HINDU COLLEGE STUDENTS AND A SENSE OF BELONGING ON CAMPUS

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

Historically, religion has been an understudied topic in higher education research, and Hindu students in particular have received insufficient attention. This qualitative study helps fill this knowledge gap by investigating how some Hindu students experience belonging at a large, public, Midwestern university. Using an emic/etic approach, I conduct a thematic analysis informed by descriptive phenomenology followed by a theoretical analysis using critical religious pluralism theory to understand how three Hindu students experience belonging on their university campus. The data collection methods used were semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation. The four main themes which emerged from the data were religious and cultural identities, religious literacy, the importance of community, and individual spirituality. The critical religious pluralism theory-based analysis focused on religious literacy as a justice issue, the way neutrality perpetuates privilege, and the role of Christian privilege, drawing insights from these content areas about students' experiences of belonging. Overall, this study demonstrates the importance of providing both neutral and sectarian safe spaces on campus for Hindu students; building religious literacy into training and programming for faculty, staff, and students; and giving attention to Hindu students' spiritual development to support Hindu students' sense of belonging. This study also demonstrates how critical it is to analyze religion separately from culture.

Dedication

For my father, who would have been proud.

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Schier-Happell, S. (2020). Waking up in the classroom: Buddhist epistemologies as a path toward decolonization of higher education. In J. T. Snipes & S. Manson (Eds.), *Remixed and reimagined: Innovations in religion, spirituality, and (inter)faith in higher education* (pp. 45-56). Myers Education Press.

Fields of Study

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Given the ever-increasing diversity among students on college campuses, it is critical for student affairs professionals to understand the ways in which their campus environments are both inclusive and exclusive to students with marginalized identities, including minoritized religious identities. Research shows that religiously minoritized students often struggle more than their peers, as religious identity appears to be predictive of student success and achievement (Bowman et al., 2014). In general, religiously minoritized students have lower levels of satisfaction (Bowman & Smedley, 2013; Fan et al., 2021), receive less support (Small & Bowman, 2011), frequently challenge their beliefs (Braskamp, 2007; Small & Bowman, 2011), and struggle more spiritually (Bryant, 2008) than their peers. Given these considerations, in the interest of equity, student affairs professionals must explore ways to create more religiously inclusive environments, thereby removing potential barriers and improving the chances of success for religiously minoritized students.

However, this is a competency area which is still in development for many student affairs professionals (Dalton, 2006; Nash, 2007; Mutakabbir & Nurridin, 2016), and may even be a topic they are hesitant to discuss for fear of conflict or negative repercussions (Stewart & Kocet, 2011; Ennis & Trueblood, 2019). It is critical for student affairs practitioners to actively grow these proficiencies as institutional leaders and

student advocates who have the power to set the tone, identify institution-specific growth areas, and generate real change on campus (Stewart & Kocet, 2011; Mutakabbir & Nurridin, 2016; Tyson, 2019). As such, student affairs practitioners need support from higher education researchers who are able to assess religiously minoritized students' needs and experiences, thereby generating data and providing recommendations to guide and inform actions that can move campuses toward greater religious inclusivity. Importantly, this research must be specific to unique religious identities in order to maximize its usefulness, as a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate to fully serve a religiously diverse student body.

This study contributes to this much-needed body of research by offering insight into the needs and experiences of Hindu college students. Using research collection methods in the form of semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation, this qualitative study is able to provide insight on the experiences of belonging among a small sample of Hindu students, informing practical recommendations to student affairs practitioners regarding how to better serve Hindu students. These recommendations create an opportunity for real change for a group of religiously minoritized students who have been historically understudied and underserved, in addition to increasing the knowledge and religious literacy of the professionals who support them. By interrogating the ways in which some Hindu students experience belonging in their college environments, student affairs practitioners may learn more about steps they can take to broaden Hindu students' sense of belonging on campus, and in so doing, support their overall success.

Background of the Problem

The colonially-founded higher education system in the United States is intimately tied to the Christian religion (Thelin, 2011). Modeled upon the British educational system, colonists originally established postsecondary institutions in the colonies as a means of promoting Christian values, and the funding to establish and operate such institutions primarily came from religious sources (Stamm, 2006; Felix & Bowman, 2015). While the breadth and diversity of institutions has grown over time, the Christian origins of higher education in the United States have left a historical imprint which impacts the present-day system in both subtle and overt ways. While religiously minoritized students may experience Christian bias in more extreme forms like discrimination or exclusion, there are also far more pervasive forms of systemic Christian privilege which may be invisible to many people, even in spaces and interactions presumed by the majority to be neutral (Seifert, 2007).

Religiously minoritized college students must often work to find spaces of belonging on campus, which is not always an easy task, as minoritized status can lead to feelings of exclusion. For example, in his editorial "Surviving College as a Hindu," undergraduate political science student Marut Yelagalawadi (2022) describes the dilemma he and other Hindu students often face as "maintaining their identity and being outcasts, or denouncing their identities to fit in" (para. 1). Whether or not religiously minoritized students feel welcome on campus impacts student success. Two national surveys—the Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey (CRSCS) and Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS)—both specifically

note the importance of having supportive spaces for religiously minoritized college students. Feeling that such spaces exist for these students "is a critical component of student perceptions of the campus' *[sic]* psychological climate" (Correia-Harker et al., 2019, p. 27). Significantly, Christian students often indicate that they experience supportive campus spaces more than their non-Christian peers (Rockenbach et al., 2014), leaving religiously minoritized students who feel less supported more vulnerable to negative outcomes (Bowman et al., 2014).

Problem Statement

While there is data indicating that religious identity should be taken seriously as a significant factor in student success (Bowman et al., 2014), for many years religion remained an underacknowledged and understudied topic in higher education research (Astin et al., 2011a; Edwards, 2016; Love, 2019), especially when compared to other forms of privilege and marginalization (Edwards, 2016; Small, 2020). For example, while the scholarship on religion and spirituality in higher education is growing (Small, 2015), there is still an underrepresentation in comparison to the literature on gender, race, and ethnicity (Bryant, 2006; Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014; Small, 2020). The need for studies focused on unique minoritized religious identities among college students is pronounced due to the shortage of research in this area (Mayhew, 2004). While a growing number of scholars are now answering this call for research on religiously minoritized students, this subfield is still in a formative stage.

Furthermore, among the small but growing body of literature regarding religiously minoritized college students, Hindu students in particular remain understudied

(Bowman et al., 2014; Small, 2015; Mutakkabir & Nuriddin, 2016). This research gap, however, is not due to a lack of interest. While researchers have expressed a desire to learn how to better serve Hindu students (Siner, 2015), the uniqueness of Hindu beliefs and the lack of resources for properly framing the needs and experiences of Hindu students present obstacles to both scholars and practitioners (Chander, 2013). In other words, a general lack of religious literacy about Hindu traditions among a majority of higher education professionals impedes their ability to properly serve Hindu students. The unintended outcome is that Hinduism often gets oversimplified so non-Hindus may more easily understand it and so campuses may integrate Hinduism into the existing Christian-influenced spiritual culture with greater ease (Chander, 2013).

Reflecting the need for a growing body of higher education research about Hindu students, some doctoral students are seeking to fill this knowledge gap by carrying out their own qualitative research about Hindu college students (Gnanadass, 2016; Samuel, 2019; Rao, 2020). While scholars employ a variety of theoretical frameworks in their analyses, it is important to note that these frameworks are primarily related to culture and ethnicity and are not specific to religion. These theoretical frameworks include critical race theory (Gnanadass, 2016; Samuel, 2019), Asian American identity consciousness theory (Samuel, 2019), DesiCrit (Samuel, 2019; Rao, 2020), postcolonial theory (Gnanadass, 2016), and cultural historical activity theory (Gnanadass, 2016). While participants' religious identities were considered in all of these studies, all of the researchers still addressed religion as a subcategory of cultural identity.

In contrast, the critical theoretical lens I engage in this study treats religious identity as something in conversation with, but also separate from, cultural identity, recognizing the uniqueness of the way religion operates in people's lives and influences systemic forms of inequality, privilege, and oppression (Small, 2020). As such, this study offers a unique perspective, making a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature about Hindu college students.

Theoretical Overview

An important aspect of this study is examining areas of both overt and systemic religious privilege in a college environment. To achieve this goal, I use critical religious pluralism theory (Small, 2020) as a means by which to interpret the data. Critical religious pluralism theory takes seriously the role that religion plays in systemic power dynamics within educational institutions. As such, critical religious pluralism theory is oriented toward the pursuit of justice by identifying, analyzing, and challenging the privilege and marginalization caused by deeply embedded religious power structures. By using critical religious pluralism theory as a theoretical lens for this study, I systematically examine the role of Christian privilege in participants' experiences, thereby bringing greater insight to both educational scholars and higher education practitioners who wish to support Hindu students on their campuses.

Research Questions and Methodology

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- In what ways do Hindu students experience belonging at a large Midwestern public university, if at all?

- If these experiences of belonging exist in the lived experiences of Hindu students, in what ways do these experiences align with critical religious pluralism theory?

To address these questions, I employ qualitative research methods to achieve an in-depth understanding of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of three Hindu student participants about their experiences of belonging at a large, public university. The two primary data generation methods are semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation.

I use a balance of emic (or inductive)/etic (or deductive) methods for analysis approaches to address these research questions. For the first research question, I employ thematic analysis supported by descriptive phenomenological methods for analysis (Sundler et al., 2019) as a means by which to understand ways in which Hindu students experience belonging. Following this, to address the second research question, I employ a theoretical analysis, exploring how critical religious pluralism theory may bring depth and further understanding to the experiences of belonging identified in research question one. In this way, this research seeks to explore the lived experiences of Hindu students, then analyze these experiences in relation to critical religious pluralism theory, including confirming, disconfirming, and/or extending current understandings.

Definitions

To bring additional clarity about the language employed in this study, I am providing definitions and further context to the terminology regarding religious literacy, religion vs. spirituality, Hinduism as a religion, and Hinduism as colonial construct.

Religious Literacy

Religious literacy refers to the knowledge-building about religious pluralism which is critical for engaging religiously minoritized identities with accuracy and authenticity. Ariel Ennis and Tarah Trueblood (2019) define religious literacy as "understanding the historic and contemporary interconnections of religion with cultural, political, and social life, and the ability to use this knowledge to promote allyship and engage in dialogue on issues of religious and spiritual concern" (p. 105). In this sense, religious literacy is more than just gaining historical knowledge by reading books or attending seminars and workshops. Religious literacy is not just about information; it is an orientation. To be religiously literate is to be eager to seek out and cultivate multi-religious connections with people from a variety of religious backgrounds, in addition to gaining deeper knowledge about their beliefs and traditions.

Religion vs. Spirituality

While many people may use the terms religion and spirituality interchangeably, it is important to recognize that they are not synonymous. While religion is more formal, traditionally structured, and outwardly focused, spirituality is more informal, personally defined, and inwardly focused (Bowman & Small, 2010). This distinction is significant in the present study, as religion and spirituality are uniquely addressed in both the qualitative data itself as well as the corresponding analysis.

Hinduism as a Religion

Hinduism is an umbrella term which encompasses a myriad of diverse beliefs and traditions with origins stretching back into ancient Indian history and culture. Hinduism,

unlike many religions, is a decentralized religion with no singular authority, no founding figure, no universally shared beliefs, no fixed set of scriptures, and no common way in which to live out one's faith (Grimes et al., 2006). In fact, Hinduism looks unique for every individual practitioner, with each person holding their own version of spiritual truth, making it a diverse and dynamic religion which is incredibly difficult to define. Because of the overwhelming diversity of beliefs, many Hindu practitioners find community not through shared belief but rather through shared practice (Grimes et al., 2006), like festivals, ritual celebrations, and temple worship.

At the heart of Hindu traditions is the concept of *dharma*, which lacks a direct English translation but has been associated with duty, order, truth, law, and ethics (Grimes et al., 2006). Every individual has their own particular dharma—their own spiritual path defined by virtuous action— based upon a multitude of factors which are unique to each person. As long as each person respects and fulfills their dharmic duties, whatever those may be, then they are helping maintain the personal, social, and spiritual order required to live a life in harmony with the divine, eventually leading to liberation from the cycle of rebirth (Grimes et al., 2006).

In the context of this study, it is important to recognize that the vast diversity of beliefs and practices within Hindu traditions makes it incredibly difficult to describe. It is impossible for any one person to "speak for Hinduism" or educate others about "what Hindus believe," because truly, no such thing exists. Furthermore, the internal pluralism and decentralized authority and belief structures of Hinduism also make it difficult to draw accurate comparisons to highly structured religions like Christianity, Judaism, or

Islam, which have clearly defined founders, moral behaviors, scriptures, and sets of beliefs (Grimes et al., 2006).

Hinduism as Colonial Construct

The word *Hindu* is a historically contested term with colonial associations. It is not of Indic origin, but rather was originally popularized outside of India (Hawley & Narayanan, 2006; Truschke, 2023). This terminology did not gain a religious connotation until the British colonial period, going through many iterations and generating heated debates (Truschke, 2023). British colonizers used the word Hindu to identify people in India who were neither Christian nor Muslim (Flood, 1996), and the adaptation of the term *Hindooism* to refer to religious (rather than cultural) identity was an eventual extension of colonial missionary work (Truschke, 2023).

Some practitioners have chosen to use alternative terminology in rejection of colonial language. The term *Sanatana Dharma* (meaning "eternal law" or "the eternal religion") is a common anti-colonial replacement for the term Hinduism (Chakravarti, 2006; Hawley & Narayanan, 2006; Saxena, 2020), while others may use the term Vedic religion to honor the long and ancient history of the tradition (Hawley & Narayanan, 2006). However, in spite of its complicated past, many practitioners still choose to continue using the term Hinduism (Hawley & Naryanan, 2006) and may even see it as a means of consolidating a shared national religious identity (Grimes et al., 2006).

It is important to recognize that even the language we choose to use about Hinduism is rarely neutral, though many non-Hindus assume it is. With the goal of moving toward greater inclusivity for Hindu students, we must be sensitive to the

complexities of Hindu traditions and be prepared to address the potential challenges which may arise. Though all three participants in this study freely self-identified with the term Hindu, understanding the complicated history of even the most basic terminology associated with the religion provides important context regarding the uniqueness of Hinduism compared to many other religions.

Positionality

As a researcher, I am uniquely positioned to undertake a study which requires expertise in the fields of both education and religious studies. My BA is in religion and culture with a minor in anthropology, and my MA is in history and critical theories of religion with a minor in theology. I did additional postgraduate work in the fields of Sanskrit and South Asian religions, and then embarked upon a decades-long professional life in higher education. For years I was a researcher and educator in the field of religion and philosophy, focusing primarily on Asian religions. This was and still is one of my greatest passions.

I also have a passion for serving and supporting students. Eventually, I made the professional move from academic affairs to student affairs, with the intention of doing scholarly research uniting the fields of religious studies and higher education. Now I am a PhD candidate in higher education and student affairs, as well as a student affairs practitioner in the Student Advocacy Center at a local community college supporting students with basic needs in the areas of food or housing insecurity, technology, transportation, and childcare assistance.

As a scholar of both religious studies and education, I am able to offer robust research and analysis on topics related to both religion and higher education, and my academic expertise in Asian religions places a focus on Hindu college students directly within my content area. However, in spite of this subject-specific knowledge, I also acknowledge that I am an outsider to Hinduism in a practical sense. While I have studied Sanskrit, found personal meaning in Hindu scriptures, experienced profound guidance from Hindu monks, nuns, and gurus, and spent time in Hindu sacred spaces both in India and the United States, I am still—and will always be—outside the tradition.

I am a middle-class, white, vegetarian, cis-gendered woman in my 40s from the Southeastern United States, now living in the Midwest. English is my first language. I contend with invisible disabilities every day. I am a parent to two adult neurodivergent children. My extended family is Jewish and Christian, allowing me to move comfortably in Jewish and Christian spaces, which is a form of privilege. I take all religious beliefs seriously and do my best to honor and respect all religions. I believe deeply and passionately in promoting equity, justice, and inclusivity for people of all religious identities.

Because of the systemic social hierarchies and cultural knowledge which privilege whiteness and Christianity in American society and knowing that the participants in this study had ethnic and religious identities which differed from mine, it was important to me to design a study which centered their voices and did not position me as an expert on experience or identity. My goal as a higher education researcher is to remain sensitive to

students' needs, open to critique, and focused on the overall goal of this study, which is to facilitate a greater sense of belonging for Hindu students.

Limitations

As is the case in any form of positivist and post-positivist research, there are limitations in this study. First, by focusing on a small sample of only three participants at a single institution, the generalizability of the findings are necessarily limited. While we may gain valuable insight about the experiences of some Hindu students, there are as many unique experiences as there are students to describe them. Everyone has their own story! A greater number of participants would have provided even richer data.

The restriction of participants to the same large, public university also poses a limitation, as Hindu students' experiences would likely differ significantly at institutions with other diverse features—for example, at schools with fewer students or in a more liberal or conservative part of the country, or private colleges which have a Christian religious affiliation. The institution which is the site of this study has a very active Hindu student organization; students at schools without any such organizations would likely have a different experience, as would students at institutions which employ Hindu-affiliated religious support staff, unlike the university in this study. There is an endless number of variables which could significantly impact the findings of the study. All of these must be taken into account as potential limitations.

There are also limitations related to researcher positionality. As a white, non-Hindu woman, my status as an outsider to the identities I was studying could have impacted the study at any stage of the research process, including the research design,

recruitment process, data generation, and analysis of findings. Though I have spent many years studying and teaching about Hindu traditions, I lack the perspective that a lifelong spiritual practitioner would have. I also acknowledge that historically, white researchers' interactions with participants from marginalized racial or religious backgrounds carry colonial baggage, and those historical dynamics continue to impact the dynamics of cross-cultural and/or inter-religious research, both implicitly and explicitly.

Significance and Contribution of the Study

It is essential that student affairs practitioners pursue a religiously responsive form of student engagement as a means by which to promote justice and equity on campus for all students (Mutakabbir & Nuriddin, 2016). By conducting hands-on qualitative research about the experiences of belonging for Hindu students, an understudied population, I hope to move the needle closer to providing greater equity and justice for Hindu college students, while simultaneously increasing knowledge about Hindu beliefs and traditions. By focusing on lived experiences and real-life examples through qualitative research, this study brings into focus the personal voices of students who, as a small minority of the overall student population, may otherwise get lost in the aggregate in quantitative studies.

Additionally, I hope that this study may inspire other researchers to carry out similar studies focused on other understudied religious student populations, thereby expanding the potential for this study to have a transformative impact on other religiously minoritized students. This study is just one among many needed to ensure that underserved students with diverse religious identities are included in efforts to create

more welcoming college campuses. Hopefully, this study will inspire other researchers to carry out additional studies in the future, thereby improving more students' experiences of religious inclusivity and, in turn, further supporting student success for religiously minoritized students.

Organization of the Study

After presenting introductory material in Chapter One, in Chapter Two I present a review of relevant foundational literature supporting this study. This review of the literature covers the Christian origins of higher education in the United States and resulting Christian privilege which still remains on college campuses, followed by literature on college students' sense of belonging and welcoming spaces promoting inclusion for religiously minoritized students. I next give an overview of literature regarding Hindu students and the complexity of Hindu identity. After detailing the theoretical framework for this study, I examine the theoretical frameworks used to understand the experiences of Hindu college students in three qualitative dissertations which have relevance to the proposed study.

In Chapter Three, I explain the qualitative research design I take up in this study, followed by an overview of the theoretical framework. After this, I define the parameters of the study and describe the data generation process, including recruitment, semi-structured interview and photo-elicitation methods, coding strategies, and analytical processes. In Chapter Four, I present the findings derived from the qualitative data. I first examine emergent themes using thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology, addressing the first research question regarding how some Hindu students experience

belonging at a large, Midwestern, public university. Then I employ the theoretical lens of critical religious pluralism theory to analyze the data presented earlier in the chapter, addressing the second research question which examines how participants' experiences of belonging align with critical religious pluralism theory. Finally, in Chapter Five, I discuss the findings and implications of the study and close with an epilogue.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

In this chapter, I explore scholarly literature which is relevant to this study. First, I discuss the history of Christian privilege and influence in higher education in the United States. I then examine literature about college students' sense of belonging and the need for welcoming spaces on campus for religiously minoritized students. I go on to explore some of the existing literature regarding Hindu students, after which I turn my attention to the complexity of Hindu identity with special focus on the dynamic interplay between religious and cultural identity for Hindu practitioners in the United States.

Next, I address the critical theoretical framework employed in this study. I provide an introduction to critical religious pluralism theory, including its seven tenets. After this, I analyze the competing theoretical frameworks three other scholars have used to examine Hindu student identity in recent studies, focusing on critical race theory, DesiCrit, Asian American identity consciousness theory, postcolonial theory, and cultural historical activity theory. Finally, I justify the use of critical religious pluralism theory as an appropriate framework through which to analyze the qualitative data in this study.

Christian Privilege in Higher Education

To address the issues Hindu college students face in the United States, it is critical to consider the impact of Christian privilege on their experience. The Christian influence upon of the founding of the United States in general, and the founding of the U. S. higher

education system in particular, make Christian privilege an unavoidable factor in students' college experiences. Christian privilege exists at both the conscious and unconscious levels, both formally and informally, visibly and invisibly; it is both overt and subtle, and it impacts Christian and non-Christian students alike (Seifert, 2007). It draws a line of demarcation between students who can move comfortably within Christian-centered spaces, and students who feel excluded by nature of their religious beliefs and/or identities (Seifert, 2007). As such, Christian privilege plays a critical role in the dynamics of social power, privilege, and marginalization in U. S. higher education institutions.

The earliest American universities established during the colonial period had distinctly Christian origins. This included Harvard, Dartmouth, The College of William and Mary, Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, Brown, and Rutgers (Thelin, 2011). As the colonies were very much immersed in Protestant Christianity, so too were its universities. For example, Harvard, the oldest university in the United States, wrote Christian principles into its founding documents, stating that "every one shall consider the main end of his life and studies to know God and Jesus Christ" (Felix & Bowman, 2015, p. 40). Likewise, students at the College of William and Mary had to declare allegiance to the Church of England to attend the school (Felix & Bowman, 2015).

Following the colonial period, Christian influence has continued to anchor higher education institutions in the United States (Seifert, 2007; Mutakkabir & Nuriddin, 2016), and this Christian influence laid the foundation for the deeply established Christian privilege we now see at the systemic level. Higher education has been, and remains, a

powerful site upon which religious privilege and marginalization are protected and perpetuated. Vivienne Felix and Nicholas Bowman (2015) write: "Essentially, higher education was used as a tool of societal stratification. Education made it possible to operationalize, through institutions, a system of inclusion and exclusion grounded in biases related to race, ethnicity, class, and religion" (p. 41). In this way, higher education was not only influenced by Christian privilege; it played an active role in promoting and sustaining religious power and privilege for the Christian majority. Over time, even as official policies supporting discrimination and exclusion diminished, selective admissions policies still allowed institutions to select students who met certain criteria on an informal basis, which continued to place religiously minoritized students at a disadvantage (Felix & Bowman, 2015).

Given the Christian influence on the development of higher education in the United States overall, the presence of Christian privilege and an overall "Christian ethos" seem to be unavoidable due to its embeddedness in the system, and its impact on students, including Christian students, is wide-ranging. Tricia Seifert (2007) explains: "Christian privilege . . . hinders the development of all students. It may forestall or foreclose Christian students' critical examination of themselves and their own traditions while simultaneously stifling non-Christian students' expression of their own spiritual identity" (p. 11). Failing to understand how powerful and pervasive Christian privilege is in our higher education institutions does a disservice to all students by impacting their personal and spiritual development and failing to support their growth in self-awareness and critical thinking skills.

In some cases, Christian privilege takes a form which is easily observable. The cultural markers of Christian identity which are so often present at colleges and universities in the United States can easily make religiously minoritized students feel "othered" and excluded (Seifert, 2007). Such cultural markers are most obvious in places like chapels or prayer spaces (Seifert, 2007; Mutakkabir & Nuriddin, 2016), but there are more: the lack of kosher or halal meals and/or vegetarian food in cafeterias (Seifert, 2007); campus holidays being based around the Christian calendar (Seifert, 2007; Steward & Kocet, 2011); prayers in Christian language before sporting events and in locker rooms (Seifert, 2007; Mutakkabir & Nuriddin, 2016); and referring to non-Christian religious leaders on campus as "chaplains," which is distinctly Christian language (Seifert, 2007). These overt markers of Christian influence among campus spaces, traditions, and policies may serve as a frequent reminder to religiously minoritized students of their minoritized status, which may negatively impact their sense of belonging. In other cases, the impact of Christian privilege is more difficult to observe as it operates at the systemic level, providing the social and ideological scaffolding which keeps power concentrated in the hands of the majority.

It is important to acknowledge both the easily observable and deeper systemic forms of Christian privilege as we consider its impact on religiously minoritized students. Students may find it easier to identify and articulate the former, but may fail to recognize the presence or influence of the latter. Therefore, it is critical that higher education researchers actively engage both in their analyses.

College Students' Sense of Belonging

College students' sense of belonging is a well-researched topic due to the strong connection between sense of belonging and student success; however, there is still no well-defined common understanding of what belonging actually means across the literature (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019; Fernández et al., 2023). Samuel Museus, Varaxy Yi, and Natasha Saelua (2018) define a sense of belonging as "students' psychological connection to the community" (p. 468), and Michelle Samura (2016) points out that belonging is not a fixed state, but rather is a dynamic process which continues to change and evolve throughout each student's college experience. Developing a strong sense of belonging may be associated with feelings of acceptance resulting in greater happiness and wellbeing (Civitci, 2015); feeling like one is important, valued, and supported within the campus community (Hausmann, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012; Dutcher et al., 2022); having enough social relationships to feel connected to the institution (Dutcher et al., 2022); and being actively engaged on campus (Fan et al., 2021). Importantly, the greater a sense of belonging students experience, the greater the level of satisfaction they are likely to have about their college experience (Fan et al., 2021).

On the other hand, failing to develop a strong sense of belonging can have a deleterious effect on students. For example, students who report a lower sense of belonging have a higher likelihood of developing depressive symptoms (Dutcher et al., 2022) and may experience a negative impact on mental health overall (Museus et al., 2018). A low sense of belonging is also associated with lower retention rates (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019; Fan et al., 2021; Fernández et al., 2023) as well as lower academic

motivation (Fernández et al., 2023) and achievement (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019). Given these associations, understanding the factors that both promote and inhibit a sense of belonging for college students, especially minoritized students who already face a number of systemic barriers, is essential.

Research indicates that overall, students with minoritized identities tend to have a lower sense of belonging than non-minoritized students (Strayhorn, 2012; Fan et al., 2021). For students with minoritized cultural identities, whether or not they feel connected to their culture in college affects their sense of belonging (Museus et al., 2018). When they feel like they have to distance themselves from their culture and assimilate to fit in with the broader campus culture, culturally minoritized students often feel a lower sense of belonging; likewise, when they are able to maintain a positive connection to their culture, their sense of belonging increases (Museus et al., 2018). In addition, when culturally minoritized students feel that the values of the institution align with their own personal and cultural values, they also tend to feel that they fit in more with the social environment, leading to a greater sense of belonging (Fernández et al., 2023). This also applies to the alignment of values associated with students' homes and families. When students feel at home on campus, this may positively impact their sense of belonging (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020), especially when they feel that their home life and campus life have some degree of similarity and continuity (Museus et al., 2018).

Samuel Museus, Varaxy Yi, and Natasha Saelua (2018) argue that colleges and universities have a responsibility to take an active role in providing these positive, affirming environments for minoritized students:

> Postsecondary institutions must also convey clear messages that validate students and affirm that their cultural communities are valued by their institutions. … When leaders take such opportunities to acknowledge the relevance of various cultural communities, they can sense salient signals to those communities that they are indispensable to the campus. (p. 481).

Such intentional messaging may make students with minoritized identities feel seen and appreciated, thereby increasing their sense of belonging and building an awareness that they are important to the institution. Likewise, Alison Faith Kelly and Hilda Mary Mulrooney (2019) find that students identify the allocation of university resources as a factor contributing to their sense of belonging, reinforcing how important it is for institutional leadership to consider the impact that their choices, from messaging to funding, can have on students' sense of belonging.

While researchers often associate belonging with students' relationships with other people on campus, belonging also occurs within the relationship between students and their college environments (Museus et al., 2017; Museus & Chang, 2021). Focusing on belonging only at the level of human interactions fails to acknowledge the significant role that the physical environment plays in this process, thereby closing opportunities to consider ways to support students through intentional places of belonging. Lisel Alice Murdock-Perriera, Kathryn Boucher, Evelyn Carter, and Mary Murphy (2019) define places of belonging on college campuses as "social and learning environments that include intentional and systematic practices that reduce threats to students' sense of belonging and support students' feelings that they are valued and respected members of

the campus community" (p. 309). By creating welcoming environments and places of belonging for students, any personally and socially based interventions implemented by institutions are more likely to be successful (Murdock-Perriera, 2019).

Need For Welcoming Spaces

Because systemic privilege is much harder to see and therefore also much tougher to tackle, university professionals seeking to support religiously minoritized students typically—understandably—direct their focus toward reducing more overt forms of religious privilege and marginalization on campus. One way to do this is by focusing on establishing welcoming spaces for religiously minoritized students. Alyssa Bryant (2006) argues that "as microcosms of American society, colleges and universities in the U. S. must . . . endeavor to create campus climates that are welcoming to students from all faith traditions" (p. 2). To that end, researchers have offered many practical suggestions for how to create these welcoming spaces through programming, organizations, and activities.

Among the recommendations researchers have made to cultivate a sense of belonging for religiously minoritized students are hosting speakers on spiritual topics (Astin et al., 2011b), establishing interfaith living communities (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014), hosting interfaith service projects (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014; Edwards, 2016), conducting interfaith forums and dialogues on campus (Fairchild & Blumenfeld, 2007; Astin et al., 2011b; Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014; Edwards, 2016), and creating spaces for quiet reflection (Astin et al., 2011b). Having "space for support and spiritual expression" on campus creates a greater sense of welcome and therefore increases student

satisfaction, leading to more positive student outcomes (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014, p. 58); in turn, greater student satisfaction is linked to increased mental well-being and persistence among college students as well (Bowman & Small, 2012), also supporting their success.

However, not everyone agrees that creating safe spaces for students is beneficial. Some critics of safe spaces argue that having such spaces carries the potential to isolate students from one another and may shut down challenging interactions across racial, cultural, religious, and/or ideological difference (Harpalani, 2017). On the other hand, designating safe spaces for minoritized students may also create opportunities for bold discussions, encouraging students to "debate and exchange different perspectives that are marginalized elsewhere" (Harpalani, 2017, p. 149). In addition, safe spaces may provide social, behavioral, and emotional benefits for religiously minoritized students seeking community and support (Coley et al., 2022).

