christian college students when explicitly trying to define them and when talking about their experiences. Specifically, Craft and Rockenback found in their study of students at a Lutheran college that identified as “Protestant Christian” that the individuals not only conflated the terms and used them
interchangeably, but they used each of them as descriptors to the beliefs they held. Furthermore, the students’ personal definitions had little connection with the formal definitions of the terms as used by traditional Protestant or Biblical sources. The findings of the present study suggest that such results might not be limited to Protestant Christians, but may be representative of Abrahamic, monotheistic traditions. More important to the immediate discussion, they suggest that more inclusive definitions of the concepts may be necessary in the higher education literature in order to capture diverse populations of students representing not only multiple religious traditions, but also the differences between those with natural and those with supernatural worldviews.

**Strengths and Limitations**

The employment of transcendental phenomenology to access the meaning-making processes of traditional age college students of monotheistic faiths proved to be a beneficial approach in overcoming the natural-supernatural dichotomy that limits many of the studies in higher education research. Rather than approaching students’ experiences as they relate to their spirituality and religion through the limits of a defined, conceptual prism, the use of transcendental phenomenology allowed them to speak about their experiences and how they made meaning of them using their own language and constructions. Although it is debatable to what degree a researcher can set aside his own constructions and biases, transcendental phenomenology’s insistence upon working towards *epoche*—the suspension of prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated—at the very least raises awareness of those biases. Accounting for my pre-conceptions as the researcher and instrument of interpretation, both as they have been
informed by my own experiences and my reading of the literature, allowed a free space for the participants in this study to set the definitions and parameters of their experiences.

One of the results of creating a free space for the participants to share their experiences was the surprising discovery regarding the nature of the initiating events that triggered the participants’ challenges to their conception of God. Grounded primarily on my reading of the literature and identified reasons for why many college students experience challenges to their spirituality and religious beliefs, my expectation was that most of the participants would discuss encounters with new perspectives in either the classroom or through their interactions with students of other religious and philosophical traditions, which raised questions about their own conceptions and beliefs about God. Furthermore, I expected that these challenges would lead to the participants feeling overwhelmed, depressed, stressed, and anxious; to poor physical health; and to low self-esteem, all of which have been found to be associated with religious-spiritual struggles among college students (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Bryant & Astin, 2008). What I discovered among the participants was quite the opposite. Initiating events had very little to do with encountering new perspectives from those around them. Instead, they were new experiences for the students, such as the death of a friend, a contracted illness, or a significant academic failure for the first time in one’s life, which led them to question, ‘where was God?’ based on their expectations. Many of these new experiences contributed to the participants feeling depressed or anxious, making poor health decisions, and experiencing low self-esteem; but none of the participants attributed these negative consequences to the challenge of their conception of God. For most
participants, the negative feelings and behaviors and the challenge to their conception of
God ran parallel to each other and were both caused by the initiating event. A few of the
participants also spoke of how their depression fueled their questions about God.

A second strength of this study is its acceptance of the possibility of a
supernatural realm in which God is not limited to a conception held by the participants,
but rather, is viewed as a real being with whom a relationship is forged and negotiated.
Accepting this possibility was important for two reasons. First, it acknowledges the
limitations identified by Speck (2005) in much of the higher education literature, which
restricts the definitions of spirituality to meaning-making processes concerned only with
the self and its relationship to other individuals and nature, while neglecting the
possibility of other types of religious-spiritual experiences. Second, it allowed the
participants, who all believe in a supernatural reality, and most who contend that they
have a real, personal relationship with God, to define their experiences. Rather than
viewing the participants as merely imagining a relationship with God due to religious
teachings they had received from other authorities, the relationships with God that the
participants described were accepted as being as real as they conceived it. When
Elizabeth spoke of God as being a friend or when Susan described God as a father-figure
to her, these relationships were accepted as truly existing. In allowing for the existence
of these relationships, the participants were allowed to define the nature of their religious-
spiritual experiences and how they made meaning of them; and thus they retained
authorship of their experiences rather than having them filtered through a conception of
spirituality incapable of capturing their phenomenological essence.
Despite these strengths, there remain limitations to the study. As acknowledged in the methodology section, the nature of phenomenology, despite its claims to accessing the shared, common essence of an experience, is that the results cannot be generalized to all students. As such, it cannot be assumed that the common experience among the eight participants of this study will be found among all traditional age college students of conventional monotheistic faiths that have their conception of God challenged; and no such, universal claims are made here. Instead, the findings of this study are limited to informing the reader on what might be occurring among some students that are experiencing such a challenge and to adding to the overall discussion of what is spirituality and how is it experienced among college students.

Another limitation of this study that must be accounted for by the reader is the potentially unique perspectives of the participants. The participants were purposefully selected from among religious organizations that specifically serve college students of their faith or from churches in the neighborhood of the university. As participants were identified by official leaders in these organizations or churches as good candidates for the study, they are individuals who are highly involved in their religious communities and who strongly identify with their religious communities and their shared faith and traditions. These unique positions in their religious communities may contribute to how they made meaning of their experiences, especially the importance of finding allies to help them work through the challenge and finding a place where their re-conceptualized images of God were accepted. Thus, the experiences and meaning-making processes of students of similar monotheistic faiths, but who are not as involved or who do not
identify as strongly with their communities may be different. Even further removed from the experiences of the participants in this study are those individuals who no longer associate with any religious community, who no longer believe in the existence of God, or who no longer identify with any form of religion due to their experiences of having their conception of God challenged.

Due to these limitations, it is important to recognize that the findings of this study do not sit in opposition to much of the higher education literature on spirituality and religion. Despite the criticism of the literature made in this study in regards to its bias in favor of a naturalistic form of spirituality, its division of spirituality and religion, and its divorce from more traditional understandings of the what constitutes a spiritual experience, the findings presented here only argue for the need to adopt broader definitions of these concepts in order to account for all religious-spiritual experiences. The distinction between spirituality and religion in the minds of many individuals was an important recognition made in the literature over two decades ago that challenged the conventional thinking that students were becoming more secularized during their college years. The adoption of a naturalistic form of spirituality that focuses primarily on the meaning-making processes of students as it relates to their self-identity and their relationships with the other was also an important step in making the topic accessible in the higher education and student development communities, where such topics had been considered off limits or restricted to a concern for only religiously-affiliated institutions. In recognizing the value of these contributions to the literature, the findings of this study are limited to suggesting that we are now at the point where we need to expand our
definitions to include the possible experiences of all students while retaining their voices and their understandings of their experiences.

**Implications for Practice**

The primary implication of this study for all individuals engaged in the higher education enterprise is the need for increased awareness of the diversity of perspectives that constitute the religious-spiritual experiences of students and the need to account not only for them, but also our own. As noted in the previous section regarding the strengths of this study, an unexpected finding was that the initiating event that challenged the participants’ conception of God was not a direct challenge to their religious beliefs. Instead, it was when the participants tried to make meaning of the initiating events that they recognized a dissonance between their experiences and their expectations. To understand their experiences and how they were making meaning of them, it was necessary to acknowledge the interpretive lenses they were employing. For the participants, the entire transition they went through was viewed through an interpretive lens that assumed God was a real, supernatural entity; and for many of the participants, that lens also assumed they had a genuine relationship with God. If an advisor, mentor, or professor failed to acknowledge these lenses, or even worse, discounted them, they would likely fall short of understanding the students’ experiences. As was seen with many of the participants in this study, they would view such a failure as an inability to empathize or to support them during such challenges and it would contribute to their overall sense of isolation. The importance of the interpretive lenses of spirituality, religion, and faith, which have been argued by some as the most important lenses an
individual can hold (Fowler, 1981; Nash, 1999), suggests that not only are they in play for direct, religious-spiritual experiences, but they may be the lens, or one of several lenses, through which all experiences, including learning and development in and outside of the classroom occur. If this is the case, it is important for all individuals to not only acknowledge these lenses, but also account for their own, as they may hinder their acknowledgement and respect for others.

Recognizing the need to account for multiple, interpretive lenses informed by religious and spiritual beliefs among the student body, the faculty, and an institution’s administration, there is a need for more discussions on campuses regarding the formation of mentoring environments as described by Parks (2000), in which students’ exploration and testing of meaning-making and knowledge creation is given space through encouragement and support. Other calls have been made by individuals such as Astin (2004), and suggestions have been made by Chickering, Dalton, and Stramm (2006) on how to begin the process of creating an institution supportive of the spiritual lives of students. It is highly recommended that individuals with an interest in the religion and spirituality of their students familiarize themselves with the works of Parks and Chickering et al. It is acknowledged that this is not an easy process for many college communities as the dominant culture on many campuses remains indifferent to students’ religious-spiritual lives, and in some instances outright hostile. Thus, as individuals who recognize the importance of religion and spirituality to students advocate for a place within the academy for such concerns, they should consider starting with the creation of discursive spaces as advocated by Nash and Murray (2010). These spaces are safe areas
in which interfaith dialogue can occur free from judgment between competing religious narratives and from outside, anti-religious perspectives.

The benefit of open and free dialogue is twofold in that students and other individuals can find a safe place to discuss their experiences and work through meaning-making processes in which they find empathy and support. First, as can be seen with the participants in this study, finding such individuals, even if they did not have a shared religious perspective was an important aspect of working through their challenge. While not surprising, it is an indictment on the higher education system that only two of the participants in this study discussed the support they found from individuals associated with their university. And even in those two cases, Nesreen only looked to academic advisors because the initiating event that led to her challenge was directly related to an academic failure; while Elizabeth only began working with a university counselor after she was encouraged by a friend, whom she felt could empathize with her experiences. In contrast, Shannon spoke of her decision to not share her spiritual views as they related to her depression with a counselor due to the look she received when she mentioned her belief in demonic spirits. The second benefit of these spaces is that by engaging in dialogue with other individuals, administrators and faculty members, as well as other students, can be made aware of the different religious and spiritual lenses being used by others to make meaning of their experiences that may lead them to very different conclusions. This will also allow individuals to see the biases their own religious-spiritual perspectives hold and the limits of them.
Seeing the significance the religious community played in the experiences of the participants in this study, practitioners should also consider the relationships their universities and colleges have with religious organizations, centers, and places of worship. Not only would the establishment of working relationships be helpful in knowing to whom student affairs and faculty members can refer a student if support from within their religious tradition is sought after; but these individuals can serve as potential allies in developing discursive spaces for interfaith dialogue and mentoring environments for the students. This recommendation for better partnerships between universities and religious organizations is not a new idea, nor is any of the other recommendations to higher education practitioners made here; but the findings of this study reinforce those earlier calls of the need for a more supportive environment in which students’ religion, spirituality, and faith, in whatever distinct, integrated, or conflated forms they take, can be discussed and accounted for as part of their education and development within a campus community.

**Recommendations for Further Inquiry**

This study looked at the experiences and meaning-making processes of a group of traditional age college students of a specific, religious worldview: monotheism as expressed in the Abrahamic traditions. Despite the variety of religious beliefs and constructions that fall under this large umbrella and the diversity represented among the participants of this study, a belief in the existence of God as a distinct, supernatural being, separate from His creation, and holding a position of authority was common among all of them. Gauging this perspective proved beneficial in exploring the importance of the
relationship the participants have with God in their religious-spiritual experiences and demonstrated the need for broader, more inclusive language when discussing spirituality in the higher education literature. Transcendental phenomenological studies of students from other religious and spiritual traditions or with different commitments to conventional monotheistic beliefs and communities would be similarly beneficial in informing a more inclusive definition of spirituality. The importance of employing transcendental phenomenology is its ability to access the individuals’ experiences using their own language and to accept what they feel is most important about their experiences, rather than imposing pre-defined conceptions upon them. As already stated several times throughout this study, such work is necessary since the construction of definitions is an essential element to the research project on spirituality due to its break with traditional understandings of the topic in other academic disciplines (Estanek, 2006).

A second line for inquiry, and the one of most interest to me, is a further development of the relationship triad of faith as conceptualized by Fowler (1981) between the self, the other, and shared center of value and power (SCVP), where the SCVP is God as understood in monotheistic faiths. Wanting to break from the single concern of the individual and his or her position in relationship to the other and to God, it would prove beneficial to have a more complete view of those relationships by accessing the experiences and meaning-making processes of identified others using a transcendental phenomenological approach. For example, drawing from the current study, I would interview Elizabeth’s identified allies, such as her mother, her roommate, and her ex-boyfriend, as well as her counselor and the religious leaders at the Newman Center on
campus to determine how they made meaning of her conception of God being challenged. Accessing their understanding of their relationship with Elizabeth, their relationship with God, and their perceptions of the relationship between Elizabeth and God during her transition could provide important insights into the positive and negative outcomes of successful and failed mentoring environments and discursive spaces.

**Conclusion**

As the importance of spirituality, religion, and faith continues to be recognized by more individuals within the academy due to students demanding attention to this aspect of their lives and to educators who have realized that an important aspect of knowledge creation has been neglected, there has been a much needed emphasis in the higher education literature over the past fifteen years on this once neglected topic. This being acknowledged, there is also a need to recognize that we must move with caution. In our pursuit to grasp these concepts from academic, practical, and our own personal perspectives, we need to resist the urge to categorize, compartmentalize, and establish simple and clear definitions for these complex concepts. The risk of searching for common definitions for these concepts from theoretical and personal positions, rather than from studies grounded in the personal experiences, language, and meaning-making processes of the students and other individuals we strive to benefit, is that we end up marginalizing some of the very people we seek to include in the educational dialogues that occur on college campuses. Already marginalized due to the historic, post-WWI trend in secular, American higher education to neglect or outright reject perspectives informed from religious beliefs, spiritual experiences, or acceptance of the supernatural,
those who hold such positions are likely to feel further isolated from the dominant culture of the academy if they begin to see the concepts of spirituality and religion discussed and interpreted in a manner that is foreign to their own understandings and experiences.