Safe spaces for religiously minoritized students typically include having an actual physical space for religious and spiritual practices. Examples of physical safe spaces would be prayer and meditation rooms or a multifaith center on campus (Edwards, 2016). Many religiously minoritized college students in the United States do not have such a designated space on their campuses, while Christian religious spaces on campus are relatively common in contrast, demonstrating that having this kind of space is a marker of privilege (Seifert, 2007). Therefore, initiatives to create physical spaces where religiously minoritized students can observe their religious and spiritual practices would signify a

shift toward greater equity. Vinay Harpalani (2017) supports the assertion that the presence—or lack thereof—of safe spaces on campus is an extended function of power:

> As an overarching matter, the key requirement for safe spaces to function is control. Minority students must feel a sense of control: that they control the activities that occur in these spaces, and that university administrators who run particular programs are meeting their specific needs. They typically do not have this sense of control elsewhere on predominantly white campuses, where they often feel marginalized. For minority students, this sense of control is more significant than having any particular number or percentage of same-race peers in a given space. (p. 163)

While Vinay Harpalani is writing in reference to racial minorities here, similar dynamics exist with regard to religiously minoritized students as well. The lack of control religiously minoritized students may feel in many spaces on otherwise Christian-centered campuses could potentially be offset by the presence of these safe, welcoming spaces, thereby affirming their value and increasing their sense of belonging.

Hindu Students

The literature in this chapter so far has focused on religiously minoritized students in general, but the focus of this study is Hindu students in particular. The literature on Hindu students is relatively scant, but there is a growing interest within higher education research in studies which focus on students with religiously minoritized identities, including Hindu students. Some studies recognize Hindu students with their data as one group among several other populations. An early example of this is the 2001 College

Students' Beliefs and Values Survey, in which researchers collected responses to a standard set of questions from students with a variety of religious identities. Among the participants, approximately 0.7% of the national sample were Hindu students. One area about which students were surveyed involves frequency of religious practices. Researchers found that 22% of Hindu students self-reported frequently attending religious services, and 79% of Hindu students reported praying, with 33% saying they pray daily (Bryant, 2006). Students were also asked about how comfortable they are discussing their religion with others. 20.5% of Hindu students reported frequently discussing Hinduism in class, 31.6% with friends, and 35.1% with family. On the other hand, 37% of the Hindu students surveyed reported that they were uncomfortable discussing religious matters (Bryant, 2006). The level of comfort Hindu students have discussing their religion in class is a likely indicator of the level of belonging they feel on their respective campuses. The fact that nearly one-third of the students surveyed reported actively feeling discomfort shows that this is a serious issue which needs to be addressed.

Hindu students are also included in a 2022 study by Jonathan Coley, Dhruba Das, and Gary Adler about the prevalence of Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim student organizations on campuses across the United States. Having dedicated groups on campus for students with minoritized religious identities is one way to provide them with safe spaces that reduce feelings of isolation and unbelonging (Bryant, 2006; Samuel, 2019; Coley et al., 2022). Culturally speaking, as Hindu students often fall within the broader category of Asian and Asian American students, research also indicates that Asian

American students experience positive outcomes by participating in Asian American clubs and organizations (Bowman et al., 2015). Michelle Samura (2016) also notes in her study of Asian American college students that culturally-specific student organizations provide important spaces in which these students may nurture a deeper sense of belonging.

Jonathan Coley, Dhruba Das, and Gary Adler (2022) note that little research has been done regarding religiously minoritized student organizations in U. S. colleges and universities. After analyzing a database of 1,953 four-year, not-for-profit colleges and universities in the United States, they found that 66% of these campuses have no religiously minoritized organizations whatsoever, and only 5% of schools have Hindu student organizations (Coley et al., 2022). This means that 95% of the colleges and universities in the United States have no student groups providing community and connectedness for Hindu students. Likewise, in a study of spiritual support offered to Hindu students at U. S. colleges and universities, Asha Shipman (2020) reveals that though some institutions have part-time or volunteer staff supporting Hindu students, only three schools in the country employ full-time Hindu chaplains: Yale, Princeton, and Georgetown.

Schools that have higher numbers of international students are more likely to have supportive organizations for Hindu students, primarily because a significant—and growing—number of international students in the United States are from India (Coley at al., 2022). According to the 2021-22 Open Doors report, there were 199,182 Indian students studying in the United States during that time period, representing a 19%

increase over the previous year, and making up nearly 21% of all international students in United States colleges and universities (Institute of International Education, 2022). If the number of Indian international students continues to grow, their increasing population may bring greater visibility to the importance of making Hindu students feel welcome in years to come.

The Complexity of Hindu Identity

Hinduism is a richly diverse and complex set of beliefs and traditions, and Hindu students bring all of this richness and complexity with them to their respective campuses. To understand the cultural and religious complexities of Hindu identity, it is helpful to learn some demographics about Hinduism worldwide. Of the approximately one billion Hindus in the world, 94% live in India, and 99% live somewhere in South Asia (Pew Research Center, 2012). The United States has the seventh largest Hindu population at 1.79 million, coming in behind Sri Lanka (2.83 million), Pakistan (3.33 million), Indonesia (4.05 million), Bangladesh (13.52 million), Nepal (24.17 million), and India (973.75 million), making Hinduism primarily—but not exclusively—an Asian religion (Pew Research Center, 2012). Hinduism is historically associated with Indian history and culture, though the modern Hindu cultural landscape is far more complicated thanks to the global diaspora. Among those who have Indian ancestry, Hindus living in diaspora also sometimes identify more with the customs and traditions of their residential country and, due to assimilation, may feel little connection to Indian culture and traditions. Self-identifying as Hindu does not necessarily mean that a person is religious and/or spiritually connected to Hindu beliefs or traditions (Rao, 2020). As such, Hindu students

in the United States often have complicated cultural and religious identities, especially children of immigrants who grow up living in the space between the culture of their parents and the culture of the United States.

In addition, ethnically South Asian Hindu students may also be affected by the "model minority" stereotype. Asian and Asian American students are often stereotyped as financially successful and academically high-achieving, and as a result, may be assumed to need less attention, not more (Park & Chang, 2010), allowing them to "face challenges that are hidden by the 'model minority' myth" (Harpalani, 2013, p. 143). This "de-minoritization" can leave South Asian American students' needs and experiences under-acknowledged in comparison to other minoritized groups (Park & Chang, 2010). For example, a Pakistani participant in Edith Gnanadass's study of South Asian American racial identity felt that being South Asian American was a challenge in higher education. With regard to college admissions, she was quoted as follows:

> It's difficult being South Asian, I think when you're looking in academia. South Asians are so well placed, they do so well as students, as administrators, as faculty, that they don't fall into that category of disadvantaged groups. They're a minority, but they're not a disadvantaged group. (Gnanadass, 2016, p. 184)

For this participant, the equation of her own minoritization with being "disadvantaged" did not feel applicable, capturing the complexities inherent in being part of a so-called model minority. Given this apparent contradiction, the needs of South Asian Hindu students as religious minorities could be masked by the associated South Asian stereotype

of high achievement, causing them to receive less attention than is needed to create greater equity and reduce religious marginalization for Hindu students.

Another potential source of marginalization for Hindu students is the lack of religious literacy about Hinduism among students, faculty, and staff, which is a common problem among student affairs professionals (Stewart & Kocet, 2011). Hindu students may either feel the burden of needing to educate those around them about Hindu beliefs (Edwards, 2016), or may choose to stay silent and let stereotypes, misperceptions, or discriminatory ideas persist. Sachi Edwards (2016) gives the following example:

> Hindus, for instance, may find themselves in a position where they have to rationalize the concept of reincarnation or the existence of multiple deities, while their Christian peers are not likely to encounter such bewilderment at the idea of a single lifetime or god. (p. 175).

In this example, there is a pressure not only for Hindu students to educate non-Hindu peers about Hinduism, but also to describe Hindu beliefs and traditions in comparison to Christianity, resulting in Christian beliefs remaining the central reference point even when the intended focus is on Hinduism. The disparity in experience between Hindu students feeling pressured to educate their peers compared to Christian students who carry no such burden, as well as the positioning of Christianity as the central reference point in inter-religious discussions, are both a function of Christian privilege. When Hindu students repackage Hindu beliefs in Christianized terms, drawing oversimplified comparisons in order to make them more understandable or acceptable to the majority, the result is that this watered-down version of Hinduism does not accurately reflect

Hindu beliefs or traditions (Chander, 2013). To reduce the burden upon Hindu students to educate the campus community about their beliefs and traditions, researchers argue that professionals working in student affairs should prioritize religious literacy as a key competency-building area (Stewart & Kocet, 2011) and assume the primary responsibility for building a religiously competent and well-informed campus population.

Overall, however, interreligious engagement on campus is not always burdensome or problematic for religiously minoritized students. In fact, it can be a positive experience for students, as it has the potential to facilitate growth and development and increase knowledge and awareness (Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021); however, coercive experiences like proselytization can have a negative effect on students, making them feel uncomfortable on campus and potentially discouraging them from engaging in interreligious exchanges altogether (Shaheen et al., 2022). While respectful exchanges with non-Hindu students can bring positive experiences, encountering proselytism can cause discomfort and negatively impact Hindu students' experiences of belonging. Hindu students are often targeted by proselytizers on campus (Shipman, 2020), making this an important issue for those seeking to create more inclusive campuses for Hindu students.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Religious Pluralism Theory

As a category of analysis, religious identity has remained understudied in the field of higher education research, being largely subsumed within the broader category of culture and ethnicity (Edwards, 2016; Small, 2020). Therefore, in contrast, it is critical to

employ a theoretical framework which takes what Yoruba Mutakabbir and Tariqah Nuriddin (2016) call a "religiously responsive approach." They write:

> A religiously responsive approach can be modeled after a culturally responsive approach. However, the term "culturally" is not exactly relevant to issues of religions, faith, belief, and spirituality, or lack thereof. Student affairs practitioners that use religiously responsive practices hold high expectations for student engagement, value the religious resources of students, and encourage sociopolitical awareness of all students, but especially religious minority students. (p. 90)

It is important to recognize that "research, policies, and campus practices suffer due to a lack of existing critical theory focused on religious identity, [which means that] one must be created" (Small, 2020, p. 54). Critical religious pluralism theory answers the call for the type of religiously responsive approach Murakabbir and Nuriddin (2016) are inviting.

As with critical race theory, critical religious pluralism theory takes systemic power differentials into account, recognizing that historical structures of Christian-centered power and privilege have shaped—and continue to shape—our institutions and condition knowledge in ways so deeply embedded that they are often rendered invisible (Seifert, 2007; Small, 2020). For this reason, identifying and dismantling religious privilege—especially Christian privilege—is a central focus of critical religious pluralism theory in the context of U. S. higher education (Small, 2020).

Critical religious pluralism theory (CRPT) is formed around seven tenets, which are as follows—quoting directly from Jenny Small:

1. CRPT declares that the subordination of non-Christian (including nonreligious) individuals to Christian individuals has been built into the society of the United States, as well as institutionalized on college campuses. (p. 62)
2. CRPT critically examines the intertwined nature of religion and culture, and embraces an intersectional analysis of religious identity with race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, immigration status, socioeconomic class, and all other forms of social identity. (p. 62)
3. CRPT exposes Christian privilege and Christian hegemony in society, as well as the related concept of the false neutral of secularism. (p. 62)
4. At the individual level, CRPT advocates for a pluralistic inclusion of all religious, secular, and spiritual identities, recognizing the liberatory potential of these identities upon individuals' lives. (p. 62)
5. At the institutional level, CRPT advocates for the field of higher education to utilize a religiously pluralistic lens in all areas of research, policy, and practice, accounting for power, privilege, marginalization, and oppression. (p. 62)
6. At the systemic level, CRPT advocates for religious pluralism as the means for resolving religious conflict in the United States. (p. 62)
7. CRPT prioritizes the voices of individuals with minoritized religious identities and those with pluralistic commitments in the work toward social transformation. (p. 62)

These seven tenets of critical religious pluralism theory collectively support a justice-centered agenda, aiming to counter the deep-seated effects of Christian privilege upon

religiously minoritized populations. Conflict resolution, personal liberation, and positive social change are all goals that Jenny Small explicitly references in CRPT, transparently and unapologetically revealing her objectives. Importantly, CRPT clarifies that Christian privilege is widespread in the United States and indiscriminately pervades our institutions, making the relevance and applicability of CRPT widespread as well.

An important feature of critical religious pluralism theory is its ability to direct our focus to specific areas in which Christian privilege has become entrenched: in "research, policy and practice;" in presumptions of secularism and neutrality; and broadly in our educational institutions. In this way, CRPT is more than a means by which to produce an academic analysis; rather, it is a call to action. By applying CRPT in ways that expose how Christian privilege has marginalized, and continues to marginalize, religiously minoritized groups and individuals, researchers can provide practical recommendations for how to drive efforts to create greater equity.

CRPT also pushes us to participate in research that is intersectionally engaged, actively resisting the potential to address religion in isolation. To work effectively toward decolonizing our institutions from religious privilege, it is essential to work cooperatively and recognize that no form of privilege operates in a vacuum. Critical religious pluralism theory places religious identity in direct conversation with "race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, immigration status, socioeconomic class, and all other forms of social identity" (Small, 2020, p. 62), while simultaneously acknowledging the uniqueness of religion's role and function for both individuals and society.

Theoretical Frameworks Used in Comparable Studies

Though Hindu college students are still an understudied group (Bowman et al., 2014; Small, 2015; Mutakkabir & Nuriddin, 2016), the literature on Hindu students is growing. This increasing focus, especially by newer scholars, reflects a response to the call for more research in this area, which supports the argument that this is a critical research gap to fill. However, a common feature among these studies is a strong focus on ethnicity over religious identity, and/or bundling religion and ethnicity together and discussing them as if they were a single entity. Therefore, the theoretical frameworks many scholars employ to carry out these studies are geared toward understanding the dynamics of cultural and ethnic identities and, as such, offer analyses that are insufficient for understanding the contours of Hindu identity specifically as a religious identity.

While these studies are making a meaningful contribution to the growing body of research about Hindu students by bringing visibility to Hindu, South Asian, and South Asian American students, there is still a need for a stronger focus on Hindu identity specifically as a religious identity. The inaccurate equation of religion with culture can serve as a form of erasure which conceals and perpetuates Christian privilege by shifting the conversation away from religion, absorbing it within broader and more prominent conversations about racial privilege and power. By using critical religious pluralism theory, the distinction between religion and culture becomes more apparent, allowing a different level of conversation and analysis to take place regarding religiously minoritized student experiences in higher education.

Critical Race Theory and DesiCrit

One example of a recent study addressing Hindu student identity is Sridevi Rao's (2020) dissertation entitled *Be(com)ing Desi: A Critical Exploration of South Asian (Indian and Pakistani) College Student Identity*. In this study, Rao uses DesiCrit, a South-Asian focused subset of critical race theory, as the theoretical framework to support her analysis. Critical race theory has inspired a multitude of offshoots like LatCrit, TribalCrit, AsianCrit, and critical white studies, all of which focus on unique ethnic identities and how their specificities demand unique analytical frameworks within a broader critical race theory-based analysis. DesiCrit is such a subset within critical race theory, focusing specifically on the complex dynamics of diasporic South Asian cultural identities in the United States.

Critical race theory is a justice-oriented theoretical framework which aims to identify and critique systemic forms of racial power and privilege, with the ultimate goal being to effect change and bring greater equity to our social institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The core of critical race theory is based upon the premises that race is at the heart of the organization of American society, and that racism is a normal, not unusual, part of that society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory continues to play an important role in higher education research in order "to capture the unique and continuously overlooked and/or dismissed experiences of those historically marginalized in higher education spaces" (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015, p. 217). Therefore, critical race theory offers a framework through which social critique and analysis can occur. In the context of higher education, critical race theory serves to identify and disrupt the

inherently racist structures which support educational institutions, with a primary focus on white supremacy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As a way to disrupt dominant narratives supporting institutional racism, scholarship employing critical race theory often centers around personal narratives and counter-stories (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015), creating space for voices which might otherwise be lost among privilege-bolstered narratives and aggregate data.

Introduced by Vinay Harpalani in 2013, DesiCrit examines the racialization of South Asian Americans and the dynamics of South Asian American identity. He explores the tension between how South Asian Americans understand themselves versus how they are perceived by others, recognizing that there is constant negotiation between the two (Harpalani, 2013). When Vinay Harpalani discusses religious identity in his theoretical framework, he addresses religion specifically related to the dynamics of cultural identity and racialization. For example, he incorporates the topic of religion into his discussion of the tension between South Asian identity and whiteness. Regarding South Asian assimilation to white culture, he writes:

> However, such assimilation is often challenged through ascriptions of "otherness" which is the ascription of religion, culture, language, and other statuses to negate claims to whiteness. For example, Christianity may serve as honorary whiteness and Islam as otherness, although religion, language, and other characteristics do not always constitute racialized symbols. (Harpalani, 2013, p. 121)

In other words, Vinay Harpalani argues that Asian religions are often racialized in service of racial social hierarchies in the United States. This dynamic offers one explanation

regarding the conflation of race, culture, and religion in many discussions regarding Hindu identity, as the blurring of these boundaries serves a systemic function by aligning Christianity with whiteness. As such, the thematic separation of religion from race and culture, as this study proposes, has the potential to disrupt one aspect of the strategic racialization of religion and the power structures that this racialization both obscures and supports.

Vinay Harpalani also addresses the historical racial ambiguity associated with Hinduism, pointing out that during the first wave of Indian immigration to the United States in the early 1900's, all Indian immigrants were labeled "Hindoos" in spite of the fact that a majority were actually Sikh (Harpalani, 2013). He also notes that the racial classification of these so-called "Hindoos" was often based on skin color, which varies dramatically among people from India; as such, Indian immigrants were classified as brown, black, or white depending on skin tone, further illustrating the racial ambiguity associated with both Indianness and Hinduism historically in the United States (Harpalani, 2013).

Returning to Sridevi Rao's (2020) study, DesiCrit forms the theoretical foundation regarding her investigation of Indian and Pakistani college student identity, pursuing the question of how students "describe and relate to their multiple identities" both before and during college (p. 72). Her study includes both international and domestic students with 21 total participants, and she found that these two groups experienced college and negotiated their South Asian identities differently (Rao, 2020). Participants represented a range of religious identities (Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and

Christian), though an overwhelming majority of participants identified as Hindu. While Sridevi Rao primarily interviewed students about their cultural identities, she identifies religious identity as one of the only topics that all 21 of her participants addressed in their interviews.

Sridevi Rao (2020) notes that "for some South Asian students religion is so intertwined with their race, ethnicity, and culture that they were hard to separate," with one of her participants even describing herself as "culturally Hindu" (p. 127). She captures the complexity of Hindu identity in her work, noting that Hindu identity often operates separately from actual Hindu beliefs or practices. One participant named Abhi is quoted as saying, "I think on paper, like, I have to say, I'm Hindu. But I'm not Hindu, though" (Rao, 2020, p. 131). In other words, Hindu identity can function like an ascribed status over which one has little control rather than being defined by voluntary belief. Sridevi Rao (2020) notes that many of her participants' religious beliefs and behaviors shifted after entering college, with a majority growing less devoted and identifying less with traditional religion. This reduction in religious commitment is related in part to students' separation from religiously observant family members (Rao, 2020).

However, while religious commitment appears to decrease among Sridevi Rao's participants, commitment to ethnic identity seems to increase. Many students were able to find community and connection through ethnic—not religious—student organizations. All ten domestic student participants mentioned being part of the South Asian student organization at their university, with one student describing the organization as "a family away from family" (Rao, 2020, p. 154). The organization provided friendships,

community, support, and cultural awareness for participants. One participant named Rohan stated, “All these people were so similar to me and … they actually really opened up my eyes to, like, a lot of different parts of the culture, like different types of dance, like all this stuff, and I got really excited about that” (Rao, 2020, p. 154). Other participants reported that they did not feel a sense of belonging in the South Asian student organization and instead found community with other campus organizations unaffiliated with either religion or ethnicity (Rao, 2020).

Sridevi Rao reads the complicated nature of religion, race, and culture among South Asian students through the lens of DesiCrit, focusing especially on the process of racialization. She notes that “most of the ways students were racialized were through avenues they could not necessarily control, like their names, accents, or skin color… However, by performing their race and religion in a certain way they can control parts of how they become racialized by others” (Rao, 2020, p. 163). Awareness of how others may perceive them seemed to shape students’ behaviors in both subtle and overt ways. For example, students may perform in a less outwardly religious way among their peers while at college, and then perform in a more religious way in front of family and elders at home (Rao, 2020). Different social pressures and expectations in different environments may impact students’ actions in significant ways.

In reference to the secularizing effect college may have upon some religiously minoritized students, Sridevi Rao (2020) writes:

> This may be particularly true for students who practice a minoritized religion due to fears of being racialized in a particular way. While students described this

> process of secularization by choice, the DesiCrit lens encourages us to think about the ways (white) American norms of religious practice exert pressure on students to negotiate their religious identities in a way that does not draw attention to difference. (p. 165)

With most domestic participants describing themselves as questioning religious beliefs and identity in college, Sridevi Rao (2020) suggests that students "could be avoiding the informal racialization that comes from participating in a minoritized religion" (pp. 176-177). In this way, the complex relationship between religion and culture may play out in numerous ways for students seeking a greater sense of belonging on their college campuses.

Asian Identity Consciousness Model

In his dissertation *Faith and Chai: Exploring Sense of Belonging and Intersections of Cultural and Spiritual Identities in South Asian American College Students*, Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019) details the experiences of Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Sikh college students who identify as South Asian American. Out of his 12 participants, three identify as Hindu, one as Zoroastrian/Hindu, and two as Sikh/Hindu. Samuel uses the Asian American identity consciousness model as the theoretical framework supporting his analysis. Through this model, Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019) focuses on identity development among South Asian American college students. He notes that this model expands the concept of student development "beyond the construct of stages," considering "an individual's context and environmental factors" as

well as “immigration history, ethnic attachment, and familial and community factors which lead to how Asian Americans may experience college” (p. 31).

The Asian American identity conscious model is a nonlinear identity development framework developed with an influence from critical race theory (Accapadi, 2012). In applying the Asian American identity consciousness model, Samuel draws upon the concept of polyculturalism as an alternative to multiculturalism. Whereas multiculturalism embraces a welcoming acceptance of diverse cultural identities, polyculturalism goes beyond acceptance and demands active engagement and the attempt to understand the many cultures which exist within a given community (Samuel, 2019). “Polyculturalism is distinct from multiculturalism in that it requires us to understand the ways in which our cultural histories intersect, draw parallels in the experiences and social location of communities, and sustain an emancipatory, anti-racist educational effort.” (Accapadi, 2012, p. 71).

In his qualitative study, Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019) seeks to identify specific factors mediating South Asian identity among college students. He found that “family support, student organization involvement, and South Asian American solidarity” were the three primary points of entry for the development of identity consciousness among student participants (p. 169). Furthermore, external influence and the perceptions of others were also key mediating factors in students’ identity negotiation, with experiencing microaggressions playing a key role (Samuel, 2019). He also specifically addresses the role spiritual identities play in his findings: “Participants noted how their spiritual affiliation informed their South Asian identity and vice-versa. Findings in the

study point to how this other social identity was interdependent on racial identity consciousness" (Samuel, 2019, p. 170). In other words, he found that students' religious and cultural identities were frequently interacting with and influencing one another.

Importantly, Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019) found that participants found their religious identities to be important to them, but "they were also keen to acknowledge that their spiritual identities could only take space in certain environments" (p. 117). Students described leading "double lives" which included westernizing the pronunciation of their names, starkly separating home life from school life, not eating Indian food at school, and remaining silent in class (Samuel, 2019). They also reported instances of both bullying and microaggressions from classmates and teachers based on a lack of understanding about students' religious beliefs and traditions (Samuel, 2019). Some students also noted the responsibility they felt to educate others about their religious identities (Samuel, 2019).

Most participants noted how important prayer was in their lives, associating prayer with childhood memories and family connection, referencing parents and grandparents in their discussions about religious rituals and traditions. They also noted offering prayers to seek divine help before exams and before the first day of school, and prayers of thanks when they experienced success and accomplishments (Samuel, 2019). Regarding prayer in a college environment, Samuel (2019) writes:

> While many participants described that their spiritual practices changed somewhat upon coming to college due to the fact that they were no longer living with family, some participants found that spiritually-based student organizations

> allowed space for community prayer. For example, Aishwarya described how joining the Hindu Student Association helped her understand unique contexts of Hinduism she did not gather in her upbringing. (p. 127)

In this way, belonging to a Hindu student organization not just allowed for the expression of Aishwarya's religious identity, but also served as a source of growth and enrichment.

However, students also commonly described the need for space for worship and reflection on or near campus, noting that most off-campus temples and worship spaces are far away, and many students do not have cars and therefore do not have easy access to them (Samuel, 2019). When asked to identify changes they would like to see at their university, participants indicated that they wanted "an increase in the number of reflection spaces on campus, along with better marketing of current spaces, is needed" (Samuel, 2019, p. 129). One student specifically indicated that he would like to see the addition of a temple space for Hindus and Buddhists on campus as well. Interestingly, the lack of physical spiritual spaces on campus led some students to feel "forced" to meet and build relationships with other students on campus with similar religious identities (Samuel, 2019, p. 138) as an unintended social consequence.

The most powerful source of inclusion Justin Thankachan Samuel identified in his findings was not related to physical spaces, but rather to personal connection with others. One Hindu student participant named Pooja shared that bringing friends to school-

sponsored Hindu holiday celebrations like *Holi*[1] and *Diwali*[2] made her feel proud and socially connected. Regarding the annual Holi festival celebrated on the university lawn, Pooja remarks: "I went my freshman year with my roommate and we had a crazy awesome time and I was like, 'I need to basically bring everybody I know next year'" (Samuel, 2019, p. 138). This need for personal connection appeared to be lacking in some areas, though, as students also noted a lack of South Asian visibility among mentors, staff, and faculty—especially in non-STEM fields (Samuel, 2019).

The practical recommendations to come from Justin Thankachan Samuel's study validate the research supporting large-scale efforts like celebrating religious holidays, providing religiously-affiliated student organizations, creating welcoming spaces, and increasing visibility on campus to build a sense of belonging and inclusion for religious minority students. One student participant also made pointed comments about the additional resources and support institutions need to make such initiatives successful. Samuel (2019) quotes her as saying the following:

> Hire culturally competent people who can really connect to students, because I the end of the day, even creating organizations, creating buildings, that doesn't mean anyone's gonna walk in. I think it is so much more about the people in it, who

[1] Holī is an annual holiday in Hindu traditions known in English as the Festival of Colors. During Holī, people celebrate by throwing colored powder at each other in anticipation of the bright colors of the coming spring. The significance of Holī is a celebration of the love between the deity Krishna and his consort Radha, as well as a reminder of the "dramatic balancing of … the world destruction and world renewal, the world pollution followed by world purification" (Marriott, 2006, p. 110).

[2] Diwali (also called *Dīvālī* or *Dīpāvalī*, is one of the most significant festivals in Hindu traditions, known more commonly in English as the Festival of Lights, during which Hindus celebrate the triumph of light over darkness and good over evil. It is a holy day commemorating the return of Lord Rāma to his hometown of Ayodhya after fourteen years of exile in the Hindu epic text, the *Ramayana* (Bahadur, 2006).

have access to the resources they need to do the programming that they need. (p. 142)

He additionally notes that South Asian American visibility needs to extend to professional roles like "mental health counselors, dining hall chefs, and student affairs professionals" (Samuel, 2019, p. 143).

Cultural Historical Activity Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Critical Race Theory

In her 2016 dissertation entitled "Perpetual Outsiders?: Learning Race in the South Asian American Experience," Edith Gnanadass (2016) examines the dynamics of racialization in South Asian American identity formation, including discussions about religious identities. Her primary theoretical framework is cultural historical activity theory, though she also pulls from postcolonial theory and critical race theory to support her analysis. In her study, Edith Gnanadass problematizes the way South Asian religious identity is perceived to be an aspect of cultural identity and places this association in historical context using postcolonial theory.

She describes how British colonizers rhetorically aligned religion with race and culture in their understandings of racial hierarchies during the British occupation of India, thereby turning religion into a racist category (Gnanadass, 2016). She references Ania Loomba in her literature review, noting that Loomba intentionally treats religion as a racial category in her analysis explicitly because of this colonial conflation of religion, race, and culture, arguing that one cannot deconstruct such colonial hierarchies without fully understanding them in the same way they were formed. Ania Loomba (2009) argues that "by illuminating the centrality of religion and culture to the development of the idea

of race, can help us retheorize the idea of racial difference in a much more radical way" (p. 508). Therefore, self-consciously blurring the boundaries among religion, race, and culture serves an anti-racist agenda in Loomba's eyes. This perspective contrasts with Jenny Small's (2020) argument that religion and culture must be considered separately as a means by which to understand and ultimately dismantle religious privilege.

Edith Gnanadass (2016) also notes how religious identity sometimes plays a unique role for diasporic South Asians who feel removed from their ancestral cultures and traditions. Purnima Bose (2008), as cited in Gnanadass, writes: "Hinduism has become an identitarian outlet for Indians experiencing the cultural, social, and geographical dislocations association with immigration, particularly in the last two decades" (p. 12), and also notes that this nostalgic form of diasporic Hinduism is "increasingly patterned on observances associated with Christianity, the dominant tradition in the United States" (Bose, 2008, p. 25). There are many social, cultural, and political dimensions to this form of often conservative Hindu revivalism (Gnanadass, 2016), further demonstrating the complexity of how religious and cultural identities interact for Hindu Americans.

Supported by elements of postcolonial theory and critical race theory, Edith Gnanadass performs her primary analysis through the lens of cultural historical activity theory. The focus of activity theory is upon the agency of the individual who is both actively shaping and being shaped by their environment (Gnanadass, 2016). In cultural historical activity theory, the roles of historical and cultural context are viewed as important mediators in this process. As such, this theoretical lens values multiple voices

and perspectives which highlight agency and active social identity negotiation. Gnanadass (2016) notes that there is a knowledge gap in scholarship presenting South Asian Americans as a non-homogenous group. She writes:

> Mutivoicedness and historicity address this gap by showing the diversity, multiple perspectives, different subject positions, and power differentials within SAAs [South Asian Americans] themselves and American society at large. This will hopefully not only reveal the complexities and nuances of the SAA experience, thus challenging the monolithic and *othering* construction described above, but also the ways in which SAAs have pushed and shaped American society, which is a much needed contribution to the literature. (p. 63).

In her research, focused on this multivocal approach, she interviewed South Asian American participants about how they learned about and formed their identities.

During these interviews, Edith Gnanadass observed participants blending race and religion together in their discussions. For example, one participant named Gallifrey noted how important being a Brahmin (the highest status in traditional Hindu social organization) is to his identity. Edith Gnanadass (2016) writes, "To be Brahmin (a caste) is to be Hindu (a religion) and to be Hindu is to be Indian (a race). For him, his caste and religion are part of his racial identity" (p. 126). Another participant named Satya similarly associated Indianness with Hindu identity and saw the two as "intertwined" (Gnanadass, 2016, p. 156).