By examining how eight traditional-age college students from conventional monotheistic faiths made meaning of a period of time during which their conception of God was challenged, this study was able to access voices that do not fit neatly within the definitions most commonly used in the higher education literature. Definitions that do not account for relationships with God as traditionally understood in their religious traditions and conceptualizations that view religious and spiritual experiences as being distinct from each other. As seen in the reporting of this study’s findings and their discussion, the existence of a relationship with God was essential to understanding the participants’ experiences. Not only did the disruption of the relationship trigger the challenge to the participants’ conception of God, but movement towards resolution did not occur until that relationship began to be re-negotiated based upon re-conceptualized views of the nature of God, the bounds of His authority, and how He chooses to exercise it. Likewise, these students’ experiences did not fit neatly into categories which can be classified as being solely religious and those which can be classified as being exclusively spiritual. These two terms were used interchangeably by most of the participants and such a division of their experiences into distinct categories could only have been accomplished by imposing language and definitions that were foreign to their meaning-making processes.
It is my hope that these findings will illuminate the necessity of using caution in how practitioners and researchers define spirituality and religion, and also faith, by presenting the voices and experiences of students who utilize a worldview in the meaning-making process of their experiences, which might be foreign to others. The positive and negative impact practitioners can potentially have on students who are struggling with religious and spiritual matters is likely to depend upon their ability to demonstrate empathy and respect for that worldview regardless of whether or not they share it. Similarly, researchers who want to better understand the impact spirituality and religion have on students’ learning, development, and overall college experiences, and how supportive educational environments can be implemented and fostered, need to recognize that comprehensive evaluation and effective advocacy will only occur if all religious-spiritual worldviews and experiences are accounted for.

As a final, personal reflection upon the process of conducting the interviews, writing up the findings, and placing them within the literature of the field for this study, it has been challenging and rewarding. As one who shares the worldview of the eight participants, but also as one who has felt his worldview and his religious-spiritual experiences marginalized over the past 20 years by various individuals in higher education, the literature of the field, and the dominant culture found at secular institutions—it is only with the benefit of hindsight and maturity that I have started to distinguish instances of intentional and unintentional marginalization, and instances where the marginalization was imagined due to a defensive position on my part that led to unfair assumptions—it has been a challenge to find a place for my personal definitions
and conceptions to exist within the larger dialogues occurring on campuses about spirituality. The process of listening to the voices of students; allowing them to determine the language and definitions used to describe their experiences; seeing the shared, phenomenological essence of their meaning-making processes; and placing those findings within the literature of the field has benefitted me in two ways. First, it has made me more sensitive to the worldviews being utilized by others to make meaning of their religious and spiritual experiences, even those that are not aligned or that conflict with my own. Second, it has helped me to better position my own religious-spiritual experiences within the larger dialogue occurring on campuses and in the literature regarding these topics. My hope is that those who read this study and its findings are challenged and rewarded in a similar fashion.
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT AND INSTRUCTIONS
Appendix A

Recruitment Script and Instructions

I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration & Student Personnel Program at Kent State University. I am currently working on my dissertation, which is looking at how traditional-age college students of monotheistic faiths make meaning of experiences that have challenged their conception of God/HaShem/Allah. As a campus leader of a Christian, Jewish, or Islamic organization, I am writing to ask for your assistance in recruiting participants for my study.

Specifically, I am seeking a diverse group of traditional-age students (i.e. 18-23 years old) at [university’s name] from various monotheistic traditions who have experienced a challenge to their conception or understanding of the ultimate divine being of their religion/faith, and who are open to discussing what they experienced, or are currently experiencing, as a result of the challenge. In pursuing such participants, it would be helpful if you could recommend such students with whom you are familiar that I could recruit for the study. As I am seeking a diverse sample of participants from various religious, ethnic, and gender backgrounds, it would be helpful if you could provide several recommendations so that I can purposefully select a group that provides such diverse representation.

In recommending potential participants, feel free to ask the students if they are okay with you providing their names and contact information. However, when approaching students, at no time should any expectations be placed on them to participate in the study if they are invited. It is important that student participation remains voluntary and they do not feel any pressure to join the study. Regardless of whether or not you ask a student before recommending them for the study, I will inform them in my initial invite that they were recommended by you due to your judgment of fit for the study and without any expectation on your part that they participate. If a student you recommend is selected for the study, their participation will remain voluntary, but may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject’s consent if he or she is determined to have not experienced a sufficient challenge to their understanding of God or is determined to be unable to sufficiently describe his or her experience in relation to such a challenge.

To better understand the nature of the study when recommending potential participants, I am providing the following purpose statement:

The purpose of this phenomenological study on how traditional-age colleges students of monotheistic faiths experience a challenge to their conception of God (more broadly defined as their center of value and power) is to contribute to the dialogue in the higher
education literature regarding the nature of spirituality, which frequently neglects elements of the "ultimate" as defined in organized, religious traditions.

Although spirituality has become a topic of significant interest for both researchers and administrators in higher education, there is little consensus as to what it is or what language should be used to discuss it. The lack of a uniform definition of spirituality has been attributed to its personal, individualized nature, competing metaphysical assumptions, and higher education's break with traditional definitions of spiritual experiences. However, despite the lack of a consensus on the definition of spirituality, two predominant assumptions exist in the literature, which the researcher finds problematic: 1) spirituality and religion are viewed as two distinct entities, often times with spirituality possessing positive traits and religion holding negative traits; and 2) there is little accounting of the conception of the "ultimate" or "God" in the definition, especially when "God" is a personal, transcendent entity. This study seeks to address these two perceived deficiencies by describing how traditional-age college students who identify with monotheistic faiths make meaning of a challenge to their conception of God. The descriptions of the students' experiences and meaning-making process will add to the depth and comprehensiveness of the definition and language used in the literature on spirituality in higher education.

If you have any questions or concerns about the purpose of the study or what types of students would make good participants, please feel free to contact me at sscherge@kent.edu or 330.338.0407. Thank you for your assistance and I look forward to hearing from you.
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORMS
Appendix B

Consent Forms

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Challenges to the Understanding of God among Traditional-Age College Students of Monotheistic Faiths: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Steven P. Scherger

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to describe how traditional-age college students (i.e. 18-23 years of age) of monotheistic faiths make meaning of a challenge to their understanding of God. The descriptions obtained through interviews with eight selected college students will contribute to the understanding of the term “spirituality” among administrators and researchers in higher education by addressing the role of religion and the concept of a transcendent entity that serves as one’s center of value and power (i.e. God).

Procedures
Participants will be asked to partake in an interview session or sessions (depending on the amount of time a participant feels he/she needs to sufficiently answer the researcher’s questions) in which they will describe their personal history, their conception of God/HaShem/Allah, and their experience(s) related to when they felt their conception was challenged. The interviews will be conducted on the Kent State University campus in a private location selected by the participant and at a time agreed upon by the participant and the researcher. All interview sessions will be audio recorded.

Participants may be asked to partake in a second round of interviews conducted in the same manner as the first, but with the purpose of allowing them to clarify statements from the first interview that the researcher finds unclear or confusing.