However, another participant named Persis had a different perspective. Her family was from India, but they practiced the Zoroastrian religion, so for her, her Indian identity

was not tied to religious identity. Persis noted that another Indian family she knew did not call themselves Indian, saying instead, "We are Hindu," when ethnically identifying themselves. Persis is quoted as follows: "They don't call themselves Indians but Hindu is an Indian, you know, religion. Right? Hinduism. So, that's what they say" (Gnanadass, 2016, p. 137). Persis disrupted this narrative equating Hinduism with Indianness by noting that the family did not speak Indian languages, did not cook Indian food properly, and was not well-versed in Hindu—or even Indian—traditions; in this example, food, language, and traditions became the mediators of Indian identity (Gnanadass, 2016). Additionally, the religious pluralism of Indian society further complicated the association of Hinduism with Indianness in Persis's mind.

In another example of the way religious pluralism complicates Indian-Hindu identity, a participant named Satya, who came from a Hindu family, was sent to Hindu camp each summer by her parents because she "didn't have any Indian friends," as all of her Indian classmates were Christian (Gnanadass, 2016, p. 157). Satya is quoted as follows:

> So that would be a thing, they'd wear Indian clothes but they don't know a single thing about Hindi or the language or the culture because they were Christian. So I think that was for me a big struggle to grow up around because well, they're Indian, but they're not like me… so it was a culture shock in my own culture. You're not Hindu, or even Sikh, or Jain. How are you Indian? (Gnanadass, 2016, p. 157-8).

The association of religious identity with Indian authenticity again was problematized, becoming an issue which challenged the individual and her own identity negotiation.

Experiences in schools were also present in participant narratives. For example, Gallifrey remembered his school calling authorities to report his parents for child neglect when they did not send enough food to school with him on Thursdays, which were the days when his Hindu family observed religious fasting. Gallifrey noted that this experience "had a pretty big effect" on him, and his family no longer trusted the school much after this incident (Gnanadass, 2016, p. 126). The subject of diet and food choices at school entered the discussion in other ways as well, as Gallifrey stated that as Hindus his family did not eat meat, and the only vegetarian food his school provided was "a piece of bread with cheese" (Gnanadass, 2016, p. 126). In these two examples, meals were an important area in which he felt set apart from the other students, providing a feeling of unbelonging. Edith Gnanadass (2016) suggests that "if it were someone of the dominant race and religion that were fasting, a White Christian perhaps, I doubt that it would have been handled the same way by the teacher" (p. 127).

Two of Edith Gnanadass's participants noted joining South Asian fraternity and sorority organizations in college as a way of seeking out belonging and social support. Having a group sharing similar values, culture, and interests can be an important source of inclusion when students are minoritized in the broader social sphere (Bryant, 2006; Samuel, 2019; Coley, Das, & Adler, 2022). Both participants joined these organizations hoping to find a meaningful community within their universities. However, the outcomes were different for each person. Gallifrey, who joined a South Asian American fraternity,

found an important sense of belonging and encouragement from the other fraternity members and felt that his college experience was richer as a result. However, Satya's experience in a South Asian American sorority was disappointing, as she felt that she had little in common with the other sorority members and disliked the self-isolation she observed. She is quoted as follows:

> One thing I've definitely noticed in the South Asian organizations is that they only hang out with each other. They only have South Asian friends. Whereas, like me because [of] where I grew up, I don't want to make that my whole life. I want to be tied to it, but I also think I should have a balance… and I think, I now have a barrier. I'm a little bit more different than the South Asian community here at the university. (Gnanadass, 2016, p. 162)

By examining the experiences of student participants through the lens of cultural historical activity theory, Edith Gnanadass is able to identify many different mediators of identity negotiation, including food, language, clothing, organizations, and religion. Through these symbolic interactions with other people and the environment, students were able to navigate and make meaning of their South Asian identities in their own unique ways.

Theorizing Religion Separately From Culture

In the previous three studies, the researchers apply critical race theory, DesiCrit, the Asian American identity consciousness model, postcolonial theory, and cultural historical activity theory as theoretical frameworks. Each researcher uses a different lens as a means by which to understand identity formation of South Asian American college

students. Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019) does this through the lens of polyculturalism and social factors; Sridevi Rao (2020) uses the lens of perception and performance, and Edith Gnanadass (2016) uses multivocalism and historicity as a contextual lens. All of these scholars make intentional efforts to approach their participants holistically, on their own terms, allowing them to generate their own meaning with regard to religious and social identities.

In each of these studies, however, students' religious identities are treated as a facet of racial and cultural identity. In fact, the simultaneous discussions about religion, race, and culture in these studies make it difficult to parse any unique data about religious identities in particular. Justin Thankachan Samuel's (2019) findings regarding the bidirectional influence of racial and religious identities among South Asian students serve as an example of how South Asian religious identities are often heavily racialized. Edith Gnanadass (2016) and Sridevi Rao (2020) both observe study participants equating religion with cultural and racial identity in their interviews, sometimes using them interchangeably. Sridevi Rao (2020) openly acknowledges that race, ethnicity, and culture are almost impossible to separate in her study, and Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019) explicitly refers to religious identities as social identities. While it is important to note that this dynamic interplay between race, religion, and culture exists, the impact of this racialization of religion upon higher education scholarship is that any discussion of South Asian religious identities can easily be absorbed into more dominant discussions regarding race and culture, preventing meaningful discussion about the unique ways that religion itself operates within higher education institutions.

As previously noted, while religion and culture are deeply related, they are not the same (Small, 2020). By failing to use a theoretical framework that is sensitive to the unique dynamics of religion, the range of potential insights and outcomes from these studies about religious identity is limited, and conclusions about how to apply the knowledge gained from these studies may not provide enough support to increase religious inclusivity on campus. For example, higher education practitioners may be encouraged to focus on building cultural literacy instead of religious literacy, or may assume that by building greater awareness about Indian or South Asian cultural identity, this may be sufficient for understanding Hindu religious identities as well.

While both religious and cultural literacy are important, the loss of religion as a specific, targeted focus in educational research enables systemic religious privilege to remain hidden and unaddressed and Hindu students to remain underserved. In contrast, using a religiously-attuned theoretical framework like critical religious pluralism theory redirects the focus toward the specificity of religious identity and therefore toward forms of religious privilege which, as Jenny Small (2020) reminds us, are rarely addressed in culture-centered or race-centered frameworks. By focusing explicitly upon religious identity, the potential for practical applications of this study become intentionally oriented toward religious inclusion—an important distinction for religious minority students for whom spirituality is an important aspect of their identities.

Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019), Sridevi Rao (2020), and Edith Gnanadass (2016) also all address the significance of involvement in clubs and organizations. Research indicates that involvement in identity-focused student organizations tends to

have positive outcomes for minoritized college students (Bryant, 2006; Samuel, 2019; Coley et al., 2022), including Asian American students (Bowman et al., 2015). Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019) specifically identifies Hindu-affiliated organizations as a source of community, growth, and religious expression for college students in his study, which is especially important in the context of the difficulty some students have feeling like they fit in with the mainstream (Gnanadass, 2016; Samuel, 2019; Rao, 2020). Meanwhile, in her analysis, Edith Gnanadass (2016) identifies South Asian American fraternities and sororities as "important sites of racialization" for participants (p. 196). Mamta Accapadi (2005) found that participation in South Asian American sororities among South Asian American female-identified college students led to positive self-image. However, the diverging experiences of Edith Gnanadass's (2016) participants Gallifrey—who had a positive experience—and Satya—who found her experience to be isolating—show that student organizations and affinity groups are not a one-size-fits-all inclusion solution for students with minoritized identities. While they serve an important role for many students and therefore should be considered a significant source of support for religious minority students, they cannot be the only initiative universities take to improve religious inclusivity on campus.

Sridevi Rao (2020), Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019), and Edith Gnanadass (2016) describe two different outcomes of being a religiously minoritized student in a majority-centered environment. Whereas Sridevi Rao (2019) and Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019) both describe ways in which their student participants exhibit less religious behaviors when separated from religious influences or environments, like

praying less or no longer following dietary prohibitions, Edith Gnanadass (2016) references the Hindu revivalism embraced by some students as a means of gaining closeness to a religion and culture from which they are geographically isolated. Importantly, she notes that the version of Hinduism envisioned among this group is often distinct from the beliefs and traditions they might observe in India or other parts of South Asia, raising questions regarding Hindu authenticity. Edith Gnanadass's (2016) findings remind us that Hinduism is not a monolith; rather, it is a dynamic tradition, constantly evolving, taking many different forms for many different people. This is why it is critical to learn how participants uniquely understand their Hindu identities and to actively avoid making any assumptions about what any one person believes or how they choose to live out their religious identity.

Though these researchers gather useful information regarding students' religious identities in their studies, religion is not their primary reference point, so their analyses regarding religion are obscured by simultaneous cultural analysis. Justin Thankachan Samuel (2019) addresses this in his limitations section:

> Students who identified with a religion or spirituality were recruited for this study, but their actual spiritual development was not investigated. This developmental process could be a focus of a future study, especially to see similarities and differences with existing spiritual development theories. (p. 176)

In the study I have undertaken, religious identity is the main focus. By crafting interview questions which specifically seek to define and understand religious identities and experiences, more pointed data generation and associated analyses become possible. The

intentional interpretation of participant data through the lens of critical religious pluralism theory permits a very different conversation about religiously minoritized college students and their sense of belonging on campus. As such, this study serves to both complement and respond to studies which examine Hindu identity only through a cultural or racial lens.

Summary

In this review of the literature, I presented an overview of the scholarship regarding Christian privilege in higher education, college students' sense of belonging, the need for welcoming spaces, and the impact of belonging or unbelonging on religiously minoritized college students. I also surveyed the findings in existing scholarly literature about Hindu students and delved into the complexity of Hindu American identity. After giving an overview of critical religious pluralism theory, the theoretical framework for this study, I summarized and then compared three doctoral dissertations which incorporate the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory, DesiCrit, postcolonial theory, cultural historical activity theory, and the Asian American identity consciousness model to examine the identities of South Asian college students. In each of these studies, scholars used theoretical frameworks regarding race and culture to analyze the dynamics of religious identity. Finally, I argued that it was necessary to utilize a theoretical framework which has religion as its main focus, justifying my use of critical religious pluralism theory to support the current study.

Chapter 3. Research Design

In this chapter, I explain the qualitative research design choices I make in the present study, beginning with a reminder of the research questions informing this study. Next, I identify and justify my research philosophy. Then I turn my attention to the research protocol, describing my overall strategy for recruitment, data generation, and analysis. Following this, I outline ethical considerations and limitations of the study. Finally, I offer a summary overview to conclude the chapter.

Research Questions

Guiding the research process are the following research questions for this study:

- In what ways do Hindu students experience belonging at a large Midwestern public university, if at all?
- If these experiences of belonging exist in the lived experiences of Hindu students, in what ways do these experiences of belonging align with critical religious pluralism theory?

To address these research questions, it is necessary to consider individual students' thoughts, feelings, and motivations regarding their experiences of belonging within the broader context of personal history, family dynamics, cultural identity, and a myriad of other subjective factors. For this reason, a qualitative study is the most appropriate means by which to carry out this research.

Qualitative Research Approach: Emic/Etic

In this study, rather than focusing on a single methodological approach, I employ strategic qualitative methods for analysis. This takes a two-part, complementary form which we can refer to as an emic/etic methodological approach. The emic/etic approach originates in the field of linguistics, with the terms deriving from the original terminology of "phonemic" and "phonetic" (Bala et al., 2012; Markee, 2013). In this terminology, an emic approach refers to the type of research that addresses descriptively the questions of "Why?" and "How?" with a focus on individuals' lived experiences and how they make meaning of these experiences (Markee, 2013), making it overwhelmingly qualitative in nature. The emic approach is an emergent one where participants' multiple experiences are explored. In contrast, an etic approach is often interpretive (Bala et al., 2012) and comparative (Markee, 2013), allowing researchers to draw insights from descriptive data with a more universal or theoretical orientation. The etic approach is deductive, where a researcher thinks with theory or research models.

In this study, the emic approach privileges the voice of the insider. Centering participants as experts, the goal is to amplify participants' voices and reduce the voice of the researcher. The objective is to accurately and authentically describe participants' experiences in order to understand their thoughts, feelings, and motivations through their own eyes. An emic approach privileges the view from within the culture or tradition being studied—in this case, from within the perspectives of Hindu students. The primary role of the researcher in the emic portion of this study is to organize and report the data according to themes which subjectively, organically arise from the data itself—not

according to themes which are predetermined or objectively imposed. Then, during the etic phase of the study, the focus shifts toward a more analytical, interpretive process—a view self-consciously positioned from the outside looking in. In this case, that external view takes the form of a critical theoretical analytical process which is used to gain insights on a broader, systemic level. Whereas the emic allows us to identify and explore the uniqueness of participants' individual experiences, the etic moves beyond the specific, expanding the conversation to explore how insights drawn from the emic data have significance with broader implications.

Research Methods: Thematic Analysis and Theoretical Analysis

I have elected to utilize a two-part research method for this study. The first research method is thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology, which allows me to examine the lived experiences of participants on their own terms. Following is a theoretical analysis using critical religious pluralism theory to frame and interpret the qualitative data. By using this dual methodological structure, this study achieves a level of balance which would be lacking with only one of these methods for analysis. This intentional qualitative research design reflects the dynamic relationship between the personal and the systemic, both of which are essential considerations in qualitative research.

Thematic Analysis Based on Descriptive Phenomenology

The first method, engaging in thematic analysis with an emic or emergent approach, directly engages the first research question: "In what ways do Hindu students experience belonging at a large Midwestern public university, if at all?" Thematic

analysis is an appropriate research method by which to address this research question because such insights are derived by seeking out patterns and themes which emerge from the qualitative data—in this case, primarily from participant interviews. Pattern-seeking is a key principle of thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Sundler et al., 2019). Lorelli Nowell, Jill Norris, Deborah White, and Nancy Moules (2017) argue that thematic analysis is a "useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights," with exceptional versatility and adaptability (p. 2). A benefit of thematic analysis is that it is flexible enough that researchers can easily use it in concert with a number of other traditions and/or methodologies (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Braun & Clarke 2021),

A common concern among researchers regarding thematic analysis is the difficulty in guaranteeing a degree of systematization and precision in a method which has traditionally ambiguous guidelines regarding its application, leading some researchers to suggest that thematic analysis is not, in fact, a method at all (Nowell et al., 2017). This assertion derives from the belief that thematic analysis represents a skillset, not a method, which provides the foundation for other, more rigorous forms of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, Annelise Sundler, Elisabeth Lindberg, Christina Nilsson, and Lina Palmér (2019) argue that one way to promote "rigor and validity" during the analytical process is by grounding thematic analysis in a critical philosophical tradition such as descriptive phenomenology (p. 734), thereby providing greater foundational support to the overall research process. Likewise, Lorelli Nowell, Jill

Norris, Deborah White, and Nancy Moules (2017) make a similar argument, stating that "consistency and cohesion can be promoted by applying and making explicit an epistemological position that can coherently underpin the study's empirical claims" (p. 2). This is the approach I take in the present study, using thematic analysis as my primary research method while grounding it in the methods of an additional, secondary tradition—in this case, descriptive phenomenology.

In descriptive phenomenology, researchers place importance on describing an individual's lived experiences according to that person's own unique way of processing, seeing, and being in the world. Unlike in interpretive phenomenology, descriptive phenomenology does not seek to offer explanations for or interpretations of these lived experiences, but instead attempts to offer as authentically as possible a description of that person's point of view, meaning-making, and experience of living in and interacting with the world around them (Sundler et al., 2019). To achieve this depth of phenomenological description, there are certain aspects of this methodology that a researcher must practice when taking up its methods.

The first of these practices is openness, which is described as "having curiosity and maintaining an open mind when searching for meaning" (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 735). This openness requires the researcher to recognize that the participant is the expert on their own experience, and the researcher is merely there to learn from them with humility, consideration, and respect (Sundler et al., 2019). The second methodological practice to follow is "questioning pre-understanding," which means the researcher must become aware of biases, assumptions, and the impact of any previous experiences which

may affect the way they understand the data they generate (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 735). Instead of trying to suspend one's biases, though, Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, and Palmér suggest that a better alternative is relying upon questioning to combat pre-understandings and assumptions:

> Instead of using bracketing, our intention is to build on questioning as a representative way to describe what something means. Accordingly, researchers need to recognize personal beliefs, theories, or other assumptions that can restrict the researcher's openness. Otherwise, the researcher risks describing his or her own pre-understanding instead of the participants' experiences. (Sundler at al., 2019, p. 735).

Taking on a reflective attitude, the third descriptive phenomenological practice, is an effective way to combat pre-understandings alongside frequent, open-minded questioning (Sundler et al., 2019). Prioritizing reflection, or reflexivity, and being willing to criticize oneself and become more self-aware as a researcher is an integral part of conducting an effective thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), and the more transparent one can be in this reflective process, the better. It is important not only for the researcher to become more aware of their own biases and pre-understandings, but it is also essential that they share those reflections with the reader in the reporting process (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Theoretical Analysis

The second method, engaging critical theories through theoretical analysis from an etic perspective, directly engages the second research question: "If these experiences

of belonging exist in the lived experiences of Hindu students, in what ways do these experiences of belonging align with critical religious pluralism theory?" Unlike thematic analysis, in which codes and themes emerge naturally and organically from the data itself, in theoretical analysis utilizing critical theories, there is a pre-set categorical agenda with a certain set of goals and assumptions the researcher brings into their analysis. In this case, critical religious pluralism theory supplies the analytical framework through which we may view the qualitative data and, ideally, gain insights regarding Hindu students' experiences of belonging.

An important aspect of CRPT is that it is person-centered, in that it "prioritizes the voices of individuals with minoritized religious identities and those with pluralistic commitments in the work toward social transformation" (Small, 2020, p. 62). In applying CRPT, the voice of the researcher is not the key focus; rather, it is the voice—the needs, opinions, and experiences—of religiously minoritized individuals who are directly impacted by this privilege-driven marginalization. In this study, the methodological choice to pair CRPT with thematic analysis supported by descriptive phenomenology honors this principle, as this method incorporates the goal to have participants speak for themselves while the researcher strives to be an accurate and respectful reporter. I abundantly use direct quotes from participants and have employed member checking strategies as ways to attempt to authentically amplify participants' voices and maintain their integrity. In this way, these paired methods are mutually supportive.

However, there are also important distinctions between these methods. While thematic analysis helps us understand individuals' thoughts and motivations on their own

terms as a primary objective, critical theory seeks to uncover and dismantle the aspects of society which cause oppression and inequity. Jenny Small writes:

> Critical theories examine privilege and marginalization, making us aware of who holds the power in society, who receives unearned benefits, and who suffers under the weight of systemic oppression. Critical theories change society, even though the vast majority of society's members never even know the theories exist. (Small, 2020, p. 1)

Because critical religious pluralism theory has a distinct focus on the systemic inequities deriving from Christian privilege (Small, 2020), it is essential that Christian privilege be a category by which we interrogate the participant data in this phase of the study. Importantly, such an analysis requires a deep reading of the data, as indicators of Christian privilege often lie below the surface. In other words, participants do not have to overtly use the term "Christian privilege," or even directly address the ways Christian bias impacts actions, policies, or thought patterns, in order for such bias to be present and observable. In fact, because systemic privilege often operates invisibly, it is reasonable to expect that participants may be unaware of how Christian privilege may be driving the mechanics of their experience. Therefore, a critical theoretical analysis may uncover dimensions of the data which may otherwise remain hidden and upon which we may fail to reflect without applying the theoretical framework.

Importantly, theoretical analysis utilizing critical theories is not merely an intellectual exercise; for many researchers, it also guides them toward action. Rachelle Winkle-Wagner, Ashley Gaskew, and Jamila Lee-Johnson (2019) write about the

potential of using critical theory in qualitative research as a transformative, justice-oriented process, not just in terms of the impact of the research upon participants, but also in the way the research is conducted; they express that "critical theory allows researcher and participants to challenge norms that oppress marginalized communities to bring about change" (p. 11).

Recognizing that social critique has the power to be transformative, a theoretical analysis employing critical theories has the potential to help bring about real change for participants when it is directly connected to action. In this case, utilizing critical religious pluralism theory to perform a critical reading of the qualitative data may be able to bring to light some areas in which Christian privilege could affect the lives of Hindu students and impact their sense of belonging. By illuminating these areas in which such bias is present—especially when and if it has been largely unrecognized—it becomes possible to take action in a way that counteracts this bias and creates a more equitable environment for many Hindu students.

Site Location

I recruited participants from the same large, public university in the Midwestern United States with a number of smaller, regional campuses throughout the state. My original intention was to focus on students who only attended classes on the main campus. However, I ended up broadening my criteria to include regional campuses during recruitment to allow for a larger pool of potential participants. As a result, two of the final participants were students at the main campus, while one was a student at a regional campus—though he had taken some classes on the main campus in the past and

was therefore still familiar with the location. Because the campus community and environment are important aspects of this study, it was important that all of the study participants had attended classes primarily in person, not online.

The actual interview site was over Zoom, not in person. Each participant participated in the interviews from different locations, including at home with family nearby, at home with privacy, and in a public area of a dorm. It is important to note that participants had varying levels of privacy and/or distraction during their interviews, which may have had an impact on the information they chose to share. However, all participants seemed to be very forthright and appeared to be willing to share detailed personal information during their interviews.

Participants

John Creswell and Cheryl Poth recommend that the ideal sample size in a phenomenological study should be anywhere from three to fifteen participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and since my research method is informed by descriptive phenomenology, these guidelines are appropriately applicable. My goal was to recruit four to six students to participate in the study. Ultimately, I ended up successfully recruiting a total of three participants—which, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), was still sufficient. After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A), I created a flyer containing summary information about the study, the list of participant criteria, details about the incentives available for participants, and contact information (see Appendix B). I circulated the flyer for distribution through the leadership of various

religious and cultural student organizations which may have relevance to the study. The original participant criteria noted on the flyer were as follows:

1) The individual is an undergraduate student;
2) The individual's age is between 18 and 24 years;
3) The individual is not an international student;
4) At least one of their parents is a first-generation immigrant;
5) The individual has taken in-person classes on the main campus for at least one year;
6) The individual self-identifies as Hindu;
7) The individual considers Hindu identity, beliefs, and traditions to be important to them;
8) The individual feels that their Hindu identity has played a role in their college experience.

Unfortunately, the flyer noting these criteria generated a limited response. With hopes of increasing my distribution, I next sent the flyer to instructors I could identify at the university who taught courses associated with religious studies or South Asian studies. I received many cordial and supportive replies about the research project I was undertaking, but very few instructors felt that they were able to distribute the flyer to any groups or individuals beyond the ones I had already contacted.

In hindsight, an additional limitation associated with the flyer distribution could also have been related to timing, as I sent the flyer out at a point in the semester when many students were likely completing large assignments and beginning to study for

exams. A distribution earlier in the semester when students had more time and less stress may have yielded a larger number of participants. In future studies, I will be more careful to take the time of recruitment into account during the planning process.

Eventually, I realized I needed to change my recruitment strategy in order to reach my minimum threshold for the number of participants. As such, assuming this low response rate was the result of excessively limiting criteria with too narrow of a focus, I ended up broadening the participant criteria and redistributing the revised flyer with Institutional Review Board approval. The new criteria were as follows:

1) The individual is an Ohio State student;
2) The individual has taken classes on the main campus for at least one year;
3) The individual self-identifies as Hindu;
4) The individual considers Hindu identity, beliefs, and traditions to be important to them;
5) The individual feels that their Hindu identity has played a role in their college experience.

By significantly broadening the criteria, I was able to distribute the flyer to additional organizations whose membership consisted of graduate, professional, and international students. The revised flyer successfully generated additional interest.

To indicate interest, potential participants completed a Microsoft form providing some demographic information about themselves (see Appendix C) to confirm whether or not they met participant criteria, indicating the reason for their interest in participating in the study, and giving consent to be contacted by the researcher according to their

preferred contact method. Ultimately, three students ended up submitting the Microsoft form, and I accepted all three students into the study, notifying one student by text message and two students by email that they were selected to participate. From this point forward, email was the preferred communication method for all three student participants.

The three participants in this study represent a different ages, identities, and experiences. Table 1 shows a demographic comparison among the study participants.

Table 1

Demographics of Study Participants

Variable	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Pseudonym	Rajesh	Sunita	Shanti
Age	34	18	22
Gender Identity	Male	Female	Female
Academic Rank	Graduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate
Nationality	Indian International	Indian-Born American	Indian-Born American

First Semi-Structured Interview

After I notified participants that they had been selected to be part of the study, I sent each participant an introductory email and presented them with an informed consent document (see Appendix D), which all three participants signed and returned via email. To arrange for the initial interview, I invited participants to schedule a one-hour block of

time using the online scheduling app Calendly. Participants scheduled Zoom interviews for the following Saturday, Sunday, and Wednesday, completing all three interviews within five days of one another. All of the participants gave verbal consent to have their Zoom interviews recorded for transcription purposes.

This interview was a semi-structured interview, meaning that I had a consistent list of questions to ask all three participants, but I was also free to ask follow-up questions to get clarification or more information on any topic according to how the conversation organically flowed. All of the participants seemed comfortable during the interview process and voluntarily answered all of the questions I posed to them. Sample interview questions were as follows:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What does being Hindu mean to you?
- Do you consider yourself to be "religious?" Why or why not?
- How has being Hindu affected your college experience?
- How has your college experience affected the way you think about being Hindu?
- Why did you decide to volunteer to participate in this study?
- Do you have any questions?

I used questions and prompts that were open-ended as much as possible to allow each student to guide the direction and tone of the interview. I consistently followed the student's lead and asked follow-up questions whenever appropriate. At the end of the interview, I gave the student instructions for the photo-elicitation phase of the study, reminding them that after they select the photos they would like to share, they would

need to schedule a thirty-minute follow-up interview to discuss their photos. All of the participants indicated that they understood the next steps and verbally agreed to continue their participation.

After each interview, I sent a follow-up email to the participants thanking them for their participation and reminding them of the instructions for the photo-elicitation assignment. I also sent each participant a ten-dollar Amazon digital gift card incentive, as offered during recruitment, with each participant being offered a ten-dollar gift card after each of the two interviews for a total of twenty dollars altogether.

Photo-Elicitation

For the next stage of the study, I employed the method of photo-elicitation as a complement to conducting interviews, as utilizing visual research methods engages a topic through a lens which is unique in comparison to verbal methods (Denton et al., 2017). This especially holds true with research topics directly related to place and space, as photos allow a more experiential form of engagement with the material. Katherine Branch and Amanda Latz (2017) note that "it is one thing to talk or describe a specific space, and it is quite another to show and tell about a specific space" (para. 2).

I was attracted to photo-elicitation as a research method not only because it allows for creative interpretation and active engagement for participants, but also because of the way participant-generated visual research methods may challenge power imbalances often inherent in qualitative research:

> Asking research participants to generate visual data or data antecedents can disrupt normative research procedures. As a result, the possibility for

> (re)distribution of power within the researcher-participant relationship *and* within the data collection, analysis, and representation processes. Providing participants with alternative modes to express ideas could disrupt power by acknowledging that knowledge may be produced in a multiplicity of ways. (Kortegast et al., 2019, p. 490)

Engaging multiple forms of knowledge and expression provides a greater richness to the research process and enables participants to be co-creators of knowledge alongside the researcher. As such, utilizing visual research methods was consistent with my goal of centering the voices of participants.

In terms of process, I prompted participants to take two photos on campus which represented belonging to them. I also invited them to write a brief paragraph describing each photo and the reason they selected it. Participants were given the freedom to interpret that prompt however they chose, seeing how the second interview would allow for further explanation and exploration. I wanted participants to define belonging in whatever way felt right to them, and that could be depicted in their photos in any way they wanted. Because photo-elicitation may help facilitate self-reflection for participants (Denton et al., 2017), I was hopeful that engaging in the creative process of photography followed by describing the image may help participants think about belonging in novel ways that may supplement and/or enhance the interview data.

Participation in this phase of the study varied. While all three participants completed the first interview, only two participants submitted photos and completed the second interview. Of those two participants, only one submitted the written paragraph

along with the photos; the other participant submitted photos only. However, during the second interview, both participants verbally provided detailed elaborations on the photos they shared and why they chose them, so the absence of the written paragraphs ended up having minimal impact upon the quality of the data generated.

Second Semi-Structured Interview

After participants selected two photos which represented belonging to them on campus, they scheduled a second semi-structured interview over Zoom to discuss the photos; this time the duration of the interview was only thirty minutes in length. Again, each participant gave verbal consent for the second interviews to be recorded for transcription. During the interviews, we looked at the photos together, and participants provided narratives and detailed descriptions explaining the significance to them of each of their chosen photos. As with the first interviews, the second interviews were guided by a standard set of questions, but also allowed for the freedom to elaborate and improvise as appropriate. The questions in the second interview were as follows:

- Tell me about your experience taking this photo on campus.
- Why did you take this picture?
- Why did you choose this location?
- What does this picture represent to you about belonging on campus?
- What advice would you give to another Hindu student who is just starting out at [school name]?
- Is there anything else you want to share?

At the end of this interview, I invited participants to ask any remaining questions they had about the study, and I also informed them that they I would provide them with the opportunity to review the portion of the draft manuscript reporting data from their interviews to confirm that their words and intentions were being characterized and quoted correctly. Following the second interview, I emailed the remaining ten-dollar Amazon gift cards to the two participants who completed this phase of the study.

Analytical Methods

My primary analytical method for processing the qualitative interview data was the use of inductive coding strategies as a means by which to carry out thematic analysis. To begin processing the interview data, I started with transcripts automatically generated from the Zoom recordings, which I converted into Word documents for editing purposes. Then I listened to each interview one sentence at a time to edit transcripts line-by-line and confirm the accuracy of the data. During this process, I edited out a majority of nonessential words such as "um," "like," or "you know" for readability, especially when those words were repeated numerous times in a single sentence or paragraph and had no impact on the meaning the sentence or paragraph conveyed. After completing the transcription edits, I read the full transcripts again while listening to each interview once more to ensure that my edits matched up to the audio files, making any remaining small corrections needed along the way. I also paid attention to tone, pauses, and other extra-textual indicators of meaning while listening to the interviews this time.