Finally, all participants will be asked to review the researcher’s depiction of their experience(s) to determine the accuracy of the summarized description.
The subject’s participation in the study may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject’s consent if the participant is determined to have not experienced a sufficient challenge to their understanding of God or is determined to be unable to sufficiently describe their experience during such a challenge.

**Audio Recording**
All interview sessions will be audio recorded and the tapes will remain in the secure possession of the researcher during the study. Audio tapes will be used to create transcriptions of the interview sessions, which will be used for analysis related to the subject of this study. A transcriber will be given access to the audio tapes for the purpose of transcription, but participants will not be identified to the transcriber in order to protect their confidentiality. At the end of the study, the audio tapes will be erased.

**Benefits**
The potential benefits of participating in this study may include discovery, clarification, and/or increased awareness of your spiritual/religious experiences, your spiritual/religious beliefs, and how these experiences and beliefs relate to how you perceive God/HaShem/Allah, yourself, others around you, and the connections between each of these entities.

**Risks and Discomforts**
Potential risks and discomforts of participating in this study are similar to the benefits. Discovery, clarification, and increased awareness of one’s self and beliefs can cause periods of personal uncertainty, discomfort, and stress as you try to understand the implications of these personal revelations. A referral list of religious leaders and counseling services at Kent State University will be provided in case you feel a need to further discuss personal issues raised during the interview session(s). In addition, if at any time during the interview session you feel the topic of discussion or the questions being asked are upsetting or make you feel uncomfortable, you may end the discussion on that topic, skip the question, or pause or end the interview session.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**
To ensure participant confidentiality, audio tapes will remain in the secure possession of the researcher during the study. A transcriber not associated with the Kent State University community will be give access to the audio tapes for the purpose of transcription, but participants will not be identified to the transcriber. At the end of the study, the audio tapes will be erased and the transcriptions will remain in the secure possession of the researcher.

Your study-related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only the researcher will have access to the data. Pseudonyms for person and location names will be used in any
publication or presentation of research results in order to prevent participants from being identified.

Your research information may, in certain circumstances, be disclosed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which oversees research at Kent State University, or to certain federal agencies. Confidentiality may not be maintained if you indicate that you may do harm to yourself or others.

**Voluntary Participation**
Taking part in this research study is entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will be informed of any new, relevant information that may affect your health, welfare, or willingness to continue your study participation.

**Contact Information**
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Steven P. Scherger at 330.338.0407 or Dr. Susan Iverson at 330.672.0653. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330.672.2704.

**Consent Statement and Signature**
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

______________________________  _______________________
Participant Signature                 Date
AUDIOTAPE CONSENT FORM

Challenges to the Understanding of God among Traditional-Age College Students of Monotheistic Faiths: A Phenomenological Study
Steven P. Scherger

I agree to participate in an audio-taped interview about my personal history, my conception of God/HaShem/Allah, and my experience(s) related to when I felt this conception was challenged, as part of this project and for the purposes of data analysis. I agree that Steven Scherger may audio-tape this interview. The date, time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                    Date

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the recording of the interview before it is used. I have decided that I:

_____ want to listen to the recording  _____ do not want to listen to the recording

Sign now below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to them.

Steven Scherger  may / may not  (circle one) use the audio-tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

_____ this research project  _____ publication  _____ presentation at professional meetings

________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                    Date

Address:
Appendix C

Referral List

Referral List to Religious, Cultural, and Counseling Services
Kent State University

Counseling and Human Development Center
325 White Hall
330-672-2208
http://chdc.educ.kent.edu/index.htm

Hillel at Kent State
Cohn Jewish Student Center
613 E Summit Street
330-678-0397
http://www.kenthillel.org

Islamic Society of Akron and Kent
152 East Steels Corner Road, Cuyahoga Falls
330-922-9991
http://www.isak.org

Latter Day Saints Student Association
2776 Hartville Road (affiliated congregation in Rootstown)
330-672-1127
http://ksuldsa.weebly.com/

Muslim Student Association
Student Center 223
330-221-9200
http://dept.kent.edu/stuorg/msa/

United Christian Ministries
1453 East Main Street (attached to United Methodist Church of Kent)
330-373-5687
http://www.myucm.org
Links to many Protestant denominations in Kent area
University Parish Newman Center
1424 Horning Road (across from KSU Music and Speech Building)
330-678-0240
http://www.kentnewmancenterparish.org/

Other Christian Student Associations and Organizations can be found at the Undergraduate Student Government’s Student Organization List at http://www.usg.kent.edu/
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

- Can you identify an event, a person, or an experience that brought about the challenge to your understanding of God?
- What incidents stand out to you that were connected with the challenge to your understanding of God?
- What people stand out to you that were connected with the challenge to your understanding of God?
- How did facing a challenge to your understanding of God affect you? What changes to your behaviors or perceptions do you associate with the experience?
- How did the challenge affect significant others in our life?
- What feelings were generated by having your understanding of God challenged?
- What thoughts stood out to you?
- What bodily changes were you aware of when you were experiencing the challenge?
- What states of mind were you aware of when you were experiencing the challenge?
- Have you shared all that is significant with reference to the question?
APPENDIX E

SAMPLE TEXTUAL DESCRIPTION
Appendix E

Sample Textual Description

Ben’s Textual Description

Ben admits to holding the traditional view of God taught by Conservative Judaism during his childhood and early adolescence.

So, back then when I was told this is what God is, that God is almighty, that God is the ruler of the universe, God is the king—there is so many different terms—I believed all of that. There was, like, white beard dude in the sky who knows everything and controls everything, and who knows how things are going to go, and everything like that, and I believed that…I sort of had that like person perception of God. That like, okay, there is a being and he’s writing in a book: that May 27th, person X is like going to die.

As Ben matured throughout his teenage years, he began to question many of the precepts he had been taught as a child. Not identifying as a rebel or a “bad kid,” he still found himself questioning many of the assumptions people made as to what was right and wrong. These challenges against the status quo played out in various spheres of his self-perception, such as committing his vocational ambitions to progressive activism and realizing his sexual orientation. However, his tendency to challenge the status quo did not play out the same way in regards to his Jewish beliefs and practices. This occurred for two reasons. First, he did not reflect on many of the beliefs taught by Judaism and represented through Jewish traditions and values.
Just about every single Jewish prayer starts with ‘Baruch atah Adonai Elohaynu Melech HaOlam’, and that means, ‘Blessed are You, Lord Our God, Ruler of the Universe’, and...I never think of it, I just say it. Even though I was saying these things and I might bless the challah on Friday night, I was never thinking about the fact that I was like saying that God was the ruler of the universe in that statement.

Similarly, Ben rarely reflected on the charity work in which he often participated as a representation of Judaism’s teachings or his own personal beliefs about the relationship between God, self, and others.

I do believe that the concept of God as being something bigger than ourselves is within us and within our interactions, but I don’t actively think about it when I have an interaction or when I do something. When I’m volunteering it’s not because I know there is some godly force that’s making that good thing happen. I don’t think about that. Um, but, when I have a reflective moment, that’s something that I do think about. It’s never per instance.