After completing the transcription edits, I uploaded the Word document transcripts into the qualitative data management system ATLAS.ti to begin identifying

codes based on emergent patterns in the data. Rather than beginning with any predetermined codes, I generated codes organically as I went through the transcripts, allowing the data to dictate the details. I did not use any of the AI coding features of ATLAS.ti and was careful to perform all tasks independently. The emergent/emic code categories with corresponding quote frequency are noted in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Individual Emic Codes and Number of Quotes, Sorted by Frequency

Code	Number of Quotes
Personal/inner religion	22
Welcoming spaces	21
Finding community	19
Living out/expressing religion on campus	19
Stereotypes & misperceptions	15
Positive interactions with others	14
Educating others	14
Christian privilege	13
Community involvement	13
Negative interactions with others	12
Relationship building	12
India vs. United States	12
Family	12
Discrimination	11

Identity construction/development	11
Dominant religious influence	10
Off-campus interactions	10
Curiosity of others	9
Power dynamics	9
Isolation	9
Non-discrimination	8
Systemic privilege	8
International student experiences	8
Culture vs. Religion	7
Religion as a source of comfort	6
Proselytizing/conversion efforts	4
Diversity	4
Awareness of resources	3
Participant Background	3
Muslim Privilege	2
Intersectionality	2
Avoiding religious discussions	2
Hindu privilege	1

While I assigned a number of codes with close similarities, because I was using this first pass as a means by which to identify patterns in the data, some level of similarity and

redundancy was not problematic. I resolved any issues with redundancy by grouping related codes (patterns) into themes.

Using a combination of the highest-frequency codes and the most salient patterns as points of reference, I established five thematic category groupings into which individual codes could be consolidated as sub-codes. To verify the logical validity of these thematic categories, and to ensure that I was maintaining the openness needed to conduct a properly reflective analysis, I reread all of the interview transcripts again in their entirety to confirm that these categories accurately captured significant patterns in the data. After reviewing the transcripts, I was satisfied that these five categories did indeed provide an accurate representation of the ideas and experiences participants communicated. The large-scale thematic categories and their coordinating consolidated sub-codes are reflected below in Table 3.

Table 3

Thematic Qualitative Code Groupings and Associated Sub-Codes

Code Group	Associated Sub-Codes
Personal/Inner Religion and Spirituality	Personal/Inner Religion Religion as a Source of Comfort
Community and Belonging on Campus	Welcoming Spaces Finding Community Living Out/Expressing Religion on Campus Community Involvement Relationship Building Isolation Non-Discrimination Awareness of Resources

Interacting with Others About Religion	Educating Others Stereotypes and Misperceptions Positive Interactions With Others Negative Interactions With Others Off-Campus Interactions Curiosity of Others Proselytizing/Conversion Efforts Avoiding Religious Discussions
Power and Privilege	Christian Privilege Discrimination Dominant Religious Influence Power Dynamics Systemic Privilege Muslim Privilege Hindu Privilege
Cultural Identity	India vs. United States Family Identity Construction and Development International Student Experiences Culture vs. Religion Diversity Participant Background Intersectionality

By organizing the original code list into five thematic sub-code groupings, I was able to establish a consistent, logical method for analyzing and presenting the participant data as well as eliminating redundancies. See Appendix E for a codebook with detailed code descriptions and sample quotes.

In processing the codes, I downloaded all the quotes labeled with their assigned codes into an Excel file, formatted them for readability, and then printed them into a single document, upon which I manually wrote down notes and memos, highlighted important passages, and used color-coded flags to organize thematic groupings for

analysis. In this sense, I used a combination of electronic and manual organization and notation techniques during the research process.

Ethical Considerations

To provide assurance that participants were protected from any harm and that the research protocols were aligned with ethical research standards, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board before initiating any recruitment or data generation processes. After requesting some minor revisions, the Institutional Review Board authorized the study to proceed. When I needed to change the participant criteria to include a wider range of students in the pool of potential participants, I resubmitted the revised study for approval, and it was accepted.

All participants gave informed consent for their participation in the study by signing and returning an approved consent form via email. I also obtained verbal consent from participants before each Zoom interview to record the interview for transcription purposes. Participants were told that they were able to withdraw their consent and/or participation at any time. One participant did passively withdraw participation before the second interview, and I fully respected her decision and, following several failed outreach attempts, did not continue to pursue communication when she elected not to respond.

To ensure that participants felt that their words and ideas were properly represented, I opted to participate in a process of member checking. After completing a first draft of the thematic analysis section in Chapter Four, all three participants were emailed a copy of the draft with an invitation to offer comments or corrections to any quotes or statements involving them. I gave them a week to complete the review and

return their comments to me, if desired, adding that a lack of response after one week reflected implied approval. One participant replied with enthusiastic approval of the document and one request for a minor correction, which I subsequently made. The other two participants did not reply at all; therefore, I moved forward with the understanding that their implied approval had been granted.

Limitations

There were several methodological limitations in carrying out this study. One major limitation was the number of participants I was able to recruit for the study. My goal was to recruit between four and six students, but in the end, I was only able to recruit three. While having three participants is still a suitable number to effectively conduct a qualitative study, having more participants would have resulted in an even richer study with the representation of more diverse ideas and experiences from which to draw greater insights.

In addition, because of the difficulty I had with a low response rate during the recruitment phase of this study, I had to shift my participant criteria so that a larger number of individuals could qualify for the study, thereby increasing my chances of recruiting additional participants. The qualitative data generated was still valuable and insightful, but the analysis became less targeted and specific due to a greater range of age, experience, and educational status. Being able to perform the same study with more narrow, specific participant criteria would have allowed me to give a more targeted analysis according to factors including undergraduate experience, family immigration history, age-specific and life stage-specific identity development, and so on.

Another important limitation was the participation rate of the three participants, as only two participants completed the second interview and photo-elicitation project, and only one participant completed the writing exercise. The repeated outreach I did with regard to the participant who did not complete the second interview was unsuccessful; while I did receive a response at first and engaged in some degree of successful communication, ultimately this participant did not end up following through with the interview. However, since all three participants completed the first interview, I relied more heavily on this interview when reporting and interpreting the data, and I still had a sizeable body of information from which to draw for all three participants. Of course, had all of the participants engaged in all aspects of the study, there would have been even more data to compare across the three students' perspectives and, again, would have resulted in a richer analysis.

There were also several ways in which researcher positionality could have created limitations. As a white, non-Hindu woman, my status as an outsider to the identities I was studying may have impacted the study. It is possible that my difficulty in recruiting participants could have stemmed, at least in part, from my lack of religious and/or cultural relatability to potential participants. It is also possible that participants may have shared different details in their interviews if I were also Indian and/or Hindu.

Reflexivity Statement

In research informed by descriptive phenomenology, it is essential for the researcher to have a reflective attitude and to share any biases, presuppositions, or relevant experiences in order to give readers proper context as they read and interpret the

findings. For this reason, I am including a reflexivity statement at the end of this and the next chapters including personal reflections about the research process as well as the presuppositions I carried into the research with me.

Because of my background in university-level teaching about Hinduism specifically, and about Asian religions and cultures more broadly, I felt very comfortable, confident, and optimistic going into this research. In hindsight, perhaps I was too confident, because I did not expect to have such a difficult time recruiting participants and ended up feeling somewhat discouraged when people and/or organizations I reached out to were either completely unresponsive or supportive but unhelpful. I got very frustrated with the recruitment process at a certain point, and it was only after I revised my participant criteria, with Institutional Review Board approval, that I was able to get enough participants that I felt comfortable moving forward. Because it took a significant effort to finally enroll three participants in the study, I was very grateful to them for their participation. I was also keenly aware of how dependent I was upon each one of the participants for successful data generation and openly expressed my gratitude to them for their interviews.

I tried to approach each interview as a growth opportunity and set the intention of maintaining a sense of curiosity throughout each interview. All of the interviews were conducted over Zoom, which did limit things like nonverbal communication and may have impacted the amount of personal connection I could develop with participants. However, because I have taught many classes online—including over 9,000 English as a

Second Language classes—I felt very comfortable conducting interviews virtually and do not feel like it negatively impacted my effectiveness in any way.

One thing that was interesting to me regarding positionality was that I ended up relating differently to the individual participants based on my own professional history. Because I taught undergraduate students in a university setting for over a decade, I found myself relating to the two undergraduate participants, who were 18 and 22 years old, in a similar manner to how I used to relate to the students in my classes. Also, being the mom to young adult children who are 18 and 20 years old and college students themselves, this surely played a role in how I related to these participants as well. In contrast, when I interviewed the participant who was a 34-year-old graduate student, I found myself relating to him more as a peer since he was a little older, and since I am also a graduate student myself. Though I was working from the same list of questions from all three interviews and was actively striving for neutrality, I feel sure that these life-stage factors impacted the conversations in ways I may not have been able to see.

I tried to refrain from making any predictions going into the interviews, but on some level I clearly did because I was a bit surprised, not so much by what I heard from the participants, but more by what I didn't hear. I was expecting to hear far more about microaggressions and/or discrimination than I actually did, revealing my bias in assuming that religiously minoritized students must have to deal regularly with such negative interactions. However, the interviews took me in a completely different direction and guided me to make some recommendations I did not predict. While writing my proposal, I researched an analytical tool focused on reducing microaggressions, and I fully

expected to apply it in the next phase of this study. However, the qualitative data generated by the interviews guided me away from this analytical tool, which I now see operated distinctly from a deficit perspective, and required me to take a different, more positive approach which was more compatible with the spirit of the data.

This recognition of my own bias has forced me to take a step back and ask myself why I originally assumed that a harm reduction model would be necessary in order to help student affairs professionals be more responsive to the needs of Hindu students. I am reminded that we are often blind to our own biases and presuppositions until they are challenged, and we are forced to view ourselves and the world around us from a different perspective. As researchers, and as human beings, we are always works in progress, and we must always be willing to be changed by our research—hopefully for the better!

Summary

In this chapter, I detailed the research philosophy, methodological approach, and research methods utilized in this study. Following this, I described the research process I followed in conducting this study, including site location, participant recruitment and selection, data generation methods and procedures, and analytical processes. Finally, I outlined some limitations related to the research process and then closed with some personal reflections in a reflexivity statement.

Chapter 4. Findings

In this chapter, I present findings based on the qualitative data, organized with respect to my two guiding research questions. As a reminder, these questions are:

- In what ways do Hindu students experience belonging at a large Midwestern public university, if at all?
- If these experiences of belonging exist in the lived experiences of Hindu students, in what ways do these experiences of belonging align with critical religious pluralism theory?

To address these questions, I first provide background information by introducing each of the study participants and describing how each perceives their own Hindu identity. Next, employing the methodology of thematic analysis based in descriptive phenomenology, I identify and expound upon four themes in the data related to participants' experiences of belonging on campus: religious and cultural identities, religious literacy, importance of community, and individual spirituality. Following this, I analyze the participant data in terms of students' experiences of belonging through the lens of critical religious pluralism theory. Finally, I share a reflexivity statement and then offer a final summary to close the chapter.

Study Participants

This study has three student participants to whom I have assigned pseudonyms reflecting their Indian heritage. I gave them each the opportunity to select their own pseudonym, but they all opted to have me select them instead. See Table 1 in Chapter Three for specific information regarding the comparative demographics of study participants.

First Participant: Rajesh

Rajesh is a 34-year-old international graduate student in a doctoral program at the university. While he is located primarily on a regional campus in a smaller city, he has also spent time on the larger, more urban main campus and therefore has a point of comparison between the two. His country of origin is India, where he has lived for most of his life. As such, Indian culture is his primary point of reference. Before coming to the United States for graduate school, he also worked for six months in Bangladesh, a small, Muslim-majority country adjacent to India. As such, he has had international life experience in multiple socio-religious contexts, including Hindu-majority, Muslim-majority, and Christian-majority countries.

Rajesh described his Hindu identity as a set of moral values that impacts all aspects of his life and brings him happiness. In living out those values, he said that he strives to be kind to people and animals, to be honest and non-judgmental, and to avoid holding grudges against anyone. He noted that he makes a point to share what he has with others, including strangers, and to practice charity and generosity whenever he can. His religious commitments also guide more routine aspects of daily life like preparing food,

spending habits, and personal care routines. All of these spiritual principles and actions are grounded in a deep belief in the transcendent. He said, "I believe in supernatural forces—godly forces, energies, cosmic energies." His belief is informed by the law of *karma*,[3] which he captured in the phrase, "Do good, and it comes back to you." He also believes that "work is worship," reflecting the principle of *dharma*,[4] in which the daily fulfillment of one's duties with humility, sincerity, and a heart of service brings an opportunity for spiritual growth and progress. In this way, the distinction between sacred and secular action disappears, as all action has the potential to be spiritual action when performed with an open heart.

Rajesh was careful to point out that many of the fundamental moral principles he personally sees in Hinduism are common to many religions, showing a high level of acceptance of religious pluralism and a sense of spiritual connectedness to others. While Hindu beliefs and practices are central to Rajesh's identity, he does not believe Hinduism is superior to other religions and specifically makes a point of saying this. He noted that he carries this principle of acceptance with him onto campus, intentionally showing respect to others, irrespective of their religious identities.

Second Participant: Sunita

Sunita is an 18-year-old undergraduate student, now completing her first year at the main campus of the university. She was originally born in India but immigrated to the

[3] The word karma literally means "action" in Sanskrit. It refers to a natural universal law of cause and effect, with either positive or negative consequences resulting from one's actions and the intent behind those actions (Grimes et al., 2006).

[4] Dharma refers to the ethical actions which support social, moral, and universal order in alignment with one's unique sacred duty, according to Hindu traditions (Grimes et al., 2006).

midwestern United States with her family when she was in middle school. She described being Hindu as a "way of life" more than a religion, having been raised in a very religious household with a strong ancestral Hindu identity:

> My grandparents are very religious. My great grandparents were priests. They used to study *Vedas*,[5] and they used to work in temples and work in very religious settings, so my family has always been very religious. My dad is extremely religious. So I grew up with following these practices and stuff like that, so it's just been a part of my life, in my daily routine. You know, saying *śloka*[6] before taking an exam or just—it's not really like a particular routine, I would say, but it's just embedded into my life. So I've never really thought about it as a religion.

Because religion was so interwoven into her family life, Sunita never considered religious life as separate from any other aspect of her life, demonstrating that her Hindu identity was a fundamental, inseparable aspect of her identity from an early age.

However, while religious life was normalized in her own household, she described having a difficult time understanding and expressing her Hindu identity outside the home in middle school. She said that she was surrounded by classmates who were predominantly white and Christian with little knowledge of Hinduism, and as a result, she experienced bullying and negative stereotyping. This made her feel pressured to minimize or suppress her Hindu identity around her classmates until she moved to a new

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[5] The Vedas are the oldest sacred Hindu texts, compiled during the period between 2000 and 400 BCE. They are composed in Vedic Sanskrit and were originally passed down through oral tradition. They contain ritual instructions, hymns, prayers, and incantations which would have been used by ancient priests (Grimes et al., 2006).

[6] A śloka is a recited prayer, typically a verse from a sacred text (Huyler, 2006).

city around ninth grade. With a new city, new school, and new local community, she became more involved by volunteering at the Hindu temple close to her home and by joining the youth committee there.

As she became more engaged with her local temple, she came to experience the temple as a safe space and a welcoming community:

> Whenever I feel stressed or before a big day, I would usually go, and all of our festivals we celebrated at the temple. So more than a religion, that became like a communal place for us, for me to meet people from my community, celebrate our festivals. So in high school, I was very connected to my religion as our temple was like a center place for us to connect and bond. That definitely made me feel more comfortable with my religion since I had a huge community background supporting me. And even in my high school, they had a Hindu student association, so that was also helpful because we had a safe space for us to just go and celebrate. And you know, I didn't feel attacked anymore. I felt like I had a group of people that I can celebrate with.

By connecting with others in the broader Hindu community, Sunita was able to find a space where she could grow and thrive not only as part of the community, but also as an individual. The community connections both at the temple and through the Hindu student association at school brought her comfort during stressful times and made her feel safe. As such, fostering those communal connections was a critical part of Sunita's ability to thrive in her personal religious life and to grow in her Hindu identity.

Third Participant: Shanti

Shanti is a 22-year-old undergraduate student, completing her final year of study at the main campus of the university with plans to attend medical school after graduation. Shanti described herself as a first-generation American student whose parents were Indian immigrants, and she considers herself to be Indian-American.[7] Shanti was raised in a Hindu household, but she did not fully understand or appreciate her Hindu identity until she was older:

> I guess I've been Hindu my whole life. I grew up being Hindu, but I didn't really start practicing until probably eight or nine years ago when I had my first pivotal moment of like, okay, wow, this is really cool. So I'll start practicing. I was a Hindu growing up, but I never really understood the point of it until I actually learned about it myself, and then that led me to being more involved within the community.

Even though Shanti had always considered herself to be Hindu, her Hindu identity gained a deeper sense of meaning when it became a choice and took the form of personal spiritual practice. Her own spiritual development was critical to her evolving Hindu identity and preceded her involvement in the broader Hindu community.

Emic Thematic Analysis

In this section, I present the qualitative data through the lens of thematic analysis to answer the first research question: "In what ways do Hindu students experience

[7] In her interview, Shanti used the term "American-Indian," but I switched the term to "Indian-American" to avoid potential confusion with North American indigenous populations.

belonging at a large Midwestern public university, if at all?" Thematic analysis allows us to organize qualitative data based on emergent themes in participant data. I have identified four themes to explore in the context of Hindu students' sense of belonging. The first theme is religious and cultural identities, the second is religious literacy, the third is the importance of community, and the final theme is individual spirituality. Each theme illuminates a different aspect of participants' experiences of belonging.

Theme One: Religious and Cultural Identities

The intersection of religion and culture is especially salient for practitioners of minoritized religions, as this compounds the potential social and religious privilege and marginalization they have to navigate (Small, 2020). In this study, participants described the ways in which their religious and cultural identities intersected, as well as what kind of a role cultural identity played in building connections with other Hindu students on campus. Because all three participants were of Indian descent, Indian culture in particular was a focus in conversations about religion and culture during interviews. I must again note that while a majority of Hindus are ethnically of Indian descent, not all Hindus are Indian, making Hinduism not exclusively an Indian domain. However, due to participant demographics, Indian culture was the only cultural reference point in this study.

Religion vs. Culture

During interviews, I asked participants about the roles culture and religion both play their identities. All three participants acknowledged the complexity of this issue in their responses. They all noted in some way that in their eyes, religion and culture were inextricably bound together. In considering identity overall, Rajesh noted how

multidimensional identities are, with many different components making up each individual:

> We are a product of many socio-economic, socio-environmental interactions. So having religious identity is one thing. We have our work identity. We have our philosophical identity. We have our group affiliations. And not all! We have our—right now, it's [school name] identity. So all these affiliations do not have a stamping of the religion. Religion maybe is more in personal sphere rather than in public sphere. Our identity in public sphere is wider compared to religious identity.

In other words, religion was one aspect among many of identity for Rajesh, and religious identity fell more within the personal, private domain than other identity categories which were more public in nature. That public/private distinction was important to Rajesh because it afforded him privacy in his religious life, a privacy which he valued because that meant he was in control of when and with whom he shared that aspect of himself. He saw this privacy as a two-way street. While he was willing to engage in conversations about religion when asked, he said that he preferred not to initiate those conversations in the interest of a mutual respect for others' privacy. He said, "No one is harming me. Neither am I asking any other person about the religious affiliations they have."

When asked about how he saw his Hindu and Indian identities relating to each other, Rajesh noted that it was difficult for him to separate the two.

> Both are embedded. Conjoined... For me, I cannot separate India and the religious—Hindu religion. Thinking of like, "I am an Indian," or, "I am a Hindu." In fact, if I have to take a stand I will take stand for country over religion.

When asked to elaborate, Rajesh continued:

> Because India is more than only a Hindu religion. Indian is much more. Culturally, we are very, very diverse. Just like American, we are very, very diverse. Yeah, and my upbringing. And being an Indian does not have only contribution of being a Hindu. It has contributions from many, many different walks of life, and many, many different socio-economic, socio-environmental attributes and domains. So, I am an Indian first. I will rephrase—it's like first among the equals. India is first among the equals. And then the second among the equals is being a Hindu.

Rajesh saw his Indian identity as being broader and more inclusive than his Hindu identity, which was equally important to him but more narrow in scope.

Sunita also saw her Indian and Hindu identities as being deeply interwoven, but like Rajesh, she also acknowledged that scale of Indian identity was bigger than Hindu identity.

> Most people I hang out with are Indian Hindus, so the culture and religious part kind of just intertwines, but I do talk to other people that are Indian but that are not Hindu, and I still feel like there's a common ground for us to connect over. So, I wouldn't necessarily—I would say being Indian and Hindu is definitely

> intertwined because that's where the religion is from, and a lot of people just assume if you're from India, you are Hindu, which is not true.

Sunita personally described her Hindu and Indian identities as being completely bound together, saying, "I can't really separate it; it just comes as one identity." However, she also acknowledged that more broadly speaking, Hinduism and Indianness were not universally connected, noting that she had non-Hindu Indian acquaintances with whom she connected on the basis of culture. In this way, having the separation between her religious and cultural identities gave her more potential points of connection with others. Therefore, while Sunita did strongly associate Hinduism with India, she did not necessarily always associate India with Hinduism.

Like Rajesh and Sunita, Shanti also saw her Indian cultural identity as deeply bound to her Hindu identity. She described learning more about Hinduism over time, eventually embracing it as a vital aspect of her identity:

> Growing up, my parents have always taught me Hindu values, Hindu morals, and everything like that, but it never really clicked to me because the way they grew up is so different from the way I grew up, so I didn't really understand it. But seeing my brother become more and more involved within the community, I kind of just gained inspiration from him, and I read the scriptures. I read *Bhagavad-Gītā*.[8] I learned more about the mythology. I learned more about the history, and I realized that it wasn't really a religion. It's not really to me; it's not really a

[8] The Bhagavad-Gītā is a sacred text which is an excerpt from the Hindu epic text, the *Mahābhārata*. The 700 verses of the Gītā represent a conversation between the warrior Arjuna and the god Kṛṣṇa. Among other things, the Gītā describes three different spiritual paths one may follow: selfless action (*karma-yoga*), devotion (*bhakti-yoga*), and divine wisdom (*jñāna-yoga*) (Grimes et al., 2006).

> religion. It's more so of a cultural practice…and I guess it's really intertwined with me being Indian and me coming to the U. S. and making sure awareness is built.

Like Sunita, who described Hinduism as a "way of life," Shanti saw Hinduism as more than just a religion, considering her Hindu identity to be deeply connected to her cultural identity. However, Shanti also acknowledged that Indian identity and Hindu identity are not always attached, and addressing culture is not the same as addressing religion; providing resources for Indian students, culturally speaking, does not automatically address the needs of Hindu students as well. Referring to the activities associated with the student organization serving Indian students, she said:

> There's also an Indian student organization here on campus, and … they're doing a lot, too, and … they're trying their best so that the Western audience knows more about different—not just Hindu cultures, but different cultures around India.

While the Indian Students Association is making a valuable contribution to the support network available to ethnically Indian Hindu students, the organization has a mission that is broader than just serving Hindu students. Given India's pluralistic religious landscape, organizations focused on Indian cultural identity would likely resist any specific religious affiliation. In this vein, Shanti also noted: "So, I think more so recently, it's become more aware to me that just because I'm Indian doesn't mean—just because people are Indian doesn't mean they're Hindu."

Diversity Within Hindu Traditions

A theme which appeared more than once among the participant data was a growing awareness about the internal diversity within Hindu traditions while attending college. With so many variations inherent in Hindu beliefs and traditions, the effect of bringing Hindu students together from many different regions and communities is that many diverse ways to be Hindu are all represented within a single small campus population.

Sunita conveyed how much she valued the way Hinduism manifests in so many unique ways and accommodates so many different beliefs:

> That's what I like about my religion. It's very flexible. There's not—I feel like each person finds it very differently. It's very flexible, very customizable. Like, you associate with it how you want to. There is not like, "You have to do these things," you know.

To Sunita, the wide diversity of belief and practice reflected within Hindu traditions was a positive and attractive feature of the religion. As she described her own spiritual development process, she noted that the way she lived out her religious beliefs was unique to her and did not necessarily look the same as in the rest of her family. She said:

> I just kind of put it all aside and find my own space in it. And I just have my own beliefs and how I want to deal with it, and I think that's how it should be for everybody. You know, you find your own way and your own attachment with it and follow it in a way that's comfortable for you, not in a way that people tell you to do it.

Because Hinduism is an inherently flexible tradition with many viable spiritual paths, Sunita was able to create her own path and carve out a religious space that felt right to her, a space in which she could authentically flourish in her spirituality.

In addition to the myriad of manifestations of Hindu belief and practice among individual practitioners, there are also many facets of Hinduism which are specific to the geographic region with which the tradition is affiliated. Shanti discussed this diversity which flourishes both within India overall and within Hinduism in particular:

> As I've learned more about other cultures and religions, I realized how diverse India was, and how many religions, languages, and cultures there are within India. Even within Hinduism, there's different practices and different things that people do within every region of India. So, as well as America, some people have adopted different ways of celebrating things in America, whereas they did in India.

Shanti described how at first she was surprised when she realized how complex and diverse both Indian and Hindu traditions actually were, but then she went on to say, "I'm learning about it more…[and] I've tried to find areas where they collided and kind of adapted those ways." Recognizing that there were both overlaps and differences among the many different ways people practice Hinduism, Shanti came to see this internal diversity as a source of pride and a reason for appreciation:

> My parents have different ways of celebrating different holidays within Hinduism, and when I tell my friends about this, they're like, "Oh, we do this differently. We do it this way." I guess instead of being a negative impact, it more

so had a positive impact on me. I was just like, “Whoa, this is even cooler than I thought it was!”

For Shanti, the diversity within Hindu traditions was not a challenge or an obstacle. Rather, Shanti viewed this wide-ranging internal diversity as a feature showing the depth, creativity, and adaptability of Hinduism overall, and it ultimately had a beneficial effect on how Shanti viewed her own Hindu identity.

Alignment of Cultural Values

In describing their relationships and interactions with other students, participants found that the overlaps between religion and culture sometimes led to a discovery not only of similar experiences, but also of similar values. Both Sunita and Shanti observed that this values-based alignment facilitated social connection and provided a foundation upon which community could grow. Sunita said:

> I have friends from all different religions, all different backgrounds, so I don’t just rely on my Hindu community for everything. But I would say it’s easier because a lot of the cultural backgrounds that I come from, a lot of the family backgrounds that I come from, they can also relate to. It’s just much easier to communicate with people from similar backgrounds, so I think that’s why they definitely are a core part of my friend group and a core part of my support system here, because I just feel like when you’re a Hindu, I just feel like a lot of cultural background, family background, values, they all just come with it that you can similarly share with the other person. So those kind of things, it’s just easier to create a community with somebody because you have those values.

Sunita clearly linked the categories of religious identity, cultural identity, family background, and personal values, indicating that for her, all of these factors played a role in establishing a sense of community and connection with her peers. While all of these factors did not have to be present for her to feel a sense of compatibility with or connection to others, she did note that when these shared values and identities were present, this created optimal conditions in which a sense of community, connection, and belonging could grow.

Shanti also noted the importance of finding others who shared similar values. She described how finding community with others through the Hindu student organization put her in contact with students who shared her religious and cultural identity, and this gave her a sense of place, purpose, and belonging:

> I felt like there was this family of people that kind of had similar experiences to me. It was surprising to see how similar their lifestyles were to mine, and how even their battles that they faced and challenges were very similar to what I had to experience.

Significantly, Shanti refers to those individuals who shared similar cultural reference points as family, demonstrating the closeness of the relationships these shared identities and experiences created for her and emphasizing how important these social connections were to her overall sense of belonging.

Theme Two: Religious Literacy

A common theme among all three participants was the experience of encountering knowledge gaps about Hinduism among non-Hindus, with a variety of outcomes ranging

from positive to negative. In the most positive interactions, students ended up feeling seen, heard, and respected by the non-Hindus with whom they were interacting. In the most negative interactions, however, students felt bullied, looked down upon, or misunderstood.

Positive Interactions Around Religious Literacy

While all of the participants reported finding most non-Hindus they encountered in college to be lacking in knowledge about Hinduism, this knowledge gap did not always lead to negative interactions. In fact, sometimes conversations about Hindu beliefs and traditions with non-Hindus led them to experiences they identified as positive.

Interreligious Dialogue. One area in which participants reported positive experiences was in the realm of inter-religious dialogue. According to Sunita:

> There's definitely a difference between curiosity and, you know, offending. Like I said, in middle school, people used to make fun of me for it [being Hindu], which obviously I did not like. But sometimes people just come out with genuine curiosity and ask us, "Oh, what does that mean?"

To Sunita, the tone of the interaction was critical. When people approached her with respectful questions out of curiosity and a desire to build knowledge, she found this to be reasonable and inoffensive. She stated:

> People just ask questions like, "What do you guys actually do? Who do you pray to? What's this festival about?" Just curiosity. I think in college, especially, most people that I have encountered have just been respectful about it.

Sunita contrasted the harmful tone of her classmates in middle school with a more respectful tone among peers in college. However, in both cases, she found that non-Hindu students held inaccurate perceptions of Hinduism which had to be corrected in order for Sunita to feel more understood and accepted.

Regarding public perceptions of Hinduism, Shanti noted that social media was playing a role in increasing non-Hindus' understanding of certain Hindu traditions. She observed: "Take TikTok, for example. There's been a lot more South Asian Hindu influencers that have been coming up to rise, and you know, mostly all of Gen Z gets their information from TikTok. I've seen that." She identified examples of topics she had seen featured on social media like "why we wear a bindi," or "how to drape a sari," describing the videos as "keeping the culture intact while also making it fun and relatable for everyone else." She also pointed out that Indian music and movies have been gaining visibility and popularity among her generation as well, which also serves to increase cultural awareness. She described seeing first-hand how impactful this type of media content has been for non-Hindu students:

> A lot of people that come to our events will be like, "Oh, yeah, I saw this on TikTok! You guys celebrate this!" It's just cool to see that people actually care, and they're actually taking their time, seeing this on social media and actually making inferences and relating it to what we do.

While social media may not be able to deliver in-depth understandings of the rich history of Hindu traditions, Shanti observed that it could play an important role in delivering Hindu-authored information about Hinduism to non-Hindus who may not have had this

type of exposure otherwise. She said she was happy about this growing media exposure because "it's a lot less for us to explain."

Rajesh had also encountered individuals who expressed curiosity about Hindu traditions and were eager to ask him questions. He gave the example of an interaction which he described as a "very interesting conversation" with Diane, a departmental staff member who was a devout Catholic Christian. Diane asked him why Hinduism had so many gods compared to Christian monotheistic traditions. Rajesh fashioned a thoughtful response to Diane's question:

> She said, "We have only one Jesus and everything is fine. You have so many gods." So, as far as my understanding of Hindu religion is, I told her that we, the world and the energy and the cosmology, is so vast. It has so many different characteristics that one God will not be able to justify everything. And when the universe is infinite, it needs infinite manifestations and infinite Gods. Just reducing that infinite into one God, it is like denigrating the infinite into one. It's not like a promotion; it's a demotion. This is how my understanding about Hindu culture goes. If infinite is there, it has to remain infinite. We should believe in infinite. Why believe in only one? Shrinking infinite into one is maybe humanly falling.

When I asked Rajesh how Diane responded to that, he said:

> Her reaction was very surprising. She was happy and surprised. She said, "I had never thought like this." Because ultimately, it's all about energies. Energy is neither created nor destroyed; it just changes form. But the point is, it's infinite.

> And we are trying to bring it into one, manifest into embodiment of that infinite into one, which is very deeply, rationally, logically, scientifically, very deeply, not good. So there are concepts of infinite forms of energy, infinite forms of God. This is what I told. And she said, "Yes, you are right."

Rajesh did not expect Diane to be so receptive in hearing about his religious beliefs, and when she was, he experienced this as affirming and felt a sense of inclusion and acceptance. Significantly, though, Rajesh said that experiencing that kind of receptiveness to new religious ideas tells him more about that person than their actual beliefs:

> In the sense, the breadth of her understanding, breadth of her inclusiveness in mind, breadth of her patience, breadth of her thinking, breadth of her assimilative power, so these kind of conversations tell more about that person. That person is really well appreciative.

In this sense, the other person did not have to agree with Rajesh or adopt his beliefs to make the exchange a positive experience for him. Rather, the willingness to engage and have a thoughtful conversation with him about his beliefs in the first place was what he deemed to be most important. However, he did note that he enjoyed the content of these conversations as well.

> These kind of conversations also provide an opportunity for me to compare one to one. By the way I think the other person is thinking, I put my point and it is not at odds. We are agreeing to disagree. It is the way I see. So social learning takes a lot in these kind of conversations.

He went on to say:

> When we speak on these topics, it shows more of the commonalities that each of the religions have. It is just the interpretation, the way it has been interpreted by different scholars of the religion. Maybe twisting they have done over time. Those twistings have become so solid that sometimes it gets into a more orthodox and fundamental model. But the flexibility of accommodating and assimilating other values and religious teachings and philosophies is there.

By attributing religious conflict to historical scholarly interpretations, Rajesh dismissed the validity of any potential interpersonal conflict and pushed it to the past. By doing this, Rajesh found opportunities to cultivate personal connections in these inter-religious conversations, not just socially but also in terms of spiritual beliefs. While one option was to "agree to disagree," as he stated earlier, another option was to try to find aspects of their beliefs that both of them had in common. As such, Rajesh stated, "I feel happy about conversing on religious topics," provided there was a respectful tone and a willingness to learn, as this provided an opportunity to open up to one another and ultimately, Rajesh said, to build trust.

Classroom Accommodations. An important area in which religious literacy can have a significant impact on religiously minoritized students is in the religious accommodations instructors provide in their classes. Shanti specifically references this:

> Very similar to other religions, Hindus also have festivals and things we celebrate, and like other religions, how we have off for Christmas or Easter, I think having a day off or something for students to be like, okay, they're seen. Some professors

> are just now starting to implement, if you're celebrating Ramadan, if you need days off, we'll give it to you. But just like them, I feel like we also fast, and we also do certain things like that, so just having more exposure for professors, having training or something for professors to go through just so that they're more aware… So I guess making us feel more seen within the educational departments and having professors openly say if you need days off on Diwali or Holi or whatever, giving us that time and giving us that option to be like, okay, if we need to celebrate and focus on our festival, we could do that. I think that's the biggest one, just having space.

Shanti felt like her instructors overall lacked awareness about Hindu holidays and practices, and this made her feel less seen than other students. She was encouraged by the way some of her instructors specifically mentioned the Islamic holiday of Ramadan in class, demonstrating the intention to create a greater sense of inclusion for religiously minoritized students, but she also noted the absence of any similar references to Hindu holidays. Shanti hoped that instructors would proactively acknowledge accommodations Hindu students might need as well, recognizing the presence of Hindu students in their classes and making them feel seen, heard, and valued.

At the graduate level, Rajesh reported having positive experiences surrounding inclusion and accommodation of religious holidays in class. He recounted the following example:

> I clearly remember in one course, maybe two years ago, a student had taken leave of absence from the class and delay in assignment, and the student had happily

> mentioned it: “I want to take leave, and on this ground,” within the class itself. That is also a kind of freedom, or the sense of belongingness and strength that the student has, that no, this is my right, or this is the way. The university also promotes, “I should have no fear in speaking up.” They spoke up within the class itself, among those ten students and the professor, “I have this reason. I want to take a leave of absence and delay in assignment submission.” That is also a big thing. That is what has been preached by university top administration. It has percolated to the mind of the students, and the students know, and they do not fear to speak up, even in a group setting. It is very much indicative of how much the university administration and the university itself, and the entire working, the entire belongingness, the feeling of belongingness that is there in the students, is very much manifesting in the way this group setting. What do we say, empowered? The students are empowered.

As a graduate student, Rajesh experienced the classroom as an inclusive space where students were empowered to speak up without fear of judgment or any other negative repercussions. While his impressions of inclusivity in the classroom differed from Shanti’s, both of them viewed the classroom as an important arena in which religious identity could be either affirmed or silenced. Both described how their experiences and observations in the classroom around religious inclusion had an impact upon how welcome they felt in that space. This shows the significant role the classroom can play for many students and demonstrates the power instructors have to affect students’ experiences of belonging, both positively and negatively.

Negative Interactions Around Religious Literacy

Participants reported both positive and negative interactions regarding religious literacy, or lack thereof. Negative interactions ranged from experiencing microaggressions all the way to overtly discriminatory or offensive interactions and religious coercion.

Encountering Stereotypes. When participants reported negative interactions, this usually resulted from non-Hindus' reliance upon stereotypes and incorrect assumptions for their knowledge of Hindu beliefs and traditions. Participants blamed these assumptions upon inaccurate representations of Hinduism in mainstream media and a lack of personal exposure to Hinduism overall.

Rajesh described how he came to understand the lack of religious literacy that many American college students had: "In general, what I have understood about the conception, the visualization, imagination that non-Hindus—typical American students—have. That has not changed me, but sometimes I feel it's a wrong perception that has been painted." He noted that Hinduism was not the only religion which non-Hindu students tend to stereotype and misunderstand, citing Islam as another example of a frequently misunderstood religion. In this way, he observed that a lack of religious literacy about minoritized religions in general was a widespread problem, not just a lack of knowledge about Hinduism in particular.

One example he gave of a false perception of Hinduism he had encountered involved the assumption that Hinduism was a non-inclusive, discriminatory religion.

> Very wrong perceptions about Hinduism [are] that we are very discriminatory toward other religions in India. In the Western press media, the people read how it is, but mostly it is not like what we say intolerance in the society is propagated here.

Rajesh cited the news media as one important source of misinformation for American non-Hindus, as his personal experience did not align with much of the information disseminated by the press. Sunita also referenced the media as a powerful source of misperceptions of Hinduism:

> In middle school, people used to make jokes like cow worshipers and stuff like that. It's just, you know, mainstream media just shows that, and people just assume things like that that I have had to correct.

Sunita saw that the general lack of awareness about Hinduism allowed non-Hindus to readily believe inaccuracies they encountered, placing her in the position of having to defend and correct misunderstandings of Hindu beliefs and traditions.

Rajesh also described encountering assumptions about Hinduism and gender-based intolerance and discrimination as well. However, he disputed that this was inherently part of Hinduism and noted how he countered these stereotypes by modeling gender inclusivity. He said that when students encountered his inclusive attitude, they said, "Rajesh, you do not seem like this," and he responded by telling them that such discriminatory ideas and practices represent only a very small minority of individual Hindus and not the religion overall. He said, "We are very tolerant, very diverse. So that was like a bad painting of the Hindu religion in the minds of the students." He noted that

in his interactions with non-Hindus on campus, he had made an effort to "change … the kind of narratives and interpretations that have been painted here [about Hinduism]; they find me different than those narratives and paintings in their mind, they say."

While Rajesh did not indicate that he felt any pressure to dispel stereotypes, he recognized that his own behavior could serve as an example that may challenge non-Hindus' misperceptions of Hinduism. Importantly, though, Rajesh explicitly stated that he did not see himself as an educator about his religion to others. He clarified that he felt he was not an expert on Hinduism and had "a very small understanding" of an "entire rich culture from past to present." However, he did describe himself multiple times as "bridging the gap" between Hindus and non-Hindus, showing that he took seriously the goal of facilitating inter-religious communication and connection across religious difference.

When I asked Shanti about any stereotypes or misperceptions of Hinduism she had encountered, she referred specifically to "microaggressions" and gave examples she had experienced among her peers, with people falsely believing that Hindus drank urine, engaged in devil-worship, or put blood on their faces. She also recalled how people often made judgments about the appearance of swastikas on Hindu art and iconography, failing to understand that swastikas are traditional Indian symbols of goodness and prosperity with a historic significance long pre-dating the Nazis' cooptation of the symbol during World War II:

> A lot of people believe that we're related to Nazis because of our swastika. I had to face that as a kid, and recently, a lot of people were asking us if we were Hitler-

> followers or something. And we're like, okay, first of all, Hinduism does not condone violence. Second of all, they stole it from us, so they took a symbol of peace, prosperity, and balance and made it into something that it's not. So it's a lot of explaining and a lot of internal battle, I guess, because it's shocking when people come up to you and ask such. It's honestly disappointing that they would never ask that about any other religion, but they would ask that about ours, and it's shocking. It takes a little bit to be like, okay, kind of compose myself and answer their question. I try to do the best that I can. Obviously, there's a lot of misinterpretation, miscommunication.

Shanti described feeling pressured to stay calm and composed so as not to offend non-Hindus and turn them off of listening to her explanation, and to prevent perpetuating negative stereotypes. She said:

> A lot of people are impatient, and they'll just start yelling and arguing, and argument and yelling with not get us anywhere, especially if we [Hindus] want to make our presence known. Doing it in a positive way is much more impactful than doing it in a negative way because that's how stereotypes form.

One strategy Shanti described using to dispel stereotypes was drawing comparisons with Christian traditions in order to make Hinduism more relatable. She used the example of how she explained the significance of a *bindi*:[9]

[9] A bindi is a "beauty mark" consisting of a colored dot or ornamental sticker placed on the forehead between the eyes. Modern bindi are often worn as a decoration by South Asian women of many different religious affiliations. However, the bindi mark is derived from the spiritual tradition of the tilak, which is a vermillion mark placed by the devotee over the sixth chakra, or third eye, following *pūjā* (worship) as a "public proclamation of one's devotion" (Huyler, 2006, p. 40-41).

> I wore a bindi one day because it was a festival or something. I typically always do. But we have this powder called *tilak*, so we put it on our [gesturing to forehead]; it's kind of a pressure point here. There's a lot of significance behind it. But someone came up to me and was like, "Do you guys put blood on your face?" And it's red, so it wasn't out of the blue for them to ask that. I guess a lot of it comes from having patience. If I were to just be like, "No, go away," then they wouldn't learn. So a lot of it is being patient with them and explaining to them, "Look, no, this isn't blood. We do this as a religious practice." I try to compare it to—I think it's Ash Wednesday when they have a cross on their forehead. I'm like, "Okay, because you do that, and we do this. It's very similar." I try to relate it to them as much as possible.

Shanti, like many Hindu students, described feeling the need to repackage her beliefs and practices in such a way as to make them more understandable to Christian students, and in so doing, increase the likelihood of a positive reception.

Bullying, Discrimination, and Proselytization. Both Shanti and Sunita reported the most negative interactions as taking place in middle school in the form of bullying, with less extreme examples arising once they reached college age. Shanti and Sunita both connected bullying to living in a social context in which whiteness and Christianity were normalized, leaving Indianness and Hinduism in the margins. In contrast to this environment, Shanti and Sunita noted the relative ease of being Hindu in India, where Hindus were the majority, compared to the United States, where Hindus make up an extremely small minority. Sunita observed that where there was a Hindu majority,

practicing her religion was easier, and this encouraged her to be more involved in religious life:

> In India, I used to be like, you know, more active in religion because obviously it was much easier. A lot of people are celebrating it. But when I moved to the U.S., I used to wear my bindi to school, but I was bullied about it. So then I stopped wearing it. I used to wear a necklace, like a religious necklace, and people bullied me for that. So I stopped it… During middle school, I was very much detached from my religion. I didn't really follow it that much because I just, you know, I just wanted to fit in.

Shanti described a similar dynamic, using her parents' experience as a reference:

> So the way my parents—I'm a first-gen American, so my parents were immigrants—so the way my parents grew up, they were surrounded by their Hindu identity. They were, and most of their friends were, Hindu. And it was very common to be Hindu at the time and for everyone to know what it was, and for their parents to just be like, go to the temple, and they were just like okay, I'll go to the temple. You know, it wasn't really a push for them because they knew all about it growing up. I want to say they weren't super-concerned with why they practiced. They just did it. Me growing up, I was surrounded by the Western audience, so I didn't really have many Hindu friends growing up. I grew up in a very Caucasian community where everyone practiced either Christianity or something else, so I wasn't really aware of why we did certain things. Like, I'd go to school and face so much racism and bullying for being who I am. And I

> genuinely, as a kid, did not know how to explain it to other kids as to why I wore a bindi every day to school. I used to. Or why I had henna[10] on my hands, or why I wore gold jewelry,[11] or why I would dress up for certain holidays.

Both Sunita and Shanti described experiencing bullying when they were younger, citing wearing a bindi and certain jewelry as visual religious markers which prompted bullying. Both also noted a problematic lack of understanding about Hindu traditions among their peers, though Shanti also expressed frustration over having a lack of personal awareness regarding her own religious traditions at the time which prevented her from even having the ability to educate her peers.

Participants also reported experiences of proselytization on campus, with two primary examples—one involving student outreach at tabling at events, and the other involving a religious group targeting international students. One primary site of proselytization was at a community green space on the main university campus, where it was common for students to have events to promote groups and organizations. Rajesh noted that there were often religious groups who set up tables at these events, and also sometimes independently of formal events. He described the discomfort he felt encountering both Christian and Muslim proselytizing students at these tables in the past:

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[10] Henna is a plant-based dye applied to women's hair, skin, or fingernails, often in decorative patterns. Traditionally, henna represents health, love, fertility, and prosperity. In Hindu traditions, it is often applied for special occasions, including weddings, to invite blessings. Henna also has medicinal uses (Vepachedu, 2014).

[11] Gold jewelry has been highly treasured in India stretching back to ancient times, and has traditionally been associated with gods and royalty. Wearing gold jewelry is associated with wealth and prosperity, not just in Hindu traditions, but also within Indian culture more broadly (Rahimova, 2021).

> And they will start. “Okay, do you believe in Jesus? Do you do this?’ Three questions. Yes, yes, yes. Okay. “We would like to contact you. Give us your number.” It is a very different thing, and when I say no, no, no, then okay. Bye-bye. So what I was trying to basically say, it becomes very difficult. Also, even if I am appreciative of Jesus, and even if I am appreciative of Islam religion, and then we’ll have questions… and it is like, so which religion is better? Then it becomes a very problematic thing. So as a person I will never say anything. It’s like neutral, neutral, neutral.

By pushing Rajesh to take sides and engage with the idea that one religion was superior to another, proselytizing students were promoting principles which conflicted with Rajesh’s moral values regarding being nonjudgmental and accepting of all people.[12] As such, this created a temporary campus environment which felt unsupportive of his spiritual goals. Furthermore, students asking for his contact information also appeared to feel intrusive to Rajesh, as it indicated a desire to continue this uncomfortable interaction beyond such a temporary environment, spilling into his private life where spiritual autonomy would normally be present.

Sunita also described interacting with students promoting religious organizations on campus:

[12] Hinduism is a tradition which does not lend itself in general to proselytism, given the view that the human perception of truth is subjective; as such, there are a myriad of differing perspectives among Hindu practitioners without a sense of conflict (Hawley & Narayanan, 2006).

> We do have religious clubs out in the streets promoting their religion, talking about the good parts about their religion. Definitely promoting, which I think is fine, because at the end of the day, everybody's trying to talk about what they believe in and be proud of it, which is completely fine, because I am proud of my religion. So, like, you can go out there and promote it. That I've encountered a lot. But the moment you start forcing it, and then saying, "That's what you should be following," I think that's when it gets offensive. But so far, at this university, I've not experienced that.

Sunita drew a clear distinction between students sharing their religious beliefs and pressuring others to adopt those beliefs. The former Sunita experienced as positive, even enriching, but the latter she experienced as harmful. She reiterated:

> People talk about their religion, like how proud of their religion they are. Like, that's completely fine. But when you're forcing it onto us saying, "You should only be following this and you shouldn't be following your own religion," that's when I think it gets problematic.

Another example of proselytization involves an organization which reaches out to international students and provides them with a supportive community, helping them with the logistics of settling into a new country, conducting English conversation practice programs, and hosting them for visits in members' homes. This group is a national Christian organization with a presence on numerous college campuses, specifically focusing upon international students. On one hand, Rajesh described the positive impact the organization could have on new international students: "They are usually very helpful

in the first four days because they host students from different nations, so Indian students—when they have to settle down in [city name] as a first-timer, they get help." Then over time, the pressure to adopt Christian worldviews increased:

> I should not say what I will say. Please do not judge me. Brainwashing. That starts happening. And then the comparison of one religion over another, it starts happening, and then why you should convert. It also starts happening. These kinds of conversations do happen, not in the group level, but individual level.

Christian proselytization is written into the mission of the organization, according to their web site, so these efforts are, in fact, coordinated and systematic and not just the independent actions of individual group members. When Rajesh was a new international student, he participated in activities with this group, but over time his participation waned, and eventually he lost touch with them. He said he felt like he had "free will" and was able to choose to disengage from the group when he stopped feeling like he experienced any benefits. In this way, this organization did not engage in high-pressure tactics with Rajesh to continue his membership once he withdrew his participation.

Religious Literacy and Belonging

A common theme among participants was how others' desire to learn about Hinduism on one hand, or lack of understanding about Hinduism on the other, impacted their sense of belonging. In some cases, the impact was positive. Respectful curiosity about Hindu ideas or practices, open-minded participation in Hinduism-related events, and instructors' efforts to be inclusive by understanding and honoring the needs of Hindu students were all examples participants cited which made them feel seen and respected.

On the other hand, a lack of religious literacy can have a negative impact. This effect may be compounded when the pressure on Hindu students to educate others about Hinduism is combined with a lack of personal knowledge about one's own religious traditions. The discomfort and insecurity which can stem from being pressured to educate others without the literacy or confidence to support it may cause Hindu students unnecessary stress, negatively impacting their sense of comfort and belonging.

Participants noted other types of interactions which had a stressful impact upon them on campus as well. Negative stereotyping about Hinduism, instructors not being proactive in supporting Hindu students, and experiencing proselytism on campus in encounters with people who want to convert Hindu students rather than learning about their traditions were all examples of experiences which negatively impacted participants. It is important to note that the negative experiences did not outweigh the positive experiences for any of the participants. While negative experiences may have had a short-term effect on these Hindu students, the positive experiences seemed to play a greater role in setting the tone for their overall experience on campus.

Theme Three: Importance of Community

Engagement with the campus community is a critical aspect of college students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), and participants identified a number of ways they found to connect to the campus community. Sunita clearly articulates how important it is to find those connections:

> Find your people and be with your community, because that definitely makes you feel like you're not alone, which is the biggest thing I feel like every student struggles with in college—that they have this feeling of being alone.

Observing that loneliness is a common experience for college students, Sunita emphasized the importance of taking the initiative to seek out "your people" and find the community that feels right. Sunita and Shanti both emphasized how important having a strong social network of other Hindu students was to them and their sense of well-being. While Sunita focused more on the community she had built on campus through informal friendships and activities in the residence halls, Shanti focused more on the community she found through clubs and organizations and connections she built through this collective activity.

Informal Friendships

When asked what advice she might give to other Hindu students coming to her university, Sunita suggested:

> I would say find your community, because we're definitely a minority religion at [school name]. There's not a lot of us, so practicing our religion might not be super-easy. Plus, our religion doesn't have very set practices. Like I said, it's more of a way of life than a religion. So, I would say it's just hard, right? Because you don't have a set routine. Like, you have to go to the temple on these days to do this; you have to do that. It's more, however you want to follow it. So yeah, definitely find your community.

Sunita identified that a major challenge for Hindu students was belonging to a decentralized tradition with many ways to observe the religion, making it difficult for practitioners to agree on a standard set of beliefs or practices. To offset these challenges, Sunita found the closeness of community itself to be what truly bonded Hindu students with one another, more than sharing specific beliefs or practices.

All of the participants found the campus to be inclusive overall and indicated that overt discrimination was not a regular part of their daily lives. For example, with regard to the campus climate, Rajesh stated: "The thrust is so much on diversity and equity and inclusion and justice that the so-called aggression of one religion versus the other or aggression of one personal identity versus other is not felt." He went on to say, "Because of this diversity and inclusion, everything's more—not easy. More of the feeling that, okay, I am not being discriminated. I am equal. For the administration and staff also, I am the same." Significantly, even though Rajesh did describe incidents of proselytization and resulting temporary discomfort, his overall impression of his experience on campus was overwhelmingly positive. These isolated incidents did not form a lasting impression of discrimination or exclusion, and he continued to feel an ongoing sense of belonging.

Sunita discovered that connecting with other international students provided her with a sense of comfort and community.

> I met with a lot of international students. So, definitely they come from an experience where, you know, they were very connected to their religion back home. So they're here, and I also felt like talking with them, it made me feel more

> comfortable with my religion because their experience is very, very similar to mine.

Sunita even invited a few Chinese students who were neither Indian nor Hindu to participate in events with Hindu students as they celebrated important Hindu festivals and holidays together in the dorms. She specifically mentioned her friend James.

> One of my best friends James—he's Chinese—and he's been hanging out with a lot of Indian students who are Hindu since high school, so he's always felt comfortable being around us with our cultural practices. So when he came to Ganesh Pūjā,[13] he was just curious. He was asking questions like, "Why are you putting milk on the idol?[14] Why are you putting flowers? Why are you bowing down?" And then he genuinely enjoyed trying new foods and sitting together and singing *bhajans*[15] with us. He didn't know what it meant, but he was just like, it's giving a good vibe. You know, it's just—it's nice to be here. So yeah.

By being open, affirming, and respectfully curious, James was able to contribute to the welcoming dynamic of the Hindu students' dormitory celebration.

> It was Ganesh Pūjā, and we had a bunch of international student friends. So we celebrated in the dorm, like we put up an idol, we did a pūjā, and then we all

[13] Ganesh Pūjā refers to the worship of the god *Gaṇeśa*, who has the head of an elephant and is commonly known as the "remover of obstacles" and the "lord of beginnings" (Grimes et al., 2006, p. 33).
[14] While the word "idol" has negative historic connotations within Christian (and other Abrahamic) traditions (Eck, 2006), it is not uncommon for some modern Hindu practitioners to use this term to refer to a *mūrti*, or physical image, of a deity with neutral intent. These physical images of deities are "abstract symbols for the one divine principle" (Chakravarti, 2006, p. 252) and are typically used in worship (Grimes et al., 2006).
[15] Bhajans are a form of Hindu devotional songs, usually sung during worship, in which a person expresses love for a particular deity through music (Ghosh, 2023).

> prayed together. We even invited some of my Chinese friends to join, and we all just had food together and prayed and just celebrated. And then we celebrated Diwali together here. Hindu YUGA had a *Navarātri*[16] celebration. So I felt like almost every festival—it didn't feel like I was away from home. I had people to celebrate with and organizations that were hosting events, so it felt definitely much better, very supportive.

Significantly, Sunita was able to combine informal religious events in the dorms alongside officially organized events offered by Hindu student clubs to build multiple layers of support.

Sunita believed the closeness formed by community rituals and events was important to many students, especially international students.

> A lot of these international students—and especially everybody, too—are away from home. Even the people who didn't celebrate festivals a lot at home, they celebrate it now because they feel it's a way for them to connect with people. It's a way for them to feel at home. It's a way for them to feel connected with their parents. Like, people even who didn't do pūjā at home, they came to college over here, and then we set it all up by ourselves. And then we did the pūjā and everything because it felt like they had a community; it felt like they were back home.

[16] The Navarātri festival is a nine-night Hindu festival dedicated to the worship of the goddess *Durgā* (Agarwal, 2018).

Not only could religious community activities help students bond on campus, but they had the potential to create a sense of connection to family and spiritual communities at home as well. Activities like celebrating festivals in community with others make many Hindu students feel reconnected to their families and the communities they have left behind (Shipman, 2020). In this way, celebrating festivals and collective ritual action could serve as a bridge between home and college life, thereby easing the negative impact of potential homesickness and isolation.

Clubs and Organizations

University-supported clubs and organizations for religiously minoritized students are an important potential source of belonging. While an overwhelming majority of colleges and universities in the United States do not have any clubs or organizations for Hindu students (Coley et al., 2022), this university does, in fact, have an active Hindu organization on campus called Hindu Youth for Unity Virtues and Actions, or Hindu YUVA. Hindu YUVA is a national organization with participating chapters at universities all over the United States. Shanti described her experience as a first-year student who found her way to Hindu YUVA:

> I think when I was a freshman, having this sort of space where we'd have weekly meetings through this organization I'm a part of, I think just having this organization in general has made the biggest impact on me because I felt seen.

Shanti felt that her participation in Hindu YUVA played a significant role in building her sense of belonging in college:

> I think having this organization really shaped my college experience because, one, I made a lot of friends out of it. Two, I was able to relate to my peers and celebrate things that I would celebrate normally at home, but I was able to celebrate it with people my age.

Shanti described her experience within the Hindu student organization as affirming and enriching, giving her not just the opportunity for companionship with like-minded students her own age, but also for deepening her own personal spiritual life as well. She stated, "All in all, I guess being a part of student organization has really made me more Hindu than I was before."

Shanti eventually earned a leadership position within Hindu YUVA and has been active in Hindu youth organizations for many years:

> Ever since I was a kid, I was part of this Hindu organization called Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh. It's just like an organization that does volunteer work for everyone, not just Hindus, and just to teach children more about what it is to be a Hindu and why you should be proud of being Hindu. Then in college, I joined Hindu YUVA, and on campus we're pretty active. We host cultural events, and we also do volunteer work. Every year we have a food drive that raises money for food pantries…and we also have interfaith dialogue. Also, as well, we collaborate with different religious/cultural organizations to make sure everyone is aware that, you know, just because we're Hindu doesn't mean we don't support other cultures or religions.

Shanti described Hindu YUVA as a service organization in addition to being a group offering community to Hindu students. She clarified that the organization "is not really event-based, but a lot of it is our character. I tell the entire board that we're the ambassadors, so if anyone has any questions, they'll come to us." In this way, Hindu YUVA sets out to build bridges with the non-Hindu community and build awareness about Hinduism based on accurate information rather than stereotypes.

This educational goal helps shape the programming the organization chooses to offer. Shanti explained:

> We're making sure we present it in a way that the Western audience learns more about it…but I think how we choose to do certain things is, well, one, we make sure we highlight the main holidays and their significance, like Diwali or Holi or Ganesh Chaturthi.[17] We make sure we tell people why we do certain things, highlighting the main points. Then another big influence on how and why we do certain things is gauging the audience, and also keeping aware of our surroundings and what people know, what people don't know.

While Hindu YUVA does provide community for Hindu students, it aims to serve and inform the entire campus population. Shanti estimated that around 70% of participants at Hindu YUVA events are Hindu students, while around 30% are non-Hindus who are there to learn, indicating that Hindu YUVA is playing a key role in building the religious

[17] Ganesh Chaturthi, or *Gaṇeśa-caturṭhī*, is a Hindu festival in which practitioners celebrate the birthday of the elephant-headed god Gaṇeśa (Grimes et al., 2006).

literacy of the non-Hindu student population. She also noted that over 250 people often come to Hindu YUVA events, indicating a strong interest-level among students.

Shanti indicated that she was striving to balance staying true to culture and tradition while also providing educational value, remaining wary of not reducing events to mere entertainment value:

> There's a difference between spreading culture and just having social events. I try to make a point within every event, every meeting, everything that we do to make sure there's some educational aspect of it. Whether it's a little talk I have before the event or something we send out to people after the event or something like that. It's easy to just bring out the fun aspects of the tradition and just be like, "color run" instead of Holi, or "Festival of Lights" instead of Diwali, so making sure that stays consistent. That we're not just, for lack of better terminology, whitewashing the religion and the culture. Instead of adapting it to Western media, we're adapting it to making them learn more about what it is, and keeping true to actual culture, and explaining if we have to.

For Shanti, the educational mission of Hindu YUVA was a priority, and she tried to maintain that focus through all organizational events and activities. Shanti clarified that it was not always easy to capture the true nature and spirit of Hinduism so concisely: "It's a really difficult topic, trying to explain an entire culture and religion—years and years of practice—into one event."

An important aspect of the success of student organizations is receiving sufficient funding from the university. When asked about how well the university supported Hindu

students, Sunita used the presence of Hindu YUVA and how well-supported it was financially as a sort of barometer by which to measure overall university support:

> I think at the moment, they [school name] are doing a great job of having organizations such as Hindu YUVA and ISA [Indian Students Association] on campus, and I know they definitely promote Hindu YUVA a lot, and they fund Hindu YUVA a lot, too.

Sunita assumed that the visibility and strong promotion of Hindu YUVA on campus were indicators of institutional support for Hindu students, including financial support, but this is not completely accurate. While the university does provide modest funding to student organizations, Shanti shared that she often supplemented university funds with her own money to support organizational programming.

> We have six people hosting events with over 250 people, so it takes a lot of hours of my time, a lot of my money, because [school name] is also—I wouldn't say they're terrible at giving us funding, but they take a while. I don't know if it's because they're understaffed or because they just don't want to, but I guess that's a different story. But it takes a lot of time and effort and money. So yeah, and primarily I'm the only one spending. People ask me, "Why are you spending your own money? What does it give you?" Well, it's more so for the cause. I guess it also ties into why I'm Hindu. It's like the morals of "money is temporary," making sure people know the ultimate goal is more important than the present struggle, I guess, for me.

In order for Hindu YUVA to accommodate the large number of participants and financially support the events they offer to the community, funding is required beyond what the university offers as standard to student organizations. Shanti's decision to spend her own money was a choice she described as being rooted in her own values of generosity and non-materialism, though it also demonstrates that Hindu YUVA was underfunded compared to the actual need. Shanti absorbed the financial weight of the organization based on moral principle, which is admirable, but may also create challenges regarding sustainability after her graduation.

Financial resources are critical to the success of Hindu YUVA events, according to Shanti, who said, "There's a lot of external factors that influence what events we choose to do and what we choose to share. More so, like, money, money, having enough money to do those things." Shanti observed that the university's funding choices reflect institutional priorities as well, noting that religious minorities seem to fall low on that priority list, as students not only do the majority of the planning and execution of events bringing visibility to Hinduism, but they also provide a portion of the funding:

> I think instead of coming from the students, I think it should come from the university… so they have the money, they have the means, they have the power, and they could do a lot more than us if they were to try. So, yeah.

The issue of financial support was important to Shanti because to her, university funding was about more than just money; it represented support on a greater, institutional level.

> They put a lot of money and effort into making their sports a big thing. I think they could also advocate and put in just a little bit of their money and time into

> diversity and inclusion. And I think they try to focus more on the bigger issues like racism, but they're kind of forgetting about the minorities—the minor minorities like this [Hindus].