The second reason for Ben not challenging the status quo in regards to his Jewish beliefs was that he found many of its teachings and practices to be beneficial and to align with many of his personal values. Returning to prayer within Judaism, despite his lack of reflection on what is being recited, he greatly values how they are a means for him to express his Jewish identity.

In Judaism there is a prayer for everything, everything from like what you’re eating, to seeing a rainbow...I like that, the idea that you’d think about it, the
idea that you are Jewish in just about every situation. Um, whether or not you do it is a different story; but I like the idea that it exists.

Ben’s relative lack of reflection on his religious beliefs and his conception of God came to the forefront during a trip to Israel, via the Nesiya Institute, the summer before his senior year of high school. The trip helped to facilitate these reflections in a couple of ways. Most direct, the participants were encouraged multiple times throughout the trip to meditate individually and to discuss as a group what it meant to be Jewish and what it meant to be in Israel as a Jew. In addition to encouraging such meditations, the trip provided a set-apart space and time for the reflection to occur.

My particular trip started out with a three day hike in the Negev, the desert in the main part of Israel, in the south. And it’s like one minute you’re leaving New York and you are plugged into everything and the next minute you are literally walking through the desert. Um, and, we had all sorts of points in that trip where like things were silent and it was just you and your surroundings, and you could just like see for miles.

During these set-apart times for meditation, some of which would be mandated silence for a couple of hours, Ben’s thoughts would turn to contrasting different ideas about God. Most prominent among his reflections, and which were in conflict with his early adolescence view of God as being in complete control of the universe, was the paradoxical concepts of God being the creative force, but everything existing naturally through evolution and history.
I remember thinking about God then, the idea that, um, I always go back to the creation story when it comes to God, that something created what I was looking at and what I was feeling...that was beautiful to me....but for me it wasn’t so much that I, I started to realize then that it wasn’t like God created the earth, it was that the earth had gotten to this point over time and that I’m feeling this because I know there is history here...and I thought about what, what was bigger than me that made all this happen, but didn’t make all this happen. That created this, but that it evolved here.

Ben was aided in his exploration of the nature of God by several other participants on the trip during times in which group discussions were encouraged.

There were like three American girls who became like my very good friends. Um, Becky, Zoe, and Sarah...we had so many like late night, deep conversations, about, um, everything from spirituality, to God, to, everything like that, and I know those three people helped me shape my inner dialogue when I was in Israel.

Two events occurred while Ben was in Israel that reinforced the dissonance he was experiencing to his earlier conception of God as being in control of every aspect of the universe and his new thoughts of God as a passive, creating agent of the universe. The first incident was a conflict that he had with another student on the trip regarding the use of electricity on Shabbat. Not even conceiving the possibility of conflict, Ben turned on the lights in a room that he was sharing with an orthodox
student who believed it was wrong to use electricity on the Shabbat. This caused the individual to become angry and the two of them ended up in a physical altercation.

We actually had a physical fight, which was such a weird concept for me.

That it’s Shabbat and we are fighting over the idea of how we’re supposed to celebrate Shabbat…It was a trip very based in community. Um, we were part of a group called a kehila, which means ‘community’ in Hebrew, um, and there was a lot of community-building activity, and community decision, and community aspects to the trip, but I was still able to have conflict with my community.”

Drawing connections between this event and his thoughts on the nature of God, Ben felt, “It was so strange for me because if there’s a God, and God is deciding these things, why would that sort of thing be allowed to happen? And that was something I struggled with.”

The other incident that tied into Ben’s evolving thoughts about God during his time in Israel was the news he received that his grandmother was hospitalized and likely to die. Although his grandmother would eventually pass after his return from Israel, Ben went through the mourning process while separated from his family and home community. As Ben worked through his feelings about the passing of his grandmother and what death actually meant, his new, emerging conception of God began to take additional form.

I did a lot of thinking then, um, naturally, about, like, what, like how precious our lives are, um, which I think is a very normal thing to think about when
somebody dies. I think that that’s where that concept of me really liking the idea of us all being created in God’s image, um, like started. The idea that we were all this, like, holy being

I was never really angry at God…I knew that death was a part of life…anger towards a higher being that, it just didn’t make sense to me. So, in those situations, I think that if I had continued with that [earlier] perception of God at an older age I would have gotten angry at God. But having realized that God isn’t this controlling, all-knowing power, I never really felt that. Like it changed the way about how I thought about death. Um, which is such a big part of life, and it sucks, but it is. I think that something about the fact that there’s no pre-decision, that things happen as they happen as nature takes it course, um, was the last time that I really, like, changed my perception of God…I don’t think that there’d be any being that would decide, okay, Ben’s going to be in Israel, and he’s going to be at the bottom of Masada, and that’s when he’s going to get a phone call that his grandmother is going to die. Like that just, I think that just happens. That’s not a decision that’s been made. So, I think that because I couldn’t perceive anyone deciding that that was when Ben is going to sit in Israel and think about his grandmother.

In addition to reflecting upon the nature of God, Ben spent a considerable amount of time while in Israel thinking about the connection he felt to the Jewish community both in the past and the present.
And there was something about being there. The place where the temple was destroyed. And you’re having these like introspective thoughts that really connects you to your people. Um, like, it just, it felt like, we all knew each other. Even though I’d never met any of the thousands of people who were there in front of me, and there were so many people there in the middle of the night. Um, but it just like, we all, it felt like everyone knew that they were connected through like their spiritual being. Um, like reliving history.

By exploring these connections and learning the different ways in which Jews expressed their identity as a people with a shared history and a shared religion, Ben discovered new ways in which he could connect with his Jewish identity.

I remember feeling very connected then. Being in that ancient city and studying something that I know people were studying thousands of years ago. Um, and being able to connect to Judaism through, like, a different way. I’d never really looked at kabbalah before…but, that was when I like realized there was different ways to connect, I think…It was a very, like, here’s the text, here’s how we’re going to study it, here’s what—the fifth letter of the alphabet is called a he—and he did some sort of art thing where he like took this letter and took a part of it and made it up-side-down and that meant something else. It, it was, I don’t remember all of the details, but I remember that it was kind of cool for me to be able to connect through a different route. Um, that that was the first time that I wasn’t connecting to Judaism through, like, the community. Um, so that stands out to me.
Ben’s recognition that Judaism can be experienced in multiple ways, individually and communally, has reassured him that his own questioning of Jewish religious beliefs, in particular about God, is another means to expressing his Jewish identity.

Whenever I think about the idea that you’d question Judaism and question religion, like for me, like that started probably about a hundred years ago. But I know that those people on Masada were questioning everything…I struggle with the idea that, when, like the mishna was written, which is like the big book of commentary on the Torah, they were questioning things. That’s why they wrote commentary. But, I always wonder, did they have thoughts that God wasn’t this being, that God was, that they thought about God the same way I do. Or, every single person then couldn’t have thought about God in that classic way. I just know that.
APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANTS’ STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTIONS
Appendix F

Participants’ Structural Descriptions

Ben’s Structural Description

Ben’s experience of having his conception of God challenged centered on a transition from received beliefs from his childhood and early adolescence that no longer seemed feasible to him to a self-authored construction that he finds more reasonable. Three essential components to Ben’s transition were having a set apart time and space to reflect upon what he personally believed and did not believe about God, experiencing specific events that heightened the difference between his old beliefs and his new ones, and finding a place within his religious community for his new views.

Regarding his former, received beliefs about God, Ben had not given much thought to them throughout his high school years, despite possessing a tendency to challenge conventional norms and values in other areas of his life. The absence of consideration about his religious beliefs can be attributed to the lack of dissonance between them and his experiences. Ben found Judaism, as practiced by his family and at his synagogue, to be supportive of his progressive values, and thus he never gave much thought to those traditions and doctrines that he might personally find untenable.

The separated time and space that Ben experienced during a trip to Israel provided him the opportunity to consider his personal beliefs about God and how they aligned with the conventional beliefs he had been taught as a youth. Being forced to spend hours at a time in another country and culture, meditating in isolation caused Ben’s thoughts to
eventually reflect upon his beliefs about God. It was during these times that Ben
 discovered the dissonance between his received belief that God was a personal entity that
 created the universe and reigned as sovereign over every event and his acceptance that
 the earth’s and humankind’s existence was the product of natural forces like evolution
 and history.

 During this time of reflection and trying to reconcile the differences between God
 as the controlling entity of the universe and as a passive, creating agent, Ben experienced
 two events that directly challenged his former conception. He was disheartened when he
 ended up in a physical fight with another Jew over how to properly observe the Shabbat.
 Ben could not reconcile why God would allow two Jews to fight over an essential aspect
 of how they lived out their Jewish identity while they were in Israel seeking to connect to
 each other and their religious and ethnic commonality. In contrast, Ben found personal
 strength in viewing God as a passive agent when he learned about his grandmother’s
 terminal illness while in Israel. As he reflected on the approaching death of his
 grandmother, he realized that it was a natural part of the life cycle. The fact that God was
 not making the decision of when her life would come to an end helped him accept that it
 was her natural time to die.

 Although Ben came to reject the conventional, Jewish view of God that he had
 been taught as a child, he continued to highly value many of the traditions and the
 communal aspects of Judaism. During Ben’s trip to Israel he discovered how Judaism
 could be expressed and experienced in multiple ways. This perspective has reassured
 Ben that his struggles with the conception of God and his divergent view from what is
traditionally taught in the Talmud and other Jewish writings is very much an alternative expression of his Jewish identity.

**Elizabeth’s Structural Description**

The challenge to Elizabeth’s conception of God resulted from a series of escalating events that caused her to question the personal relationship she believed she had with Him. Although theodicean doubts had always existed in her mind, they became more prominent when the events in her life left her feeling abandoned by God. Her sense of abandonment led to feelings of anger and resulted in her pulling away from religious activities and the Catholic community. During this time Elizabeth accepted the support offered by a few individuals whom she felt truly understood what she was experiencing, while she rejected those whom she did not perceive as comprehending her situation. Once Elizabeth began to reengage in her religious life, the personal relationship she perceived to have with God was altered, but also strengthened.

Throughout her childhood, adolescence, and first year of college Elizabeth was actively engaged in the Catholic community and believed she had a strong, personal relationship with God. Primarily, she identified God as her closest friend in whom she could confide and find comfort. Yet, despite the strong, positive relationship she had with God, Elizabeth occasionally experienced doubts as to why she and others would experience hardships in their lives. These doubts became more prominent after a series of events, including the imprisonment of her father and the onset of debilitating depression.
As Elizabeth experienced these hardships, she came to feel that God had abandoned her by not protecting her from them. This led to a sense of betrayal and considerable anger directed against God, which in turn led her to pull away from religious activities, such as prayer and attending weekday religious services, and her engagement with the campus Catholic community. The pulling away from her religious commitments mirrored Elizabeth’s overall retreat from activities and her desire to flee from her life during the time in which she battled against depression. Yet, despite her pulling away from these activities, Elizabeth did not divorce herself from all ties to her faith as she continued to attend Sunday masses and observe religious holidays. Elizabeth attributes this continued observance as a matter of habit and obligation rather than any desire to keep minimal ties with her religious identity at the time.

While Elizabeth was going through the negative consequences of the events in her life, she accepted the support offered from individuals whom she believed could relate to what she was experiencing. The three individuals from whom she accepted support were her mother, who shared the negative consequences of Elizabeth’s father being imprisoned; a close friend who had also experienced separation from a parent; and her boyfriend, who had battled depression in his past. In contrast to these three individuals, Elizabeth rejected the sympathy offered by those whom she did not perceive as understanding her situation because they had not had similar experiences.

At the prompting of her counselor to establish normalcy in her life, Elizabeth began to reconnect with the Catholic community and engage in religious activities. As she become more active and the negative events in her life subsided—father was released
from prison, she switched majors to something she found more enjoyable, and she was able to manage her depression through medication—Elizabeth found her anger at God subsided and her friendship with Him was renewed. Elizabeth admits that she has not discovered the final answer to her doubts as to why God allowed her to experience her hardships; but she has come to accept that negative situations are a part of normal life and God is not always going to shield her from them. This acceptance is part of her re-conceptualization of God as friend. Rather than seeing Him as someone who will prevent bad circumstances from occurring, Elizabeth now sees Him as someone who will be a source of strength during the bad seasons in her life. Most important, she does not believe God will ever abandon her because of His love for her.

**Leah’s Structural Description**

Theodicean doubts about negative events in her personal life and in history led to Leah’s conception of God being challenged. Unable to answer why the negative events occurred, Leah became resentful and angry towards God. The consequences of her anger were her withdrawal from religious activities and her seeking out support from sources who would share her experiences. Leah is uncertain whether or not she has resolved her negative feelings about God as she has been in a period of temporization in regards to the challenges she has experienced.

Leah’s personal experience with physical ailments during her adolescent years, including depression, seizures, and Crohn’s disease, led her to question why God would allow her to be afflicted with them. In the absence of an answer, Leah’s frustration developed into bitter resentment as she blamed God for causing her physical and
emotional afflictions. Looking at historical events such as the Holocaust and the World Trade Center Attack, Leah felt the same anger towards God for allowing these tragedies to occur. Despite these negative feelings and the challenge they raised about her conception of God, Leah’s anger confirmed her belief in the existence of God as he “gave [her] someone to blame.”

Leah’s anger led to her pulling away from religious activities that required her to engage with God. She became reluctant to pray or to attend Shabbat services since these activities would remind her of her anger and its source. During this period of withdrawal Leah also became resistant to Jewish religious instruction, which did not provide her the space to explore or reflect upon her thoughts and feelings about God. Leah perceived her religious teachers as not tolerating debate or being open to alternative answers to conventional teachings.