In her consideration of what the university does choose to fund, she specifically noted that bringing visibility to race, for example, is prioritized over minoritized religions, acknowledging that addressing one does not address the other.

Shanti acknowledged that Hindu students may be a lower priority because of their small numbers on campus overall, but she argued that Hindus make up a significant population within the STEM fields and contribute in valuable ways to the university and its reputation.

> Smaller groups of people actually have the biggest impact. I mean, if you were to look at just science in general, I'm not even going to try to get into the computer science or technology aspect of it, but we make a pretty big population of individuals within research, technology, science. We're everywhere, and we help the universities grow their name so much. The least they could do for us is, like, notice us.

Shanti's perception was that the institution places Hindu students at a lower priority level due to their smaller numbers, failing to acknowledge the importance of their presence on campus.

Off-Campus Community

While opportunities to build community with other Hindu students on campus were the primary focus, all three participants also noted the important role that having a

Hindu community off-campus played as well, given the limited resources available to Hindu students at the university.

ISKCON Temple. All of the participants positively referred to the existence of a temple near campus affiliated with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), a group more commonly known in the vernacular as the Hare Krishna movement.[18] Participants noted that this was the only Hindu temple within walking distance of the university campus. Without a dedicated worship or prayer space specifically for Hindu students on campus, the ISKCON temple provided a public gathering place for spiritual activities which was important to students in need of a more formal religious community setting.

Rajesh did not regularly attend events at the ISKCON temple, but he had been there a couple of times and understood why it may be an important spiritual center for some Hindu students. "I'm also a religious believer, but I find many of my inner calling to do at home rather than going somewhere else. But those are students who are part of that." He said that one reason students liked to go to the ISKCON temple was to find community with others with similar backgrounds and beliefs. He also recognized a spiritual dimension to their participation there, stating, "Those temples and those places are manifestation of the godly energies, so they go there. They want to find their drive."

[18] ISKCON is a modern Hindu movement founded by His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda in 1966 in New York City. It is a devotional movement centered around the god Kṛṣṇa and heavily focused on the sacred text the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Devotees participate in acts of love for Kṛṣṇa through "festivals, the performing arts, yoga seminars, public chanting, and the distribution of the society's literatures" (International Society for Krishna Consciousness, 2020).

He did note that one reason the ISKCON organization was able to have a presence not just near this campus, but near university campuses in many cities throughout the United States, was because they have strong financial backing. This gives them the power and resources to establish temples and provide ongoing support to their surrounding communities. In this way, ISKCON practitioners have the ability to actively connect with college students in a way that less prominent, less wealthy, less populous Hindu temples or organizations cannot.

Sunita also identified the ISKCON temple as an off-campus religious community offering services and support to Hindu students who could not get those needs met on campus, or who would like to belong to a more formal religious community. In spite of its close proximity to campus, Sunita had observed that many students were not aware of the temple and often learned about it informally from friends. She said, "When I tell a lot of my friends, they're like, 'Oh, really? We have a temple next to campus?' So I'm like, 'Yeah, that's really cool.'" Like Rajesh, she did not regularly attend services or events at the temple, but she acknowledged its overall value to Hindu students on campus.

> I am glad that we do have a temple, at least something close to campus, because I didn't even know about it. I think one of my friend's friends told us about it. I was thrilled to know that we even have a temple off campus, because I think I've seen a couple of churches in here. And then there are prayer rooms, too, but I didn't know we also had something close to campus where we can go and pray.

Sunita observed the religious support offered to Christian students on campus by the visible presence of churches on campus, and she correctly noted that the university also

makes a number of prayer and meditation spaces available to students. For example, Rajesh remembered seeing students praying in a room located in the basement of one of the libraries on campus. He described the prayer room as a space "where they respect religious practices, and they can go and offer prayers in whatever way." The intent of university officials is for prayer rooms to be open to students of all religious identities, specifically referring to them as "interfaith" prayer rooms. However, Sunita identified the ISKCON temple, not the on-campus interfaith prayer rooms, as a place where she would feel more comfortable praying. Having a prayer or worship space specifically oriented toward Hindu practices—not just a neutral interfaith space—made a difference.

Shanti echoed this point of view, suggesting that the presence of churches for Christian students but not temple space for Hindu students was problematic, saying:

> I feel like if other religions can have spaces on campus for which people learn more about their religion and have churches or something like that, I think, why can't we? We need to have a space as well to practice as do what we do as Hindus without being judged.

To Shanti, the Christian affiliation attached to the visible presence of churches on campus created an expectation of equity for Hindu students, desiring a similarly affiliated space where they could practice "as Hindus" rather than an all-purpose interfaith space with presumed neutrality.

In her limited interactions with the priest and community members at the ISKCON temple, Sunita described feeling very comfortable. She said, "I felt really welcome, and he [the priest] told me a lot of students from campus go there and get

connected, and it's a safe space. So yeah, it was definitely very welcoming." The priest described serving many students from campus, including students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds: "From what I heard from the priest, he said a lot of demographics go there, like a lot of students, and not just Indian students, but a lot of students go there, just meditation and, you know, feel good." Because there are a number of religious practitioners in this temple who are not of Indian, or even Asian, descent,[19] this community serves as an example of how religious and cultural identity function in different spheres.

While ISKCON has a number of characteristics that depart from a majority of Hindu traditions, for students seeking a formal temple near campus, the promise of community and familiar rituals and iconography are often more important. For example, Sunita recalled a time when there was no on-campus celebration of the Hindu holiday Diwali, so she and her friends turned to the ISKCON temple for support.

> On Diwali day itself, they didn't host any events on campus, so we just felt like, you know, at least going to the temple would be a good way to celebrate. So we all dressed up, and then we went to the ISKCON temple off campus, and that's where we were able to celebrate and have a moment. So I think that's the only time I've ever stepped off campus to go to a religious setup because it's just—it's hard to go places here.

[19] One thing that makes ISKCON unique within Hinduism is that it openly seeks converts from all over the world. This contrasts with the majority of Hindu traditions, in which conversion is rare. There are so many unique aspects of ISKCON that some scholars believe that they "have reworked the sense of being Hindu to the point of asserting a new form of Hinduism" (Patton et al., 2006, p. 289).

Because she did not have a car, Sunita described preferring events that take place on campus. However, because Diwali was important to her, she felt it was worth the effort to leave campus to find a community with which to celebrate.

For many Hindu students, the ISKCON temple provides them with an opportunity to experience important rituals and festivals in a familiar temple environment with a like-minded community in a way that they cannot experience through campus-based resources. Importantly, the ISKCON temple is geographically accessible and welcoming to students, allowing Hindu students to experience a sense of belonging which extends beyond the campus borders, but still positively impacts their on-campus experiences.

Theme Four: Individual Spirituality

While social interaction and communal activities play a significant role in cultivating a sense of belonging for participants, all of them also described how important it was for them to have the ability to nurture their own personal spirituality as well. Participants noted that the ability to focus on their own inner spiritual experience enabled them to feel grounded, at peace, and fully present in their environment, all of which contributed significantly to developing a deeper sense of belonging, not just as members of a community, but also as individuals.

Personal Religious Space

While there was a strong focus on the importance of community and collective ritual, all three of the student participants described the importance of personal, private spirituality as well. By cultivating this inner spiritual focus, they described religion as bringing a sense of peace and comfort when needed. Sunita noted that religion brought

her reassurance especially when she was facing stress and life challenges. She recalled a time of social upheaval when religion helped her to stay calm and persevere:

> For me, being away from home, religion is definitely a comfort zone. I feel it's a way for me to connect with God, especially during tough times. I had a very huge fallout, like a breakup, with one of my friends recently, and it was a really bad incident. But then coming out of it, I prayed. I definitely sat down and I prayed. I read shlokas. I listened to audios that my grandma sent me, and it just really helped me calm myself down.

For Sunita, religion gave her a positive way to cope with difficulty during a period of social challenge and isolation. Not only did prayer give her a means by which to feel a peaceful closeness to the divine, but listening to the audio from her grandmother helped her feel close to her family as well. Sunita also noted that religion helped her with more than just social challenges, though.

> Even during academic stress, when I'm taking exams or when it's a really stressful situation, just praying really helps me calm down. It's definitely a coping mechanism for me. Like, if I'm anxious or nervous, it helps me calm myself down, thinking that there is a higher power that can help me take care of myself. So I think it's my comfort zone, and it's something that helps me through stressful situations for me. That's what religion means to me in college.

When asked whether her college experience has changed the way she thinks about her religious identity, Sunita wholeheartedly agreed.

> 100%, because I remember in high school, too, I was part of it, but it never really meant something more to me that just like, oh, going to temple, meeting with friends, you know. It was like a regular thing. But coming to college, staying away from home, being away from parents, I definitely started relying on God and religion more. Because when you're away from your support system, you need something, and faith became my support system. So going through college, going through the hardships here, you know, people, relationships, academics, it all got a lot. But when it gets too much, faith is something I can always rely on, so that has definitely made me more religious, I would say, in college.

While the hardships and challenges which so often accompany college life can destabilize some students, for Sunita, the challenges she faced caused her to rely more heavily upon her spirituality and, as a result, helped her find her center.

Findings From Photo-Elicitation

In addition to completing the semi-structured interviews, I also invited participants to engage in a photo-elicitation exercise as a creative means by which to share additional information about how they experience belonging on campus. Douglas Harper notes that photographs bring forth a different type of information than words, as the brain processes visual information differently from verbal information (Harper, 2002), so using photo-elicitation to complement interviews has the capacity to provide richer data with multiple points of emotional and psychological access: "Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph,

and it leads to deep and interesting talk" (Harper, 2002, p. 23). By sharing photos which capture their own personal experiences of belonging, participants were able to take me to those places which have meaningful memories attached, inviting me into their world in a way that encourages exploration and creativity.

Shanti opted not to participate in this part of the study, but Rajesh and Sunita both participated. They identified photos, shared them with me, and discussed them during their second interviews. Rajesh shared his photos with me in advance by email, including some written reflections about the photographs he submitted, while Sunita shared her photos in real-time during the second interview.

The photos they chose had many unique features, but they also shared some similarities. For example, Rajesh and Sunita both independently selected photos of secluded locations where they felt a connection to both nature and the divine. Instead of referencing places associated with activities, community organizations, programming, or events, they both chose to focus on places associated with introspection, reverence, and quietude.

Rajesh's Photos

Rajesh chose three photos showing peaceful landscapes at an arboretum located on the regional campus where he spends most of his time (see Appendix F). The first photo (see Figure F1) depicted the sign at the entrance of the arboretum. There is neatly manicured green grass surrounding the sign and a tree surrounded by mulch next to the sign, in the mulch is a small sign, too small to be legible in the photo, indicating the species of the tree. Behind the tree, a large building is slightly visible in the background.

Rajesh's second photo (see Figure F2) depicts a stamped concrete path leading to a round, wooden, enclosed pavilion. Next to the path is a large stone marker with a plaque identifying the donors who provided funding for the pavilion. According to the plaque, the donors were two entomology professors at the university, making the donation "to commemorate their long-term professional and personal relationship." The arboretum has a slightly curved path leading to the pavilion, surrounded by what appears to be dirt or mulch. To the left of the pavilion is a round table with seating, all made of natural-looking materials (wood or stone) which have been left in a mostly wild, unrefined state. Behind the pavilion and seating area is a finely manicured green space with trees of various sizes and species planted at intervals throughout, leaving a great deal of green space open. Behind this green space is a more densely forested area with many trees, with large evergreens prominently visible where this are begins.

The third photo (see Figure F3) shows a paved path leading to the same pavilion depicted in the second photo, but from a perspective that is farther away. This portion of the path is simpler than the design of the first path. The path in this photo appears to be asphalt, contrasting with the more ornate stamped concrete stretch of path in the second photo. This photo shows a wider view of the green space and forested area behind the green space depicted in the second photo, providing additional context. On the right side edge of the photo, a natural wood pergola is also partially visible.

Rajesh described the specialness of the arboretum, sharing, "It is my favorite place as I find solace here," adding that is "provides a respite from daily chaos, allowing me to recharge and find inspiration amidst the greenery." He described feeling connected

to nature, appreciating the presence of a natural space which is "untouched by urbanization," and which "evokes a sense of wonder and reverence for the earth's beauty." The value of this space to Rajesh lay in its quiet beauty, providing natural spaces in which he could return to himself and be fully present, providing an escape from the stress and busy-ness of graduate student life.

In discussing the importance of this space to him, he also noted the impermanence of nature and talked about the way the arboretum allowed him to connect more deeply to himself:

> I have a very quiet personality, and the solitude that I find there, that is one which manifests many a time. When some solution to a problem, and courses are beyond, and the mind is in a very complex web, it helps to untangle the threads. And I am there. … We are just in awe at the beauty of the art, which is so diverse. These are some things that always inspire me to go there.

Because the arboretum is only available for a limited period of time each year, Rajesh noted that the fleeting nature of the experience made him value it more, knowing that the time he was able to spend there was precious.

Sunita's Photos

While Rajesh shared multiple photos focused on a single location on a regional campus, Sunita's photos centered around two different locations on the main campus (see Appendix G). The first of her photos was of a courtyard outside one of the residence halls. The courtyard was beyond a wall and an archway, tucked away from the view of passers-by. There were trees framing the courtyard, and beneath one of the trees was a

bench where Sunita liked to sit and reflect. She originally discovered this spot when she was exploring campus with a friend and happened upon this rather secluded area.

> This is toward the very end of the housing area of campus, where this begins, so not a lot of people. We're here and even the dorm itself was so quiet. You don't see a lot of students walking near this place. It was such a secluded place, and it looked so pretty, too. It had this nice view and everything. So we went in there, and we sat in there, and it was just such a nice, quiet, remote area. All of campus is so crowded and always surrounded by people, whereas in this place, it was just like there's nobody there so it felt really nice.

After initially discovering this quiet place on campus, Sunita continued to return there time and time again.

> Even without people, I myself would just take late-night walks, and I would go sit on this bench, and I just listen to music, or I'll just go sit there, even. I've always had, I don't know—something about this building always just felt very calm and very peaceful, because everyone on campus it's so crowded and so busy, but this place doesn't even feel like it's on campus. It feels like it's its own little world. So I like just going there, sitting, and just feeling relaxed, taking a breather, not being surrounded by people.

Because of the private, peaceful nature of this place, Sunita was able to find the opportunity to escape the overwhelm of a busy, heavily-populated campus. She noted that because the area is quietest at night, this was when she preferred to go sit on the bench and enjoy the stillness. She described the way the place changed throughout the seasons.

> I went there earlier in the year, and there were flowers on the tree. And then throughout the year, the flowers are getting on the bench, so I would usually push it away and then sit, and then during winter there were no leaves, so it was just branches. So just throughout the year, the tree transformed as well, but the place was still such a nice comfort spot for me that I would go and visit.

For Sunita, this peaceful bench in a quiet corner of campus provided a place of retreat, of "comfort" in her words, while the world continuously changed around her.

Sunita also shared a second photo which represented belonging to her. This one was from an exhibit in the art museum on campus. She recounted exploring the campus with a friend, and she was pleasantly surprised to discover that there was an art museum there. She described what she saw and experienced when she entered the building.

> It was so beautiful in there. I've been there since then a couple of times. And not a lot of people even know about it, so it's a very quiet space. It's an art museum, so it's not going to be loud, but there are not a lot of people there as well.

Sunita valued the calm, peaceful environment in which she could experience the art at her own pace. She and her friend enjoyed one particular art piece, which she described in detail.

> This was, I think, a piece that an artist made to reminisce in their childhood. They took little—this kind of reminds me of a treehouse or a little play area. They took scraps and stuff they found in New York City or something, and they put it together, and they built it, I think, if I remember correctly. So, me and my friend, we just stood underneath it, and we like, oh my god, that looks so pretty.

Standing under this piece of art, looking up, Sunita described being moved by the experience, as if she were transported into the world of the artist. She explained that a kind security guard told them the best way to experience that art piece was to go inside it and look upward. The picture she shared was from this experience.

> Like the art, you're not supposed to look at it from the outside, but you're supposed to go inside and then look up. That's where the real art is. So we were like, oh, that's so cool! We never even thought about looking at it from that perspective. So then we went inside, and we looked up, and then I was like, okay, let me take a picture.

For Sunita, the picture reminded her of a meaningful, unexpected experience in a place she never knew existed. She explained how she valued the way these special, private, out-of-the-way places existed throughout campus, though she noted that it would only be possible to find them if a person were willing to get out and explore, to step out of their comfort zone and find spaces beyond the ordinary, beyond what they typically encountered in their daily routine.

Sunita clearly articulated how having these opportunities for silent reflection and quiet exploration brought an important level of balance to her life as a college student:

> I love being with people. I love spending time with my friends. I love having people over at the dorm because that's where we did our Ganesh Pūjā. That's where we celebrated all the festivals. That's where we met up for Diwali. Like, everything happened at the dorm. But at the same time, I do need a quiet space in my life. So yeah, it is that balance. I would say these two places [the courtyard

> and the museum] definitely bring that balance during my college life, because going from home life to college, I had to definitely find alternatives to maintain the same balance that I found here. So the dorm became more of like how school and outside places were for me, whereas these places became more like home where I would get some peace and some time for myself.

Using these quiet spaces as an opportunity to emotionally reconnect to home, family, and a sense of self made Sunita feel grounded and authentic, allowing her to feel belonging not only in the social atmosphere or the physical environment, but also on a deeper, more existential level.

Thematic Comparison

There were several common themes present in the descriptions Rajesh and Sunita shared about the photos they selected. One prevalent theme was the value they placed on feeling close to nature in these spaces of belonging. They both contrasted the natural settings in their photos with the busy and crowded environment of daily life on campus, noting how nature changed over time. Returning to the same natural setting repeatedly throughout the year instilled in them an awareness of the cyclical passage of time. Sunita remarked about the tree in the courtyard changing with the seasons:

> When I went there earlier in the year, there were flowers on the tree, and then throughout the year the flowers are getting on the bench. So I would usually just push it away and then sit. And then during winter there were no leaves, so it was just branches. So just throughout the year the tree transformed as well, but the place was still such a nice comfort spot for me that I would go and visit.

Rajesh noted the way the arboretum reminded him of the impermanence and fragility of nature, which made the moments he spent there even more special. He noted how the arboretum was only open for part of the year, sharing, “I value it more. The impermanence is one of the primary reasons. It is there for a short duration. Do not miss it!”

Another important theme which emerged for both Rajesh and Sunita was the value of solitude in their spaces of belonging. Sunita described the privacy of the courtyard:

> Unless somebody actually goes inside, they don’t even notice the spot. So I think this entrance just makes the place even more secluded and even more personal, because then I just can have my own space and don’t have to worry about people constantly walking in or just people even being present in there, so it’s very secluded.

By having the opportunity to remain in quiet reflection by themselves, they felt invited into a contemplative space with a beneficial personal outcome. Sunita’s quiet bench and Rajesh’s path through the arboretum both carried almost a meditative quality in their descriptions, being places where they could shut out the rest of the world and be fully present, finding a calm center in the midst of daily chaos. Rajesh said about the arboretum, “I have a very quiet personality, and the solitude that I find there, that is one which manifests many a time,” and continued to say that when he gets overwhelmed, “it helps to untangle the threads” in his mind to go there. In Sunita’s photo from the art museum, she also noted how much she valued the quiet, unhurried environment of the

museum. She said, “Not a lot of people even know about it, so it’s a very quiet space. It’s an art museum, so it’s not going to be loud, but there are not a lot of people in there as well.” Even though she was not completely alone in the museum, the calm, quiet nature of the environment overall contributed to her positive experience there.

Findings Through the Lens of Critical Religious Pluralism Theory

The second research question in this study is, “If these experiences of belonging exist in the lived experience of Hindu students, in what ways do these experiences of belonging align with critical religious pluralism theory?” To address this question, I now turn my attention from the emic to the etic, utilizing a framework based upon critical theory. By using critical theory, I am able to apply a predetermined analytical lens to the data and examine the implications on both overt and systemic levels within the context of religious privilege and inequity. It is important to recognize that systemic privilege differs from the kind of surface-level oppression and discrimination which are easily observed and identified. Rather, systemic privilege is so deeply embedded in the social fabric and history of our institutions that it often becomes difficult to recognize, also making it difficult to dismantle (Small, 2020).

To illustrate the distinction between surface-level and systemic religious privilege, consider the following example. When she described encountering negative stereotypes about Hinduism from non-Hindu students, Shanti recalled a time when another student asked her if she put blood on her face because a bindi was visible on her forehead. This comment serves as an example of religious privilege at the surface level. While the suggestion that Sunita had blood on her face is an example of ignorance about

Hindu traditions and certainly qualifies as a microaggression, it does not necessarily serve as an example of systemic privilege. However, to reach the systemic level, it is possible to go a step further and ask, for example, "What are the socio-historical conditions at work which normalize asking Hindu individuals questions which openly denigrate their spiritual traditions?" or "What socio-historical forces create the conditions allowing religious illiteracy about Hinduism to be commonplace among the non-Hindu majority?" By asking questions like these, one can begin to dig down and examine the roots and inner-workings of religious privilege at the systemic level.

In order to reach this level of systemic analysis, a deep understanding of the critical theory is essential. It is difficult, if not impossible, to address systemic issues by remaining within a strictly descriptive space because participants may fail to recognize markers of systemic privilege in their own stories, thereby leaving it out of the discussion altogether. In such cases, it is the role and responsibility of the researcher to take the data analysis a step further in order to critically expose embedded privilege in the data. Only then may systemic privilege be named and challenged in the interest of creating greater equity, reducing harm, and supporting an overall sense of belonging for religiously minoritized student populations.

The Contextuality of Religious Privilege

While the focus within CRPT is specifically Christian privilege, it is important to recognize that Christian privilege is not universal. Rather, religious privilege is typically afforded to whatever religion has the deepest socio-cultural influence and the greatest ties to power in any given geographical area. In India, for example, Hindu privilege reflects

the power and influence of the Hindu-majority population, or in a Muslim-majority country like Saudi Arabia or Iran, Muslim privilege would reflect similar ties to the power and influence of Islam within those social and geographical contexts.

For example, Rajesh recounted that during the time he spent working in Bangladesh, he encountered some challenges as a Hindu in a Muslim-majority country. He noted that eating, which is a basic human need, could be challenging there. He described how it was difficult to find Hindu-friendly vegetarian food, which was a departure from his experience in India, where vegetarianism is widespread. It is easy in India to access vegetarian food which conforms to common Hindu dietary standards, like not cooking vegetarian food and meat on shared surfaces, or not using the same cooking utensils for meat and vegetarian food together. The strictest vegetarians even refrain from eating foods like onions, garlic, or root vegetables which kill the whole plant, and will only eat foods which can be picked or plucked without harming the plant overall. In contrast, in Islamic traditions, it is common for adherents to eat meat. There are certain restrictions, like not eating pork and making sure the meat has been prepared according to halal[20] guidelines, but in general, meat-eating is the norm for the Muslim majority.

Rajesh reported that in Bangladesh when he had to go to work, it was nearly impossible to find vegetarian food. Therefore, something as simple as eating, which the majority population likely took for granted, became a challenge to navigate as someone with a minoritized religious identity. He also specifically noted that because Bangladesh was a coastal country, Bangladeshis heavily incorporated fish into their diet, which

[20] Halal food has been prepared according to Islamic dietary laws.

particularly bothered Rajesh and affected his comfort level in that environment: “Fish, they smell so much when they are cooked… Food, if I am not able to find vegetarian, I can survive on packaged food. But what about the smell?” This is not necessarily an example of overt discrimination against Hindus; rather, it shows how the needs and comfort level of Hindu individuals remain largely invisible and/or unacknowledged among the majority, demonstrating Hindus’ relative marginalization in Bangladeshi society. Systemically—not just in Bangladesh but worldwide—social systems are set up to accommodate the majority, leaving minoritized populations to be forced to adapt without similar accommodations in return. This is true regardless of whether social privilege is concentrated in the hands of Muslims, Hindus, Christians, or any other religion.

Because the focus of critical religious pluralism theory, as well as the focus of this study, are on educational institutions in the United States, the discussion here is directed toward Christian privilege. As a Christian-majority and Christian-founded nation, the United States has Christian privilege baked into the social, historical, political, and institutional fabric of the country and its culture. Applying a critical theoretical analysis with a focus on Christian privilege allows us to begin to identify the areas in which this privilege contributes to the marginalization of those with religiously minoritized identities in U. S. society. In terms of Hindu college students, critical religious pluralism theory enables us to view their experiences in novel ways and, as a result, identify additional areas of marginalization, as well as potential support, which may be missed in a descriptive analysis.

Religious Literacy as a Justice Issue

While I have already addressed religious literacy in the thematic analysis portion of the chapter, it is essential to revisit this topic within the context of critical religious pluralism theory as well. During thematic analysis, we were able to observe the impact of religious literacy upon participants' sense of belonging. When Hindu students encountered non-Hindus on campus who lacked religious literacy but asked questions with respectful curiosity, or were willing to engage in open-minded inter-religious dialogue for the purpose of gaining understanding, this served to affirm their sense of belonging. However, when Hindu students found non-Hindus on campus to be repeating negative stereotypes, asking questions disrespectfully, or pressuring them to engage in inter-religious dialogue with the intention to convert them to another religion, these experiences were disaffirming and made students feel uncomfortable and unsupported, which negatively affected their sense of belonging.

Critical religious pluralism theory adds to this discussion by framing religious literacy not just as a matter of knowledge and understanding, but also as a matter of justice. A lack of religious literacy about minoritized religions in the United States "fuels prejudice and antagonism" and allows ignorance and discrimination to proliferate (Aronson et al., 2016, p. 141), creating circumstances in which religiously minoritized individuals may feel physically or emotionally unsafe. This is an especially important topic for higher education researchers to address because, according to D-L Stewart and Michael Kocet, religious illiteracy remains prevalent in U. S. colleges and universities (Stewart & Kocet, 2011). The lack of knowledge and training about religious pluralism

among higher education practitioners may make them reluctant to take up issues about religion and spirituality on campus (Ennis & Trueblood, 2019), and without this intentional advocacy, students with religiously minoritized identities will continue to be at risk of marginalization.

Study participants showed an awareness of the impact religious illiteracy had upon their experiences of belonging. For example, the religious literacy level of course instructors affected whether or not they had a sense of inclusion in class. At most U. S. colleges and universities, instructors automatically have privilege-based obstacles to navigate in the classroom because Christian privilege has shaped the standard academic calendar, leaving religiously minoritized students with the need to request accommodations, if they feel able to do so. Jenny Small identifies such "Christian-centric" calendars as "concrete artifacts" of Christian privilege (Small, 2020, p. 62-3). For example, Muslim students who want to go to the mosque on Friday afternoon, which is the standard weekly day and time of collective worship, often have conflicts which prevent them from participating. However, Christian students who want to go to church for their collective worship day on Sunday usually have the freedom to do so because the school week is already built around the Christian worship schedule (Aronson et al., 2016).

While participants noted that some instructors did excuse students when they made specific requests, none of the participants were sure about whether or not such a policy was in place and generally felt like accommodations were granted based on an independent determination by the instructor. Shanti believed that an institutional focus on

building instructors' religious literacy would result in greater inclusivity and feeling more "seen:"

> Just having more exposure for professors, having training or something for professors to go through just so that they're more aware… So I guess making us feel more seen within the educational departments and having professors openly say if you need days off on Diwali or Holi or whatever, giving us that time and giving us that option to be like, okay, if we need to celebrate and focus on our festival, we could do that.

Shanti placed a strong emphasis on instructors being well-informed enough to be proactive in offering accommodations to students, not merely reactive by waiting for students to initiate the conversation. This serves as an important reminder that building religious literacy will not lead to positive change unless that knowledge is effectively applied and the outcomes are strategically assessed.

Importantly, there is a state law protecting religiously minoritized students' rights to religious accommodations, including taking up to three days off per semester for religious observances without penalty. Furthermore, [school name] publishes information regarding students' legal rights to religious accommodations in the classroom on their website, including instructions for an official dispute resolution process if a student feels that their instructor is not properly respecting their requests. However, though both the state and the institution have these guarantees in place and make the information publicly available, it appears that none of the students participating in this study were aware of them. Having protections in place are ineffective if students are not informed about them.

Failing to prioritize making religiously minoritized students aware of their rights shows an institutional blind spot supporting the perpetuation of Christian privilege in the system. Making religiously minoritized students aware that their university is actively taking steps to protect their rights and respect their religious traditions may have a positive impact upon students' sense of belonging by, as Shanti said, making them feel more seen.

At the surface level of Christian privilege, increasing religious literacy is not a cure-all for discrimination and coercion toward religiously minoritized students, especially considering that many individuals enacting such discrimination and coercion are unconcerned with understanding diverse religious beliefs. Jenny Small notes: "A religious bigot does not care about the beliefs inside someone else's mind. Hate is not impacted by another person's internal narrative" (Small, 2020, p. 5). For this reason, educational efforts or religious literacy campaigns are not sufficient on their own to support religiously minoritized students' safety and wellbeing—though they are absolutely a step in the right direction.

Enabling Privilege Through Neutrality

Addressing religious pluralism with a spirit of tolerance, secularism, or neutrality may seem attractive as a conflict-avoidant institutional approach. However, Small refers to this noncommittal approach to pluralism as "the false neutral of secularism," arguing that neutrality fails to challenge the status quo, and thereby perpetuates the privilege which supports it (Small, 2020, p. 62). Included in this false neutrality is the language of

"fairness and equality," which serves to "silence the voices of the oppressed" (Small, 2020, p. 64).

Participant data support this idea. For example, when Rajesh was approached by proselytizing students on campus, he described his response to the pressure he felt from them with the words, "Neutral, neutral, neutral!" While this allowed him to walk away from the interaction without further conflict, at the same time this response did not actually challenge the presence of religious coercion on campus. As such, while neutrality serves an immediate purpose in providing an exit from an uncomfortable situation, at the same time it also allows religious privilege and coercion to continue dominating a common space, diminishing feelings of safety and inclusivity for religiously minoritized students within that space.

False neutrality can also refer to designated interfaith spaces on campus. For example, [school name] offers a significant number of interfaith prayer and meditation rooms scattered throughout campus. The interfaith "prayer, meditation, and wellness spaces" on [school name] campus generally are free from religious iconography and have minimalist décor with a few simple furnishings like a table, chairs or stools, and perhaps some natural-looking elements like silk flowers in a vase; there is also usually a reasonable amount of open space so that students have room to bring their own prayer rugs or meditation mats, or to carry out any other spiritual activities they desire. One of the rooms also has an ablution station for students, like Muslim or Sikh students, for example, who wish to perform purification rituals before prayer.