Leah’s mother and closest friend were indispensable sources of personal support for her during her physical and emotional afflictions. Leah developed a strong, emotional tie to her mother, who played a proactive and personal role in dealing with the negative consequences of her ailments. Specifically, Leah feels her mother shared the experiences with her and helped her cope with their unpleasantness. Similarly, Leah relied heavily on her closest friend, who would share sleepless nights with her, comforting her during anxiety attacks and listening to her when she needed to talk through her negative feelings and troubled thoughts. The support Leah welcomed from her mother and her closest friend contrasted significantly with the vast majority of other people in her life from whom she hid her negative feelings. The belief that other individuals, especially her peers
at school, did not genuinely care about her well-being is why Leah did not see them as a source of support.

Despite Leah’s resistance to religious activities that required her to personally engage with God, she retained her ties with the Jewish community and continued to participate in many of its traditional practices. When she moved a considerable distance from her family to attend college, the support of the Jewish community became paramount for Leah who no longer had immediate contact with her mother and her closest friend. Leah attributes the current contentment she feels in her religious life to the strong sense of support and acceptance by the college, Jewish community. In contrast to these feelings, she does not attribute her contentment to God.

In admitting that her current, neutral feelings towards God are tenuous, Leah revealed that the challenges to her conception may not be over, but rather temporized. Although she is not angry towards God and has relegated him to being a distant observer, Leah is uncertain whether these feelings are a resolution to the challenges she faced or if they are the result of a relative absence of hardship during her college years. Nevertheless, she is content with her current conception of God, regardless of how tenuous it might be.

Nesreen’s Structural Description

Nesreen’s challenge to her conception of God was precipitated by as a period of adversity in her academic career that caused her to doubt herself for a period of time, but ultimately confirmed her original beliefs. Her struggle took the form of experiencing unexpected failures in her vocational pursuits despite acting in a way that she believed
would result in God granting her success. During the period of time in which she experienced these struggles, Nesreen accepted support from individuals whom she believed genuinely cared about her success: God, her parents, and her academic advisors.

Nesreen’s doubts were caused by her inability to pass the MCAT after multiple attempts and to successfully complete organic chemistry on her first try as part of an accelerated BS/MD program in which she was enrolled. These failures led her to question why God was allowing them to occur as she had always experienced academic success in her past. Her past successes had been interpreted by Nesreen as signs of God’s approval of her plan to become a physician.

Specifically, two personal beliefs, which Nesreen had been taught by Islam, were challenged. First, she believed that hard work always yields success. Knowing the amount of effort she was putting into the courses and the sacrifice of free time and socializing with friends that she was making, Nesreen did not understand why she was failing to achieve the academic results she desired. The second belief that was challenged by her failures was that righteous living should result in God granting her desires. These academic failures led Nesreen to begin to question whether or not she had done something to damage her relationship with God. Ultimately, Nesreen could not discern where she was failing to live a righteous life as defined in Islam. These doubts about herself and about what God was doing in her life led Nesreen to seek understanding by praying for a sign: pass her fifth attempt on the MCAT or consider a new career path.

During the time Nesreen was struggling with her academics and trying to understand why God was not granting her success, she found her parents and academic
advisors to be the most supportive. Nesreen feels her parents were supportive in that they experienced her frustrations and failures with her. They were also invested in her success emotionally and financially. Nesreen found her academic advisors to be supportive because she felt they genuinely desired to see her succeed. In contrast, Nesreen did not view her friends or peers as a source of support because she believed they were preoccupied with their own pursuits for success and not invested in hers.

When Nesreen passed the MCAT on the fifth try, she interpreted her success as permission from God to continue to pursue a career in medicine despite having to complete an additional year in the BS/MD program. She also interpreted her failure to achieve immediate success as an unexpected, additional blessing by God as she feels it made her a stronger person capable of persevering through adversity and she is a more prepared student for medical school due to the additional year of undergraduate studies she had to complete. For Nesreen, the entire experience confirmed three beliefs she holds that are a part of her faith as a devout Muslim: hard work will eventually yield success, righteous living will gain you God’s favor, and having met these two criteria, God may give you more than you originally desired.

**Philip’s Structural Description**

Philip’s experience of having his conception of God challenged centered on the transition from previous, received beliefs from his childhood that no longer seemed feasible to a new perspective that he deems is better supported by the teachings of the New Testament. Although Philip does not explicitly link his feelings toward God and others in his life to the challenges that confronted his understanding of God, he
recognizes the influence they had on his exploration. These feelings include a previous sense of being unloved by God and others during his early adolescent years; the realization that God did love him in his late adolescent years; and Philip’s sense of discouragement and rejection by his former religious community and the support and acceptance he felt from the new religious community he joined.

Philip’s questioning about the nature of God began in his late adolescence when several of the doctrines his church taught no longer made sense to him. Chief among these teachings were the traditional Christian understanding of the trinity and how one genuinely receives salvation from the spiritual consequences of their sins. These doubts led Philip to begin comparing the teachings of his church against those of other denominations, especially those taught by an Apostolic community with which he had recently connected.

Philip’s comparative study of the two denomination’s doctrines occurred during a time he was experiencing significant personal and relational transitions. The first transition was Philip’s decision to become more devout in fostering a relationship with God. Philip wanted to pursue this due to his past feelings of abandonment and resentment having disappeared during a spiritual experience in which he felt God spoke to him about His love. The second transition was Philip having been welcomed into a new religious community in which he felt accepted for the first time in his life.

In addition to the contrasting doctrines of his old church and the Apostolic faith to which he had recently been introduced, Philip saw contrasts between how the people in each community treated him. He felt rejected and was shunned by his peers in his old
church, while he felt appreciated and cared for by the friends he was making in the new religious community. Similarly, Philip felt the pastor of his old church discouraged him from pursuing religious questions or becoming involved in leadership and ministerial roles, while the pastor in the Apostolic church encouraged him to ask questions and to pursue opportunities to become more involved with the community.

Once Philip came to the personal conclusion that the Apostolic teachings on the nature of God were more in line with what the Bible taught, and due to feeling more welcomed in their community, he made a complete break with his old church. An important aspect of finalizing this break was his decision to be re-baptized in the Apostolic church because he believed his previous one had done it incorrectly. Philip feels that the experience of being baptized in the correct fashion was a spiritually empowering experience that has strengthened his confidence in his walk with God.

In making a complete break from his old community, Philip stopped associating with all members other than his parents. This has been a source of continuing tension in Philip’s life since he made the decision. Nevertheless, he does not regret making it, nor going through the entire transition as he feels God has made him a stronger individual through it. He also values the set of experiences he had gained, from which he may draw upon to help others who are going through a similar period of questioning and exploration.

Sadid’s Structural Description

The challenge to Sadid’s conception of God occurred when his religious beliefs, which were always abstract concepts to him, became real and immediate due to the
unexpected death of a close friend. The event forced him to evaluate the Islamic beliefs he had received as a child regarding God, the temporality of life, and the immediate reality of death. Having these concepts become suddenly real led Sadid to conclude that the religious teachings he had received needed to be taken seriously in order to respond properly to the concept that God is in control of the universe. These beliefs have led Sadid to refocus his commitments in life and to attach significant value to the traditions of his faith, the religious community, and friendships that respect his commitments.