While the initiative to offer such spaces reflects an effort toward inclusion from university officials, the neutrality of these spaces may not feel welcoming enough to students who need spaces that feel more authentic to their specific religious identities. For example, Sunita indicated that while she was aware of the presence of interfaith prayer spaces on campus, the off-campus ISKCON temple offered a more desirable space for Hindu students to pray:

> I was thrilled to know that we even have a temple off campus, because I think I've seen a couple of churches in here. And then there are prayer rooms, too, but I didn't know we also had something close to campus where we can go and pray.

Elaborating on this sentiment, Shanti observed the need for equal treatment with regard to on-campus prayer spaces:

> I feel like if other religions can have spaces on campus for which people learn more about their religion and have churches or something like that, I think, why can't we? We need to have a space as well to practice and do what we do as Hindus without being judged.

Shanti compared the presence of sectarian Christian spaces on campus to the lack of similarly designated religious spaces for Hindu students. Unlike religiously minoritized students, Christian students are not confined to the neutrality of shared interfaith spaces. The fact that Shanti associated having a specially-designated Hindu religious space with not "being judged" indicates that she connected having a dedicated Hindu space with feeling a sense of acceptance and belonging.

The topic of resource allocation relates equally to funding as well as physical space on campus. In their study seeking out elements which affected college students' sense of belonging, Alison Faith Kelly and Hilda Mary Mulrooney learned that students identified university resources as a key determining factor (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019). Just as providing financial support to Hindu student organizations and activities reflects the priorities of the institution, so would providing a physical space for Hindu student to pray, meditate, and reflect in an environment which reflects Hindu beliefs, iconography, and values.

Accommodating Christianity

A critical aspect of Christian privilege is the pervasive power it has to shape behaviors, often making such systemic privilege and oppression difficult to identify when one is already used to operating from within that oppressive system. Oftentimes Christian privilege is not exposed until one has a meaningful comparison from outside the system, revealing oppressive structures which are usually obscured (Schier-Happell, 2020).

One must make a distinction in how to address overt versus systemic oppression. For example, Rajesh describes the diversity and inclusion survey which is distributed each year, asking students about experiences of overt discrimination and feelings of inclusion on campus. This initiative is helpful in understanding students' experiences and could potentially assist in reducing instances of coercion and microaggressions against religiously minoritized students. However, surveys like this do not necessarily address the issue of systemic privilege. Identifying "singular acts of interpersonal discrimination" among religiously minoritized people is a more straightforward process, whereas

systemic privilege and oppression are much harder to identify and dismantle (Edwards, 2016, p. xvi).

There were several areas in the participant data which revealed the impact of systemic Christian privilege on their experiences. For example, multiple students indicated that they felt the need to explain Hindu beliefs and practices in a way that was accessible to Christian students, essentially repackaging their traditions to gain acceptance and understanding more easily from non-Hindu students. Vineet Chander notes that this is a common experience for Hindu students, and this becomes problematic when their beliefs and practices are Christianized for convenience to the point of being inauthentic or inaccurate (Chander, 2013). Even the way Hinduism itself is often presented as a religion to non-Hindus tends to be shaped by Christian expectations of what a religion should look like, with a neat dichotomy between sacred and secular life that does not always apply to Hindu ways of being in the world (Hawley & Narayanan, 2006).

An example from participants' experience lies in Shanti's recounting of how she explained applying a bindi to her forehead to another student by comparing it to a common Christian practice:

> I wore a bindi one day because it was a festival or something. I typically always do. But we have this powder called *tilak*, so we put it on our [gesturing to forehead]; it's kind of a pressure point here. There's a lot of significance behind it. But someone came up to me and was like, "Do you guys put blood on your face?" And it's red, so it wasn't out of the blue for them to ask that. I guess a lot

> of it comes from having patience. If I were to just be like, "No, go away," then they wouldn't learn. So a lot of it is being patient with them and explaining to them, "Look, no, this isn't blood. We do this as a religious practice." I try to compare it to—I think it's Ash Wednesday when they have a cross on their forehead. I'm like, "Okay, because you do that, and we do this. It's very similar." I try to relate it to them as much as possible.

Shanti described feeling a need to reject the urge to dismiss the question altogether, instead staying patient and calm in order to educate the other student. The pressure to remain inoffensive, even in the face of the other student posing a potentially offensive question, shows a power differential which is conditioned by systemic privilege. While Shanti is concerned about not offending the non-Hindu student, the same courtesy is not extended to her by the other student.

Furthermore, the comparison between a Hindu bindi and a Christian cross applied on Ash Wednesday is not truly an accurate parallel, aside from the fact that both are marks applied to the forehead. In Christian traditions, the figure of a cross is applied by a priest or minister to the practitioner's forehead, usually at a prayer or worship service on the Wednesday preceding Easter Sunday. It is a tradition going back hundreds of years, reminding the wearer that "we are mortal and all will die, that we lament our sins, and that we need to be washed with baptismal waters" (Ramshaw, 2004, p. 14). In Hinduism, the closest parallel would be a customary practice in which a priest applies a dot of ash to the center of the practitioner's forehead in a ritual context, but even in this example, the ash represents purification during worship (Huyler, 2006), differing significantly from the

Christian ash on the forehead as reminder of mortality. Therefore, while the external ritual actions might seem similar, to draw too strong of a parallel is misleading to anyone who wants to truly understand Hindu traditions. By Christianizing Hindu traditions and accommodating existing Christian beliefs and expectations, majority students are not pushed outside of their comfort zones and are allowed to remain within the realm of the familiar. Hindu students should be able to expect more of their non-Hindu peers; however, keeping the focus on the comfort level of students who are only familiar with majoritized traditions takes the focus off of the students who are marginalized and continues to center the majority.

Another example of Christian accommodation in the participant data lies in the decision-making process for the Hindu student organization in planning their events. Shanti explained how much of their programming was geared toward educating non-Hindus about Hindu traditions, and shared how many of their events were widely attended by non-Hindu students. Shanti shared an example of organizational programming:

> And then another big influence on how and why we [Hindu YUVA] do certain things is gauging the audience, and also keeping aware of our surroundings and what people know, what people don't know … So, like, for example, we had a meeting about Hinduphobia—so how people feel against Hindu people and why they feel that way. And we were targeting it towards Hindu Americans that have recently passed away due to police brutality or other things, like racism in general. So, we kind of base our events off of mainstream media and as well as

the main holidays and making sure the [school name] community specifically knows that we exist.

While these educational efforts are important, necessary, and highly commendable, at the same time, dedicating so much time and effort, not to mention limited funding, to supporting the needs of non-Hindu students reduces the amount of resources available to support activities specifically geared toward Hindu students. Why can't Christian student organizations, for example, put their resources toward meetings about reducing Hinduphobia instead of having Hindu students bear that responsibility? Why can't the university overall dedicate institutional resources toward such initiatives, taking the burden off of the students entirely? Having to maintain an outward orientation—as Shanti said, "gauging the audience"—and focusing on the comfort and education of non-Hindu students at Hindu student events diminishes the opportunity for Hindu students to turn inward and focus on their own experience.

Critical Religious Pluralism Theory and Belonging

The conversations enabled by using CRPT as a critical theoretical lens empower us to advocate for Hindu students in novel ways. For example, understanding the ways in which neutrality centers the majority and perpetuates Christian privilege could lead to more intentional supportive actions, like providing space on campus specifically designated for Hindu students and not just nondenominational or interfaith prayer spaces. Likewise, recognizing how the Hindu student organization directs so much of its programming and funding toward educating non-Hindu students, potentially decentering the needs of Hindu students, could lead the institution to take a more active role in

providing financial and logistical support for educational opportunities about Hinduism to the campus community, thereby removing the full weight of that responsibility from Hindu students.

However, CRPT helps us take the conversation one step further to ensure that the conversation doesn't end at practical, immediate matters like space allocation, funding, or logistical support; rather, CRPT challenges us to dig even deeper, asking ourselves why these needs exist in the first place and pushing for transformation at a deeper level. Understanding the ways in which U. S. higher education has been socially, culturally, and historically shaped by Christianity can help us recognize the role that Christian privilege continues to play in the inner-workings of our institutions.

While a significant portion of the conversation surrounding critical religious pluralism theory focuses on systemic privilege and the impact of marginalization on a larger scale, CRPT also addresses the impact of religious marginalization or inclusion upon the individual. In the fourth tenet of CRPT, Jenny Small writes, "At the individual level, CRPT advocates for a pluralistic inclusion of all religious, secular, and spiritual identities, recognizing the liberatory potential of these identities upon individuals' lives" (Small, 2020, p. 62). We have seen through participants' stories how important their individual spiritual journeys are to them. CRPT reminds us that tending to the systemic is also tending to the individual at the same time, and as we validate and support Hindu students' religious identities and spiritual well-being, we are also in turn supporting their experiences of belonging.

Reflexivity Statement

Going through the process of analyzing the data using an emic/etic approach has truly been a journey. This is the first time I have ever structured my research approach in this manner, and it has transformed the way I interact with the data. In writing and organizing the emic portion of this chapter, I did my best to capture the voices of the students I interviewed, being careful to hold back my own analyses in favor of the descriptive process. I admit that this was difficult at times, as my original academic training was in critical theory, so I often feel like my brain has been hard-wired to start out with an analytical/theoretical approach. There were many times I started spinning into an analytical mindset which bordered on etic, and I had to recenter my intention and dial back my approach.

While this forced restraint may sound frustrating, the process was actually a positive experience. The self-discipline required to stay in a descriptive space gave the work greater meaning. By pushing myself to maintain a descriptive approach, the result was that I gained a true closeness, a personal connection, to the data. I learned to quiet my own voice and focus on listening to the words of the participants instead. In so doing, I think I became a better researcher, because when it was time to turn my attention to the etic approach and look at the data through critical theories, I felt a closeness to the data which allowed me to offer an analysis that felt authentic and respectful. The emic approach humanized the data in a way that transformed the etic into something more.

The themes which emerged in the findings brought back memories of my undergraduate college years at Emory. I remembered proselytism with students passing

out literature and street preachers with megaphones on campus, making me uncomfortable as I moved between buildings. I thought about students who missed class for religious holidays and had to play catch-up on the material when they returned, making their absence more of a liability than a privilege. I remembered attending religious and cultural events sponsored by different student organizations as an outsider wanting to learn more about different cultures and traditions, like a Farsi movie night sponsored by an Iranian student organization. I remembered seeing Muslim students praying in empty classrooms and carrying their prayer rugs in yoga mat bags, and I also started pondering all the ways that a commitment to neutrality may have protected Christian privilege throughout my experience. However, I feel like I was lucky to have been a religious studies major as an undergraduate, as neutrality was never a goal in our classrooms. We grappled with material and openly discussed religious and cultural privilege with a willingness to put ourselves under a microscope and criticize even the things closest to us. For this reason, the presence of Christian privilege has been on my radar from early on during the course of my education.

As I examined the photo-elicitation data, there emerged some important patterns which I also recognized from my background in religious studies. As participants described their spaces of belonging as places set apart from everyday life, where they could turn inward and connect with something greater, I recognized this as a description of sacred space. For example, Sunita said that she felt like the courtyard was "its own little world" as she experienced the natural world changing around her, with flowers covering the bench eventually giving way to bare branches as she returned to the same

place time and time again. Rudolf Otto called this type of transcendent experience the "wholly other" (1923); Mircea Eliade described it as finding yourself at the *axis mundi*, the "center of the world" (1957), for the time that one is present in that space. The space itself was transformed by the intention with which they entered it.

I will admit that I was surprised to discover that Sunita and Rajesh both shared photos which reflected turning inward to demonstrate spaces of belonging. I was expecting to see photos of places where they had celebrated holidays with other students, maybe the temple near campus or a dorm room where there had been pūjā celebrations. Thinking back again to my own undergraduate experience, if I had been given the same task, I probably would have taken photos of a classroom where one of my favorite classes had taken place, or perhaps the building where I regularly attended an early-morning group meditation session led by one of the university chaplains. Even with an element of personal, inner experience present, I still would have chosen spaces where I was acting in community with others. In contrast, Sunita and Rajesh focused on spaces which enabled them to separate themselves and be fully present, feeling a sense of belonging not as members of a group, but as individuals, free from obligations or expectations—free to be exactly who they were, where they were, when they were.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented my findings. After giving some background on each of the three participants, I used thematic analysis based in descriptive phenomenology to identify and describe four themes related to participants' experiences of belonging on campus. Following this, I analyzed the data from the photo-elicitation phase of the study,

describing the photos and participants' descriptions of them, and then identifying common themes. Next, I employed an etic or deductive approach using Jenny Small's critical religious pluralism theory to bring additional insight regarding students' experiences of belonging. Finally, I provided a reflexivity statement and offered a final summary analysis.

Chapter 5. Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications

In this chapter, I first provide a discussion regarding the findings described in the previous chapter. This discussion focuses on physical, academic, spiritual, and emotional space. Following this, I offer some thoughts with regard to theory. Next, I offer recommendations based upon the findings of this study, organized into three separate categories: recommendations for method, recommendations for research, and recommendations for practice. Finally, I describe the implications of the study regarding the ways in which Hindu students may experience belonging on campus. To close the chapter, I offer an epilogue with some final thoughts about the context of the study in relation to my personal experience.

Discussion

In the following discussion, I process the findings of this study in multiple areas. First, I address the significance of physical space, focusing on the relationship between physical space and justice, and then turning my attention to the lack of designated space for Hindu students on campus. Next, I address academic spaces with a discussion about the ambiguous nature of the classroom. Then I turn to spiritual space, addressing the absence of spiritual struggle reflected in the participant data in contrast with the literature. Finally, I address coercion, microaggressions, and discrimination on campus in the context of Hindu students' experiences of belonging.

Of Space and Justice

Religious privilege on college campuses exists not just in the social milieu, policies and procedures, calendar structure, academic curriculum, and overall ethos of the institution. Religious privilege also pervades our physical environments as well (Seifert, 2007). In his writings about DesiCrit, Vinay Harpalani (2017) points out that having a designated safe space on campus may give minoritized students a sense of power and control within a broader environment in which they may feel less empowered, directly connecting safe spaces with the impact of privilege and marginalization.

Recalling Shanti's call for Hindu-specific spaces on campus, she said, "I feel like if other religions can have spaces on campus…why can't we? We need to have a space as well to practice and do what we do as Hindus without being judged." Having these official spaces on campus is essential for creating a sense of inclusion, equity, and belonging. Even more importantly, *not* having these spaces communicates an implicit message to Hindu students that they may not be valued as much as the religious groups who do have such designated spaces, causing Hindu students to question their importance to the institution.

Still, Hindu students may carve out space for themselves on campus in spite of this lack of official space. In Hindu traditions, all space is potentially sacred—not just temples or shrines, or the space before an altar. Therefore, an arboretum may become a place of spiritual experience and connection, as may an art museum or the courtyard of a residence hall, provided that one enters that space with a spiritual intention. This idea contrasts with the assertion in critical religious pluralism theory that neutral spaces

promote injustice and perpetuate privilege. In the spaces of belonging identified via photo-elicitation, the neutrality of these spaces is the very thing that gives them the potential to be transformed into whatever these students need them to be at any given time.

However, the fact that neutral spaces have the power to be personally and spiritually valuable in this context does not mean that Hindu students do not also need designated spaces on campus for prayer and worship. The allocation of physical space on campus for religiously minoritized students is not just a matter of spiritual experience; it is also a matter of justice, an indicator of empowerment and/or marginalization, and, as Tricia Seifert (2007) reminds us, an important marker of privilege. Therefore, providing such sectarian spaces for Hindu students is a matter of both practice *and* principle, and is critically important for supporting Hindu students' sense of belonging.

Lack of Designated Safe Space

Students participating in this study noted several examples of safe spaces in their interviews. Sunita described the dorms as a space where she and her friends felt safe and free enough to celebrate holidays and conduct pūjā rituals together, and both Sunita and Rajesh identified natural spaces—the arboretum and the residence hall courtyard—as their own personal safe spaces during the photo-elicitation portion of the exercise. Importantly, none of these safe spaces were officially sanctioned spaces for Hindu students provided by the institution. Rather, they are spaces students had to identify for themselves.

Sunita and Shanti both indicated that the off-campus ISKCON temple was a safe space where they felt a sense of community, comfort, and familiarity when needed. I find it significant that some Hindu students may have to go off campus to find a space where they feel that sense of belonging since dedicated space for Hindu students on campus is absent, leaving students with the need to fill that gap another way. This means that an independent organization like ISKCON, unaffiliated with the university, may assume the responsibility for supporting Hindu students' wellbeing and spiritual development, taking the potential for providing this type of personal guidance and influence out of the university's hands completely.

While this particular ISKCON temple seems like a positive and affirming environment according to all three of the students participating in this study, the role it plays in supporting Hindu students allows for a de facto abdication of responsibility by the institution. Employing a Hindu chaplain, even part-time, who may actively offer support to Hindu students on campus, combined with providing a sectarian Hindu-centered space for prayer and worship, would relocate these critical resources for Hindu students back on campus and allow the institution the opportunity to play an active role in guiding and supporting Hindu students' spiritual development rather than outsourcing it.

The Ambiguity of the Classroom

This study provided little clarity as to whether or not the classroom was a supportive or unsupportive space for the participants. Students reported both positive and negative experiences in the classroom, and it is important to note that all three students referenced faculty interactions—not student interactions—in their descriptions of

classroom dynamics, whether positive or negative. This demonstrates how important and impactful faculty may be in providing needed support to Hindu students on campus.

Rajesh reported positive experiences with faculty who created an inclusive classroom culture, making students feel safe to bring their religious identities into the classroom with them and making them feel comfortable asking for the support and accommodations they may need. On the other hand, Shanti described how a lack of religious literacy among faculty made her feel less seen, and how she wished that faculty were better informed about Hindu traditions and the needs of Hindu students:

> I feel like we also fast, and we also do certain things like that, so just having more exposure for professors, having training or something for professors to go through just so that they're more aware… So I guess making us feel more seen within the educational departments and having professors openly say if you need days off on Diwali or Holi or whatever, giving us that time and giving us that option to be like, okay, if we need to celebrate and focus on our festival, we could do that. I think that's the biggest one, just having space.

Significantly, Shanti equated inclusive classrooms and proactive instructors with "just having space." Using the language of space here is significant when we consider how space is associated with privilege (Seifert, 2007) and empowerment (Harpalani, 2017), and how the institution providing resources—of which space is one—appears to be supportive of belonging for minoritized students (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019).

Faculty members share responsibility with the rest of the institution for providing care and support to the students in their classrooms, and as such, they must be

knowledgeable about specific ways in which they can support not only Hindu students, but all religiously minoritized students. Samuel Museus, Varaxy Yi, and Natasha Saelua (2018) argue that in their interactions with minoritized students, "effectively providing holistic support requires educators to develop an awareness of various resources across their campuses, take the time to understand the complex challenges that students might face, and connect these students with the supports that they need" (p. 481). By providing intentionally inclusive classrooms and by openly demonstrating knowledge and awareness about Hindu students, faculty have the power to make a strong contribution to Hindu students' experiences of belonging overall.

Absence of Spiritual Struggle

According to the literature on the impact of religious identity on student success, religiously minoritized students are more likely to struggle spiritually (Bryant, 2008) and question their religious beliefs (Braskamp, 2007; Small & Bowman, 2011) in college. As such, it would be reasonable to expect that the Hindu students participating in this study would describe some level of questioning or struggle regarding their religious beliefs and/or identities in college. However, for both Sunita and Shanti, the opposite was true. Both of them described their Hindu identities becoming stronger as they gained a deeper sense of self and a greater feeling of independence and autonomy in choosing their own beliefs in college. In fact, both Sunita and Shanti described some level of struggle, lack of strong belief, or relative disengagement with religion *before* coming to college, with a strengthening and consolidation of their Hindu identities happening *after* they actually became college students.

While this may not be the experience of all Hindu students, as many students do certainly struggle with religious beliefs and identities in college, the experiences of Sunita and Shanti in this study provide an alternate narrative, demonstrating the complexity and individuality of Hindu student experience and emphasizing how important it is to seek out individual voices to avoid making assumptions about the needs and experiences not only of Hindu students, but of any religious minoritized students.

While Rajesh indicated that becoming a student at the university had not noticeably impacted his Hindu identity and/or religious commitments, it is important to note that as a graduate student who was significantly older than Sunita and Shanti, he was at a different life stage and in a different social and academic environment than Sunita or Shanti. For this reason, it is more difficult to compare their experiences.

Addressing Coercion, Microaggressions, and Discrimination

In this study, participants gave multiple examples of religious coercion, microaggressions, and discrimination—all of which are examples of Christian privilege on campus. In these examples, private social interactions were involved rather than any kind of official institutional policies or actions. However, the question of institutional responsibility is still important. How much should the institution attempt to intervene and/or mitigate harm in private interactions which negatively impact religiously minoritized students, especially when the students being harmed are not actively asking for help?

Religious coercion occurs when students "feel forced to examine or change their beliefs" (Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021, p. 8), and the main examples of religious

coercion in the participant data come from Rajesh's interview. One example of coercion is his description of encountering proselytism on the lawn of the main university campus, and the other example comes from his experience with the international student support organization pushing Christian beliefs upon students wishing to use their resources. A common theme between these examples lies in a lack of preparedness on Rajesh's part for these coercive experiences. In the case of the students proselytizing at a table set up in a public space, Rajesh was merely walking across campus and was not expecting to have his religious beliefs questioned or challenged in that moment. Likewise, with the international student support organization, there was a lack of transparency about the motives of the organization, and the coercive practices did not begin until after Rajesh had already started using their resources—a practice which could create a sense of obligation for some students, though Rajesh had no qualms about walking away once he realized that members of the organization were attempting to convert him to Christianity.

While proselytism is certainly a form of free speech, the institution may still choose to enact stronger ethical guidelines for the behavior of groups with a presence on campus, whether those be external groups targeting students or student groups targeting other students. Requiring transparency about motives and intentions for external religious groups actively targeting students on campus would provide the opportunity for students to give active and informed consent before they choose to get involved with a religious organization. Likewise, for religious student organizations requesting permission to set up tables on campus, clearly communicating what is and is not allowed as conditions of participation would offer more protection to students for whom proselytization on

campus makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. For example, in Rajesh's case, guidelines preventing organizations from following students who try to walk away from the table and/or prohibiting organizations from trying to obtain personal contact information when it is not freely offered may have made a positive difference in his experience.

Regarding discrimination, the most powerful examples of discrimination in the participant data came from Sunita and Shanti, who both experienced bullying and Hinduphobic discrimination in grade school. Both noted that they had not experienced bullying in college, though Sunita and Shanti both also provided examples of microaggressive questions other students asked them, like asking if Hindus were Nazi sympathizers, for example, or inquiring if Hindus drank urine or put blood on their faces. Neither Sunita nor Shanti considered this bullying or outright discrimination, but rather assumed it to be the result of ignorance and stereotyping. In this sense, these microaggressions may have seemed to be somewhat of an improvement over the outright bullying and discrimination they experienced in middle school, though no less harmful.

It is important to realize that such perceived improvements may affect how seriously some Hindu students take these types of microaggressions, and as such, they may not ask for support and/or may not recognize the level of potential harm such actions may have upon them, but this does not mean that these microaggressions are not still impacting them in significant ways. Whether or not students are reporting such microaggressive behaviors and asking for support from campus leaders, the institution still has a responsibility to mitigate the potential harm students may experience.

Requiring religious literacy education for all students, clearly communicating institutional values to the student body, and informing Hindu students about procedures for reporting behaviors and experiences that make them feel unsafe and/or harmed in any way are all steps institutions could take toward both proactively and reactively disrupting microaggressive behaviors.

Thinking About Theory

Throughout this study, I have argued that critical theories which focus upon culture and ethnicity are insufficient for educational researchers to understand religion-related phenomena. For this reason, I chose to use critical religious pluralism theory as the theoretical framework through which to analyze Hindu college students' experiences of belonging in my theoretical analysis. However, while critical religious pluralism theory may be an effective tool for more effectively analyzing the experiences of religiously minoritized college students, it cannot be the only theory.

This study has referenced several culture-centered critical theories which have been utilized in educational research. Critical race theory, Asian American identity consciousness theory, DesiCrit, cultural historical activity theory, and postcolonial theory are all theoretical frameworks researchers have used to examine the experiences of Hindu college students. Given the commonness of researchers addressing Hinduism as an aspect of culture, I expected culture to be a much more prevalent topic in my interviews with Hindu students. However, participants primarily addressed culture only when I initiated that topic of discussion; it was not otherwise central to their responses. One reason that culture may not have been more prominent in these interviews may lies in the fact that all

participants said that their Hindu identities were tied to their cultural identities, so they may not have felt the need to address it separately unless specifically prompted to do so.

However, it is significant to note that none of the participants discussed their religious or cultural identities using the language of race or racism. Shanti did mention Hinduphobia in the context of the educational programming the Hindu student organization offered to the non-Hindu community, and she also noted that she moved into a "very Caucasian community" when her family moved to the United States from India, but none of the participants specifically mentioned anti-Indian or anti-Asian racism in any context, neither when they were explicitly discussing their Indian cultural identities, nor when they were sharing examples of coercion, discrimination, or microaggressions. As a result, it is difficult to place the findings of this study in direct conversation with culture-centered theories like DesiCrit, in which Vinay Harpalani (2017) specifically addresses Hindu religious identity in the context of racialization and white supremacy.

Furthermore, because there are plentiful options where culturally-focused theoretical frameworks are concerned, researchers have the opportunity to be selective when determining the most appropriate theoretical lens to best fit their research questions. However, educational researchers have much greater limitations if they wish to use a theoretical framework which is specifically oriented toward religion. Therefore, just as religion has been understudied in higher education, theoretical frameworks which are specific to religion have also been underdeveloped and/or underapplied in higher education as well. For this reason, it is critical for educational researchers to take up the work of developing new theoretical frameworks and adapting existing frameworks in

order to accommodate the unique ways in which religion impacts educational institutions. As more religion-focused theoretical frameworks are developed and adapted, researchers will have an increasing ability to select frameworks that best fit the studies they design, thereby expanding not just the quantity but also the quality of the body of literature about Hindu college students.

Recommendations

As a result of this study, I am offering the following recommendations regarding how to frame—and reframe—future ideas and actions in the areas of method, research, and practice regarding Hindu students and their experiences of belonging.

Recommendations For Method

The data collection for this study took place over a very short period of time, with the first and second interviews occurring within just a few weeks of each other. As such, the data provide a sort of snapshot of each student's experience at a particular time in both their personal and academic lives. However, a student's sense of belonging could change over time, depending on life experience, educational opportunities, degree of engagement, and personal identity development over time. For this reason, I would recommend that the present study be expanded and further developed by redesigning it into a longitudinal study, following a cohort of students throughout the course of their college career, starting with their freshman year and following them through graduation. With this type of research design, it would be possible to capture not just how Hindu students experience a sense of belonging, but also how that sense of belonging evolves over time.

Another area of consideration lies in the positionality of the participants as well as the researcher. For example, regarding participants, it would add meaningful knowledge to this growing content area by incorporating more focused participant criteria, such as American-born children of immigrants, international students from a specific region, or Hindu students of non-Indian descent. It would also be useful for similar studies to be carried out by one or more researchers with different positionalities. For example, a researcher who is also Hindu and/or of Indian descent would likely have a different interpersonal dynamic than I did with participants during interviews, and may also be attuned to different details, allowing them to gain different insights as a result. Having a researcher in a younger age group or with a different gender identity may also impact the data generation in significant ways. Because this content area is so new in the field of higher education research, there are many knowledge gaps to fill and many ways to fill them.

Recommendations For Research

A strong direction for future research, informed by the findings of this study but currently beyond its scope, would be an exploration of individual spiritual development among Hindu college students. An educational researcher with a secondary disciplinary specialization in developmental psychology or another relevant behavioral science would have the expertise needed to investigate the ways in which Hindu college students experience both moral development and spiritual identity development throughout their time in college.

Researchers have only recently started to acknowledge the need for studies regarding Hindu college students' spiritual development (Shipman, 2020), and I would argue that it is important to continue to push for progress in this content area. It is critical for researchers to build a strong body of literature regarding Hindu students' spiritual development in order to effectively improve how supported they feel and enhance their experiences of belonging. Not only is this important to increase knowledge and improve practice, but in addition, peer-reviewed data from well-designed studies are essential when it comes to applying for funding to support the addition of new programming and student support personnel.

I would also argue that it is important for educational researchers who focus on minoritized religious identities in higher education to be in conversation with researchers focusing on other marginalized identities. Jenny Small (2020) advocates for "an intersectional analysis of religious identity with race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, immigration status, socioeconomic class, and all other forms of social identity" (p. 62). Future educational research which actively engages specific intersections of Hindu student identity and dis/ability, for example, or Hindu student identity and sexual orientation, would create an even richer field of knowledge from which to draw as we learn new and better ways to support Hindu students.

Recommendations For Practice

As supporters of student wellbeing, student affairs practitioners have the power to intentionally create and protect safe and welcoming spaces for Hindu students, making

them feel seen, heard, and valued by their institutions. D-L Stewart and Michael Kocet (2011) write:

> Student affairs professionals must serve as advocates for students from underrepresented worldviews, traditions, and humanistic perspectives regarding their need and the potential invisibility some students may experience because their spirituality, religion, or worldview is not reflected in the majority culture on campus or in society. (p. 5).

Hindu students need advocates from within the institution to bring visibility to their needs, and to be present and supportive to them throughout their college experience.

There are many ways in which student affairs practitioners can provide support. For example, we know we can develop and implement inclusive programming and designate spaces which support religious inclusion for Hindu students. On a smaller—but no less important—scale, student affairs practitioners can ensure that their individual interactions with Hindu students are religiously literate and support equity and inclusion. Research indicates that developing positive relationships with staff has a positive impact on students' sense of belonging (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019). Meagan Pollock and Ben Williams (2021) write, "Each of us can identify an interaction with an educator or other significant adult in which we felt either highly valued or excluded and devalued" (p. 13). We can all can be that person for someone.

It is also important to develop a communication plan to ensure that Hindu students are aware of the resources available to them. Samuel Museus, Varaxy Yi, and Natasha Saelua (2018) argue that being proactive on behalf of students with minoritized

identities means "go[ing] above and beyond making information, opportunities, and support available to ensuring that students have knowledge and access said information, opportunities, and support" (p. 469). During interviews with participants, I discovered that students were unaware of the policies that were in place at the university to guarantee them religious accommodations, and/or that there was a formal procedure they could follow to report an instructor who failed to provide religious accommodations. For protections and interventions to be effective, students have to know that they exist and understand exactly how to access those resources.

However, Hindu students need more than just visibility, welcoming spaces, and positive interactions to experience true inclusion on campus, as marginalization also occurs at the systemic level, as critical religious pluralism theory explains. In this sense, focusing on areas like programming can be a surface treatment which fails to address deeper sources of inequity. Regarding social justice and the interfaith movement, Sachi Edwards argues that "without adequately acknowledging and managing the drastic power imbalance between different religious groups, educational programming that deals with religion and religious identity can be damaging to religious minority students who may perceive the initiatives as hollow attempts to assuage them, while not actually addressing their marginalization" (Edwards, 2016).