Throughout his first three years of college, Sadid did not reflect often on the religious beliefs he had received as a child and adolescent. Although he identified as a Muslim, the beliefs he had received were primarily abstract and were not seen as holding any specific relevance in his life. Failing to see any practical value in the beliefs, Sadid was confused about a number of spiritual matters, and only continued to identify as a Muslim because of the lack of a better alternative.

Sadid’s ambivalence towards his religious beliefs was unexpectedly challenged after his close friend and roommate died in a motorcycle accident. The event occurred several hours after the friend had confronted Sadid about not spending enough time together. Experiencing the death of an individual close to him for the first time was a significant shock to Sadid’s religious beliefs as the concept of death become a reality rather than just an unfortunate, but abstract event that occurs to other people. As Sadid went through the process of mourning his friend’s death and trying to understand why it occurred, he found answers in the religious beliefs he had received from his father and the Muslim community.
Paramount among the Islamic beliefs that Sadid had been taught was that God is ultimately in control of all events, including when and how someone dies. The personal revelation that his received, religious beliefs were correct caused Sadid to start to take them seriously by embracing the religious practices and traditions of the Islamic faith. These practices have provided Sadid personal strength and peace of mind as they have helped to slow down his perception of time passing and they have aided him in refocusing his priorities to include his relationships with family members, friends, and the Muslim community.

Sadid acknowledges that several individuals have supported him in exploring his Islamic beliefs—specifically his research mentor, who is also a Muslim, and his father—but he primarily sees the study of his faith and his commitment to it as a solitary journey. What has changed most significantly in Sadid’s relationships with others is that he is more discriminating regarding whom he considers a friend. Sadid has ended a number of relationships with individuals who do not respect his religious commitments.

**Shannon’s Structural Description**

Shannon’s conception of God was first challenged during a period of time in which she was experiencing severe anxiety and depression, and she felt that no one could understand or help her. During a moment when she felt completely alone, she expressed her frustration and the sense of abandonment that she felt from God. Believing that God responded to her call for help, Shannon began to disregard many of the viewpoints she had held in her early adolescence, including her conviction the God existed, but was a distant and vague entity. Despite the new set of beliefs that Shannon developed during
this time, she admits that she did not act upon them seriously or become a devout Christian until her college years when her view of God was challenged once again.

In her early adolescence, Shannon held multiple beliefs about spirituality and God that she now considers to be deceptions. These beliefs included a reliance on mystics and spiritual talismans for fortune-telling and good luck, seeing God was a distant and vague entity, and viewing the Bible as an unreliable source for truth.

During this time, Shannon was experiencing severe anxiety and depression. Although Shannon acknowledges that biology may be the root cause of these conditions, she also believes they were exacerbated due to her involvement with mysticism and her lack of reliance upon God. As a result of her depression, Shannon became resentful and angry with almost everyone in her life. There was significant tension between Shannon and her parents, and later her grandmother, due to her perception that they could not understand what she was experiencing. Shannon was also angry at God for not fixing her problems.

As Shannon became increasingly frustrated with the lack of relief from her depression and the absence of understanding from others, she became desperate and wrote out her thoughts and feelings to God. Shannon admits that although she had prayed to God in the past, this was the first authentic expression of her feelings to God in that she genuinely believed He would see them and help her. Shortly after she wrote the letter, Shannon reached out to her grandfather to talk about what she was experiencing. In her grandfather, she finally found someone who listened to her and took actions to help her. Shannon interpreted these actions as an answer to her prayer for help.
Feeling that God had answered her prayers, Shannon began to change her view about him, which led to a radical departure from her old beliefs and her willingness to trust mystics and spiritual items. Seeing God as an ally who is a source of strength and protection for her, she holds that her former beliefs were an entrapment meant to keep her from receiving the blessings available to her through a relationship with God.

Shannon admits that although receiving an answer to her prayers caused her to examine and change her beliefs, her life did not reflect this change until her college years. It was during her second year of college that she became a devout Christian. After experiencing a renewed sense of depression and anxiety, she felt prompted by God to start taking her faith more seriously and to practice it in earnest. Shannon views both of her bouts with depression as God allowing hardships in her life to move her to the point where she would reach out to him for help. She also sees the experiences as strengthening her for future, difficult times, so that she can persevere through them.

**Susan’s Structural Description**

Susan’s conception of God has been challenged on two prominent occasions during which she has felt abandoned by Him. During these times of abandonment, Susan experienced multiple feelings about God, including anger towards Him and shame for failing His expectations. She has also questioned the existence of God. During these times, Susan has received guidance and support from the Mormon Church and individuals within the religious community who have helped her to find stability within her religion. As a result of her experiences, Susan now conceptualizes God as a loving parent who allows his children to make mistakes in order to learn from them; however,
she admits that she still experiences doubts about God’s existence and the Mormon
Church’s teaching about His expectations on how she should live her life.

The first time Susan felt abandoned by God occurred during her high school years
when she went through a period of rebellion against the moral teachings of the Mormon
Church. The second time was during her first year in college when her religious beliefs
where questioned by a group of non-Mormons. In both of these incidents Susan felt
abandoned because God did not intervene directly for her benefit by preventing her from
rebelling against the moral teachings of the Church or by providing her answers to the
questions raised against her faith.

During both of these experiences, Susan became angry with God for failing to
protect her. This sense of anger arose from her belief that God is suppose to act as a
loving father who wants a relationship with her. Based on this understanding, Susan
expected God to warn her against participating in immoral behavior and to provide the
correct answers to questions posed against her religion. The lack of intervention by God
caused Susan to question whether He existed; or if He did exist, to doubt whether the
Mormon perspective of seeing God as a loving father was correct. These suspicions
about the nature of God were accompanied by doubts about herself. Susan blames
herself for not knowing more about the doctrines of her faith, which would have guided
her decisions and responses in both situations.

The Mormon community has been an important source of guidance and stability
for Susan during the times her beliefs about God have been brought into question.
During her period of rebellion, Susan lost her Temple Recommend, which she feels was a
just punishment for her actions. The loss of her Recommend and her desire to regain it inspired Susan to return to a life that was in alignment with her religious beliefs. A close, Mormon friend during this time period also served as a role model for Susan as she wanted to emulate the positive, “glowing” presence she exuded. After Susan’s faith had been challenged by outsiders, the local Mormon community near her college campus provided her a support structure for her beliefs that she had been missing since leaving Utah and helped to reassure her about her beliefs.

Looking back on both of these experiences, Susan interprets them as tests given by God to make her stronger in her faith. She has also adapted her perspective of God as a result of them. Although she still views him as a loving parent, rather than expecting him to rescue her from negative situations, Susan’s expectation is that He will allow her to make mistakes in order to learn from them. Related to this conception, she also believes God will forgive her when she does fall into error. Nevertheless, Susan admits that she still questions her beliefs about the nature of God at times, especially when she feels that she might be missing out on experiencing the fullness of life because of her religion’s strict teachings on moral behavior.
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