We have to be willing to go deeper and work harder to identify the roots of injustice, and not only be willing to advocate for change, but also be willing to change ourselves, even when—maybe especially when—that process becomes challenging or uncomfortable. Engaging these topics in interdisciplinary, interdepartmental campus

dialogues could be a meaningful way to raise awareness and invite critical engagement regarding the presence and impact of religious privilege on campus.

Another key theme throughout this study has been the importance of building religious literacy about Hindu traditions across campus. To be effective in these efforts, the needs of different groups must be uniquely addressed, including Hindu students, non-Hindu students, faculty, and staff with attention to the specific needs of each group. One area in which we can effect positive change is by supporting educational opportunities specifically geared toward Hindu students. It may be easy to assume that Hindu students are already knowledgeable about their own traditions, but this is not always the case. The way Sunita described her own past experience serves as an example of how some Hindu students might benefit from educational opportunities about Hindu traditions, geared specifically toward them. For Hindu students who have grown up in assimilated environments and are newly exploring their religious identities in college, or for Hindu students who are knowledgeable about Hinduism but are seeking to deepen their understanding, having access to educational and personal enrichment opportunities specifically for them could be quite meaningful. Positionality is important in both the planning and execution of such events, and it is important for Hindu students to play a primary role in determining the content, and for Hindu practitioners to play a key role in the facilitation.

Institutions which have Hindu chaplains or spiritual directors on staff would enjoy the benefit of having personnel already in place to support the planning and coordination of such events. However, institutions without dedicated staff would need to make sure to

assign a specific office, and specific individuals, to provide the logistical support needed to implement the programming with advisement from a variety of Hindu practitioners. The institution must also be prepared to support educational programming financially as well. Shanti described using her own personal money to fund Hindu student-sponsored campus events, which I would strongly argue should not be necessary. Institutions need to actively assess what is needed for successfully executing programming and then make sure to actually provide what is needed. In this study, participants observed that where the institution directs its funding is an indication of where their priorities lie. Providing this type of support not only would allow for successful programming, but also would serve to show Hindu students that they are important and would make them feel seen, and in so doing, deepen their sense of belonging at the institution overall.

Recalling Shanti's description of how a large portion of the Hindu student organization's programming was geared toward educating the non-Hindu campus community, this means that the organization which was supposed to support the needs of Hindu students was directing a significant portion of its resources toward activities that centered non-Hindu students. While educational programming geared toward the entire campus community is both needed and important, the responsibility should not fall upon Hindu students to fully plan, finance, and execute these educational opportunities.

Furthermore, an additional area which impacted all three participants' experiences of belonging was what happens in the classroom. Instructors who freely offered accommodations to Hindu students made them feel seen and valued, and communicated an overall campus climate that was welcoming and inclusive. However, instructors who

did not seem to support the needs of Hindu students had the opposite effect, making them feel frustrated and unseen. Many faculty members lack awareness about Hindu festivals and holidays to be able to proactively offer accommodations, leaving Hindu students feeling unsupported. By providing opportunities for instructors to receive training which builds literacy about Hindu traditions and gives direction about ways to support Hindu students, institutions can create more inclusive and welcoming classrooms, thereby also improving Hindu students' experiences of belonging.

Implications

One of the main implications for me as a result of this study lies in the ways in which the data have caused me to rethink how belonging operates for religiously minoritized students. The students themselves defined belonging differently than the way it appears in a majority of the literature regarding college students and belonging. Rather than taking a collective approach in sharing their spaces of belonging, they identified spaces of solitude and introspection. This discrepancy affirms the value of taking up a descriptive analysis in research, allowing participants to speak for themselves while suspending an interpretive voice. Descriptive analysis leaves room for the disruption and reframing of established ideas and expectations, adding potentially greater value and significance to the research overall.

Belonging Beyond Community

Based on the literature showing that religiously minoritized students' participation in student organizations is associated with an increased sense of belonging (Bryant, 2006; Samuel, 2019; Coley et al., 2022), I predicted that the participant data would show a

positive correlation between participation in the Hindu student organization on campus and a sense of belonging. While only one participant—Shanti—described her ongoing participation in Hindu YUVA, she did indeed experience a connection between being active in that community and having a sense of belonging. However, the other two participants did not describe themselves as being heavily involved in Hindu student organizations. Instead, Shanti focused on the friendships she formed privately, apart from any official organization, with Hindu and international students as a source of belonging, describing how they informally celebrated Hindu festivals and performed pūjā rituals together in the dorms. Rajesh tried out membership in an organization for international students but ultimately opted not to participate. His key source of belonging seemed to come primarily from his academic department and the support he found there, not any other kind of community or organization, religious or otherwise.

Interestingly, participants' most powerful descriptions of their own experiences of belonging on campus had nothing to do with clubs or organizations; neither were they affiliated with a Hindu temple community, nor with informal friendships. Rather, participants' most powerful descriptions of belonging referenced time spent alone, being quiet, reflecting, praying, or communing with nature. So often in student affairs, the concept of belonging is stereotypically associated with activities students share with others, enabling them to fit in with a meaningful community on campus; however, participants in the photo-elicitation exercise most clearly identified belonging with time spent alone, fitting in not with a community in particular but with the universe overall, finding their center, finding their place. Rajesh's welcoming space was a path through the

arboretum; Sunita's welcoming spaces were an outdoor bench tucked into a quiet courtyard and a nearly-empty art museum. These places of solitude were where they most felt belonging.

These perspectives lead me to understand that the phrases "sense of community," "welcoming spaces," and "sense of belonging" are not inherently connected, and as such, we should consider these three ideas separately. To nurture a sense of belonging for Hindu students, it is important to recognize that we should support them not only as individuals in community with other students, but also as individuals on a spiritual path that is completely their own.

Recognizing Spiritual Development as Supportive of Belonging

Though it is common for many religiously minoritized students to experience doubt and struggle in college (Bryant, 2008), some students have the opposite experience and instead develop deeper religious commitments (Braskamp, 2007). Sunita's experience was an example of this, reporting that college made her "more religious." She gained a stronger faith and found greater security and confidence in her religious identity. Likewise, Shanti said about her college experience, "[It] made me more Hindu than I was before." These students' experiences serve as a reminder that spiritual development is a critical aspect of student development overall (Braskamp, 2007; Bowman & Small, 2010) and should not be ignored.

On one hand, participants described how having a robust community of other Hindu students with whom could relate and with whom they could share meaningful experiences on campus was valuable. However, they also described how important their

own personal, individual spiritual development was in feeling a sense of place and belonging on campus as well. When they were feeling far away from their homes and families, focusing on their inner spirituality made them feel safe, calm, and close to home.

Given the significance of individual spiritual growth and opportunities for private reflection in supporting experiences of belonging on campus, it is critical that we focus not only on opportunities for community interaction like organizational activities, speaking events, facilitated dialogues, or religious services. In addition to these things, institutions also need to give attention to developing ways to support students' independent spiritual journeys, and to validate the importance of this work. Asha Shipman writes, "There is an increasing awareness among higher education professionals that to fully serve our students, our institutions should include among their goals a firm commitment to supporting students' religious, secular, and spiritual identities," and observes that "spiritual support for Hindu students is in a nascent stage" (Shipman, 2020, p. 21). In the present study, both Sunita and Shanti found that their religious identities grew more important to them in college. Clearly this was a time of spiritual growth, as they articulated that their level of spiritual commitment changed during their college experience. Larry Braskamp argues that rather than assuming that students automatically become less religious in college, we should instead acknowledge that college can be a time of spiritual searching and personal growth for students, and as such, institutions should take spiritual development seriously as an aspect of student development which is deserving of attention (Braskamp, 2007).

In the photo-elicitation exercise, Sunita and Rajesh both shared how finding special spaces for quiet reflection was important to their experiences of belonging. Significantly, these were not officially designated spiritual spaces like prayer or meditation rooms; rather, these were private spaces they found independently, places that were uniquely theirs. As such, to complement the official prayer and meditation spaces which are often vital places on campus for many students, we can also openly encourage and provide opportunities for students to explore, to enjoy time set apart, to think and reflect, and to look within themselves.

Spiritual development is a personal process, and while the process itself cannot be planned or controlled, we can still create campus environments which invite quiet spiritual engagement, and build opportunities for reflection and introspection into curricular and co-curricular programming, providing natural, uncolonized spaces where students can sit with their own thoughts and look within, whether in a state of prayer or self-examination. As such, these contemplative opportunities can benefit religious and non-religious students alike.

Conclusion

As I look back over the entirety of this study, a common theme which continues to emerge is the importance of balance. Recalling the words of Sunita, she frames the process of seeking balance in her life as a college student in the following way:

> I love being with people. I love spending time with my friends. I love having people over at the dorm… But at the same time, I do need a quiet space in my life. So, yeah, it is that balance. So, I would say these two places [the quiet bench and

> the art museum] definitely bring that balance during my college life, because going from home life to college life, I had to definitely find alternatives to maintain the same balance that I found here. So, yeah, the dorm became more of like how school and outside places were for me, whereas these places [the quiet bench and the art museum] became more like home where I would get some peace and some time for myself.

Belonging to her has both exterior and interior components. School and the dorms are "outside places," whereas space for quiet reflection is "more like home"—a source of comfort and safety, a place of belonging.

This dynamic tension is apparent in other parts of this study as well. In outlining critical religious pluralism theory, Jenny Small draws a distinction between religion and spirituality as outer and inner worlds, respectively. Religion is what happens in the "outside places," and spirituality is "more like home." In student services, activities and organizations are the "outside places," while prayer, meditation, and spiritual spaces are "more like home." Even in my methodological approach, the emic and etic are framed within a similar balance. The emic brings intimacy with the data from the inside-out, while the etic provides an analysis from the outside-in. The etic is the "outside place," and the emic is "more like home."

A sense of belonging for Hindu students grows in both spaces: it grows in the communal as well as the quiet. It grows in the festivals—in the colors of Holi and the fireworks of Diwali, and it grows in private spaces—in prayer rooms and wooded trails

and art museums after hours, and importantly, both are needed. Both are essential. One without the other would be incomplete.

Epilogue

As I conclude this dissertation after seven long years of doctoral study, I think back to what—and who—originally inspired my research focus. Throughout the years I spent teaching about Asian religions at the university level, I taught thousands of students and made many, many observations about the way students showed up in these classes. A majority of students in my classes were not Hindu and entered the classroom with minimal knowledge about Hinduism in general. Most of what they knew was from Hollywood, social media, and limited anecdotal experience. The lack of even the most basic knowledge about Hinduism was staggering, demonstrating how large the need was to provide education about religious pluralism to college students as a matter not just of foundational education, but also of responsible citizenship.

The number of Hindu students in my classes throughout the year was tiny in comparison, but I remember them well. There were thoroughly assimilated American-born Hindu students with little personal knowledge about Hindu traditions, and others whose families had done their best to keep Hindu heritage traditions alive in the next generation. There were international students who brought to the classroom very specific beliefs and rituals from their regions of origin. There were students who belonged to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and others who dabbled in some combination of Hindu traditions and new age practices.

Most students were eager to learn and engaged the subject matter respectfully and with great curiosity, but some challenged or even fought against the material. Every class was different. The students set the tone, and I learned something new from them every single semester. I feel like I have carried all of these students with me into this study. I designed this study with them in mind, wanting to positively impact the educational system which supports students like them and make a contribution toward greater justice and equity on their behalf. I hope this study inspires other researchers to want to make a similar contribution, benefitting them and others like them in years to come.

In Hindu traditions, there is a Sanskrit mantra traditionally recited between teachers and students, setting an intention of mutual respect and peaceful cooperation as they both work toward common goals. I would like to close with this mantra, as I feel that it reflects the spirit in which I designed and carried out this study. This is also a mantra I used to share with my Hinduism classes regularly, so it feels like bringing life back around full-circle to share it here. The translation is by Gaurav Rastogi (2017).

ॐ सह नाववतु ।
सह नौ भुनक्तु ।
सह वीर्यं करवावहै ।
तेजस्वि नावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहै ।
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

oṃ saha nāvavatu |
saha nau bhunaktu |
saha vīryaṃ karavāvahai |
tejasvi nāvadhītamastu mā vidviṣāvahai |
oṃ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ||

May we (both) be protected.
May we (both) be nourished.
May we work together with great energy.

May our knowledge be radiant.
May there be no differences or disputes between us.
Om, peace (inside), peace (around), peace (between).

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Responsible Research Practices

130C Mount Hall
1050 Carmack Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1002

orrp.osu.edu

03/04/2024

Study Number: 2024E0222
Study Title: Hindu College Students and a Sense of Belonging on Campus

Principal investigator: Matt Mayhew
Date of determination: 03/04/2024

Qualifying exempt category: #2c

Dear Matt Mayhew,

An IRB member has determined the above referenced project exempt with limited IRB review, according to 45 CFR 46.104.

Please note the following about this determination:

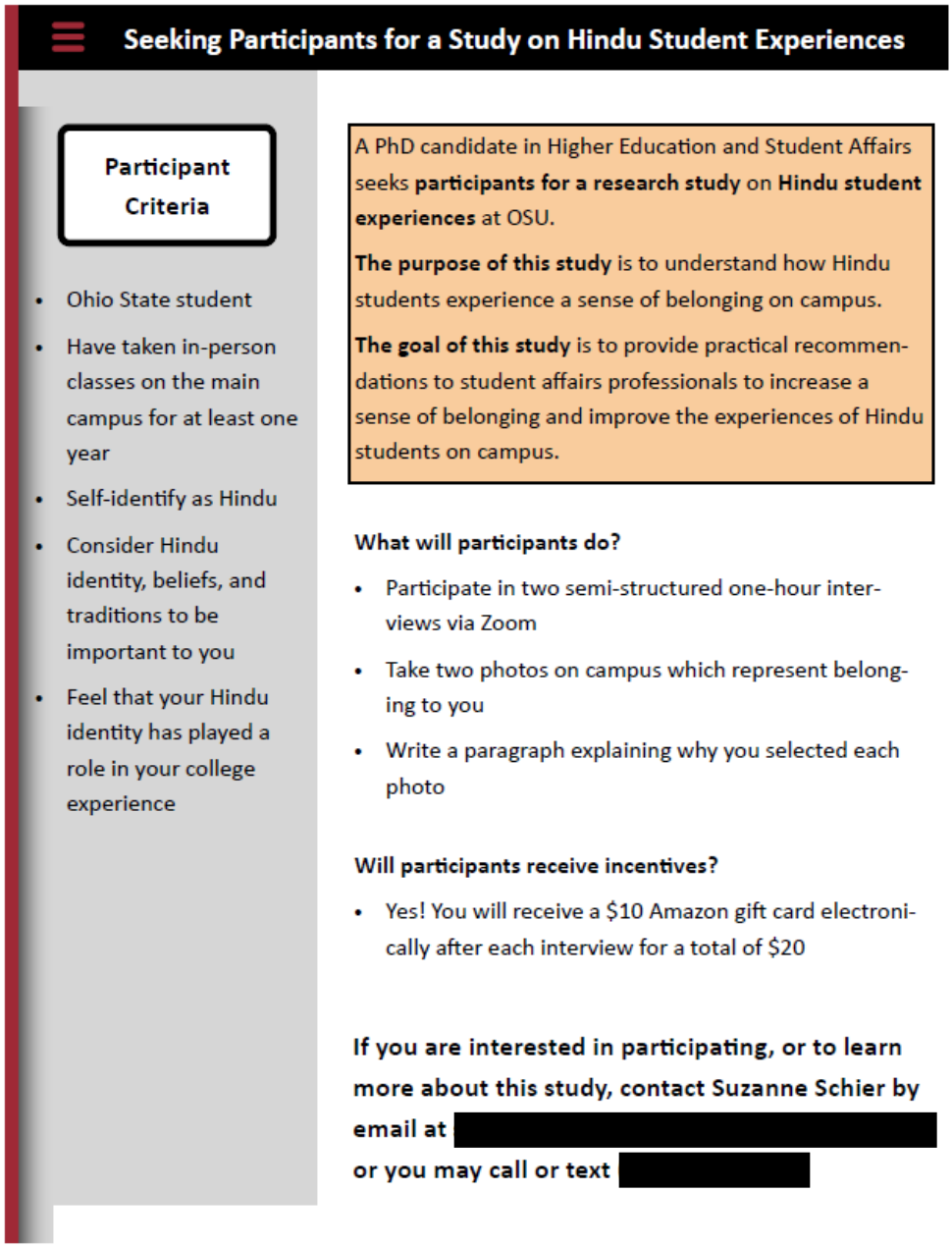
- Retain a copy of this correspondence for your records.
- Only the Ohio State staff and students named on the application are approved as Ohio State investigators and/or key personnel for this study.
- Simple changes to personnel that do not require changes to materials can be submitted for review and approval through Buck-IRB.
- No other changes may be made to exempt research (e.g., to recruitment procedures, advertisements, instruments, protocol, etc.). If changes are needed, a new application for exemption must be submitted for review and approval prior to implementing the changes.
- Records relating to the research (including signed consent forms) must be retained and available for audit for at least 5 years after the study is closed. For more information, see university policies, Institutional Data and Research Data.
- It is the responsibility of the investigators to promptly report events that may represent unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This determination is issued under The Ohio State University's OHRP Federalwide Assurance #00006378. Human research protection program policies, procedures, and guidance can be found on the ORRP website.

Please feel free to contact the Office of Responsible Research Practices with any questions or concerns.

Jacob Stoddard
stoddard.13@osu.edu
(614) 292-0526

Appendix B. Recruitment Flyer



Seeking Participants for a Study on Hindu Student Experiences

Participant Criteria

- Ohio State student
- Have taken in-person classes on the main campus for at least one year
- Self-identify as Hindu
- Consider Hindu identity, beliefs, and traditions to be important to you
- Feel that your Hindu identity has played a role in your college experience

A PhD candidate in Higher Education and Student Affairs seeks **participants for a research study** on **Hindu student experiences** at OSU.

The purpose of this study is to understand how Hindu students experience a sense of belonging on campus.

The goal of this study is to provide practical recommendations to student affairs professionals to increase a sense of belonging and improve the experiences of Hindu students on campus.

What will participants do?

- Participate in two semi-structured one-hour interviews via Zoom
- Take two photos on campus which represent belonging to you
- Write a paragraph explaining why you selected each photo

Will participants receive incentives?

- Yes! You will receive a $10 Amazon gift card electronically after each interview for a total of $20

If you are interested in participating, or to learn more about this study, contact Suzanne Schier by email at [redacted] or you may call or text [redacted]

Appendix C. Pre-Screening Form

To pre-screen potential participants, students were given access to a Microsoft form online via a hyperlink with the questions and answer fields noted below.

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study "Hindu College Students and a Sense of Belonging on Campus."

To confirm that you meet the criteria for participation, please answer the following questions:

1. Are you an undergraduate, graduate, or professional student at OSU?
   [Multiple choice: undergraduate, graduate, professional]

2. What is your age?
   [Free response]

3. Are you an international student?
   [Multiple choice: yes, no]

4. Have you taken in-person classes on the main campus for at least one year?
   [Multiple choice: yes, no]

   If yes, how long have you taken classes on the main campus?
   [Free response]

5. Is at least one of your parents a first-generation immigrant?
   [Multiple choice: yes, no]

   If yes, please name the countr(ies) of origin.
   [Free response]

6. Do you self-identify as Hindu?
   [Multiple choice: yes, no]

7. Is your Hindu identity important to you?
   [Multiple choice: yes, no]

If yes, how important is it on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important at all.
[Clickable scale, numbered one to ten]

8. Are Hindu beliefs and traditions important in your life?
   [Multiple choice: yes, no]

   If yes, how important are they on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being very important and 1 being not important at all.
   [Clickable scale, numbered one to ten]

9. Do you feel that your Hindu identity has played a role in your college experience?
   [Multiple choice: yes, no]

   If yes, how much has your Hindu identity played a role in your college experience, with 10 being very much, and 1 being not at all.
   [Clickable scale, numbered one to ten]

10. Why would you like to participate in the study?
    [Free response]

11. Do you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study?
    [Free response]

If you are selected for the study, you will be contacted within the next two weeks. Please share your contact information so that I know how to get in touch with you:

Name: [Free response]
Email address: [Free response]
Cell phone: [Free response]

How would you prefer to be contacted?
[Multiple choice: email, phone call, text]

[Check box] I understand that by submitting this form, I am volunteering to participate in a research study and may be contacted by the researchers.

[Check box] I understand that my name and contact information will remain private before, during, and after the study, and will not be shared with any third parties.

Please contact Suzanne Schier with any questions at [contact information]
Thank you so much for your interest!

Appendix D. Informed Consent Form

CONSENT
Behavioral/Social Science

IRB Protocol Number: 2024E02222
IRB Approval Date: 03/03/2024
Version: 2

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Hindu College Students and a Sense of Belonging on Campus

Researcher: Suzanne E. Schier, PhD Candidate

Department: Educational Studies (Higher Education and Student Affairs)

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:

This study will investigate Hindu college students' sense of belonging on campus. The purpose of this study is to better understand Hindu students' experiences in order to improve supportive services offered to Hindu students. The goal is to provide recommendations to student affairs staff to increase belonging, improve student satisfaction, and create more successful outcomes.

Procedures/Tasks:

The procedures associated with this study include: (1) participating in two semi-structured interviews; (2) taking two photos of physical spaces on campus the participant associates with belonging; and (3) writing a paragraph about each of the two photos describing the motivation for taking the photos.

For the photo activity, participants should avoid taking photos of people, private locations, or anything which would cause a breach of confidentiality without consent.

Duration:

Research activities will take the following amount of time:

- Total interview time: 2 hours
- Taking two photos: approximately 1-2 hours
- Writing a paragraph about each photo: approximately 1 hour

You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no known risks to participants in this study.

Confidentiality:

The researcher will make every effort to anonymize any identifying information, with the participant holding the rights of final approval or refusal regarding de-identification before publication.

All files containing interviews, transcripts, photographs, writings, or any other documentation regarding participation in this study will remain confidential. All files will be stored electronically with password protection and will not be shared with any third parties without consent.

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- Authorized Ohio State University staff not involved in the study may be aware that you are participating in a research study and have access to your information; and

- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

Future Research:

Your de-identified information will not be used or shared for future research.

Incentives:

Participants will receive two Amazon gift cards in the amount of $10 each, for a total of $20. A $10 gift card will be sent to participants via e-mail following each of the two interviews. By law, payments to participants are considered taxable income.

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

This study was determined exempt from IRB review.

Contacts and Questions:

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, or you feel you have been harmed as a result of study participation, you may contact Suzanne Schier at [contact information].

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

[Signature line on next page.]

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form**.**

Printed name of participant	**Signature of participant**
	Date and time
Printed name of person authorized to consent for participant (when applicable)	**Signature of person authorized to consent for participant (when applicable)**
Relationship to the participant	**Date and time**

Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

Printed name of person obtaining consent	**Signature of person obtaining consent**
	Date and time

Appendix E. Codebook

Code	Description	Sample Quote
Avoiding religious discussions	Resisting having conversations about religion on campus	"Also, even if I am appreciative of Jesus, and even if I am appreciative of Islam religion, and then we'll have questions … and it is like, so which religion is better? Then it becomes a very problematic thing. So I as a person will never say anything. It's like neutral, neutral, neutral."
Awareness of resources	Knowledge of resources available on or near campus for Hindu students	"It's not well known. Yeah, because I didn't know about it until somebody told me about it. And when I tell a lot of my friends, they're like, 'Oh, really? We have a temple next to campus?' So, I'm like, 'Yeah, that's really cool.'"
Christian privilege	Preferential treatment of Christians over others, or observations of Christian majority influence	"I feel like if other religions can have spaces on campus for which people learn more about their religion and have churches or something like that, I think, why can't we? We need to have a space as well to practice and do what we do as Hindus without being judged."
Community involvement	Being active in a Hindu community, including both formal and informal groups and organizations, on or off campus	"I started volunteering at my local temple. I became friends with people there. I joined the youth committee and stuff like that. So I definitely got more involved in my temple."
Culture vs. religion	Relating or comparing being Hindu with being Indian	"I would say being Indian and Hindu is definitely very intertwined because that's where the religion is from, and a lot of people just assume if you're from India, you are Hindu, which is not true. But I would say, since the majority of the people that I hang out with and I'm with are from India and are Hindu, it's just… it comes for me together, you know? So, I can't really separate it. It just comes as one identity."

Curiosity of others	Encountering neutral-tone or positive-tone questions about Hinduism from non-Hindus	"So when he came to Ganesh pūjā, he was just curious. He was just asking us questions like, 'Oh, why are you putting milk on the idol? Why are you putting flowers? Why are you bowing down?' And then, yeah, he genuinely enjoyed trying new foods and sitting together and singing bhajans with us. He didn't know what it meant, but he was just like, it's giving, like, a good vibe."
Discrimination	Overtly unequal treatment of Hindu students	"But when I initially moved to the US, I used to wear my bindi to school, but I was bullied about it, so then I stopped wearing it. I used to wear a necklace, like a religious necklace, and people bullied me for that, so I stopped it."
Diversity	Acknowledging a wide range of religious expressions and/or experiences	"I think more recently, as I've learned more about other cultures and religions, it has become a lot more—I realized how diverse India was, and how many religions, languages, cultures there are within India. Even within Hinduism, there's different practices and different things that people do within every region of India."
Dominant religious influence	Noting the impact of having a religiously minoritized identity around a majority religion in any given area	"I grew up in a very Caucasian community where everyone practiced either Christianity or something else. So I wasn't really, really aware of why we did certain things. Like, I'd go to school and face so much racism and bullying for being who I am. And I genuinely, as a kid, did not know how to explain it to other kids as to, like, why I wore a bindi every day to school. I used to. Or why I had henna on my hands, or why I wore gold jewelry. Or why I would dress up for certain holidays … so they had more of a background or influence around them while I had to kind of learn that for myself and spread it to others."

Educating others	Teaching non-Hindus about Hinduism on campus	"But I think how we choose to do certain things is, well, one, we make sure we highlight the main holidays and their significance, like Diwali or Holi or Ganesh Chaturthi. We make sure we tell people why we do certain things, highlighting the main points. And then another big influence on how and why we do certain things is gauging the audience. And also keeping aware of our surroundings and what people know, what people don't know."
Family	Relationship with and/or experiences of parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.	"My grandparents are very religious. My great grandparents were priests. So they used to study Vedas, and they used to work in temples and work in very religious settings. So my family has always been very religious. My dad is extremely religious."
Finding community	Connecting to other people in a positive way either on or off campus	"Like, people even who didn't do pūjā at home, they came to college over here, and then we set it all up by ourselves. And then we did the pūjā and everything, because it felt like they had a community, it felt like they were back home."
Hindu privilege	Preferential treatment of Hindus over others, or observations of Hindu majority influence	"I said, no, this is not how it is. Just a very, very tiny, tiny, miniscule fraction. And there is no such thing called as intolerance or discrimination, subjugation of minorities. Hegemony. Power of the majority. There is nothing like that. We are very tolerant, very diverse. So that was like a bad painting of the Hindu religion in the minds of the students."

Identity construction/development	Changes in how one understands oneself during college experience	"Because, you know, when you're away from your support system, you need something, and faith became my support system. So going through college, going through the hardships here, you know, people, relationships, academics, it all got a lot. But when it gets too much, faith is something I can always rely on. So that has definitely made me more religious, I would say, in college."
India vs. United States	Comparing experiences in India to those in the U.S. (social, cultural, structural, etc.)	"And then the celebrations and the way we do everything from our daily life to academic, non-academic. Everything gets a very different flavor."
International student experiences	Life as an international student on campus	"And my belief is, as you said, how it is different being a Hindu here than in other nations. So, here it is. I believe we tend to very much start finding our tribe slowly. We as persons grow up also because we are on our own self. If there is problem for us, we only need to solve. And differences like missing home is definitely one thing."
Intersectionality	Having multiple identities simultaneously	"Okay, so I don't see a big difference. Because as we say that we are a product of many socio-economic, socio-environmental interactions. So having religious identity is one thing. We have our work identity. We have our philosophical identity. We have our group affiliations. And not all. We have our, like, as I say, right now, it's [school name] identity. So all these affiliations do not have a stamping of the religion. Religion maybe is more in personal sphere rather than in public sphere."

Isolation	Feeling alone and/or having a lack of community on campus	"So I think that's the only time I've ever stepped off campus to go to a religious setup, because it's just, it's hard to go places here. I don't have a car, so I've not really tried to transport myself to a lot of places. So I usually try to stick to on campus events."
Living out/expressing religion on campus	Religious experience and/or expression when physically on campus	"Okay, I had a very recent conversation with Diane. She is administrative assistant in my department. She was asking, Rajesh, why do Hindu religion have so many gods? I had a very interesting conversation with her on this."
Muslim privilege	Preferential treatment of Muslims over others, or observations of Muslim majority influence	"So, biggest problem, I think, like, Hindu is a minority. Like, only 3% of the entire population in Bangladesh. It's a minority nation. 97% is Muslim majority. And... but more than religious identity, there I could find a difference in food habits. Somewhere, religion and culture definitely affect our foods also. So, I am not an animal meat eater. And there, when I used to go and work, I had to literally break my heads to find vegetarian food."
Negative interactions with others	Social interactions that feel harmful, either on or off campus	"A lot of people believe that we're related to Nazis because of our swastikas. I had to face that as a kid. And recently, a lot of people were asking us if we're Hitler followers or something. And we're like, okay, first of all, Hinduism does not condone violence. Second of all, they stole it from us. So they took a symbol of peace, prosperity, and balance and made it into something that it's not. So it's a lot of explaining and a lot of, it's a lot of internal battle, I guess, because it's shocking when people come up to you and ask such. It's honestly disappointing that they would never ask that about any other religion, but they would ask that about ours. And it's shocking."

Non-discrimination	Feeling that one is being treated equally to others	"Everything seems more, what shall I say? I will say more easy on this diversity. Because of this diversity and inclusion, everything's more, I will rephrase, not easy. More of the feeling that, okay, I am not being discriminated. I am equal. For the administration staff also, I am at the same."
Off-campus interactions	Student experiences outside of the physical campus	"So far, the only time we stepped off campus is there was an ISKCON temple outside of college. So I think it was Diwali, and my friends and I, we just came back from a cabin trip, so I didn't get an opportunity to go home. So in that time, on Diwali Day itself, they didn't host any events on campus. So we just felt like, you know, at least going to the temple would be a good way to celebrate. So we all dressed up, and then we went to the ISKCON temple off campus, and that's where we were able to celebrate and have a moment."
Participant background	Sharing details of life, history, and/or historical identity	"Yeah, so I'm originally from India. So my family moved here when I was pretty young."
Personal/inner religion	Reference to private religious life (i.e., not expressed in community with others)	"I would say that there was a point in time I didn't agree with everything my religion said, or all the politics around it and everything. But finally, I just kind of put it all aside and find my own space in it. And I just have my own beliefs and how I want to deal with it. And I think that's how it should be for everybody. You know, you find your own way and your own attachment with it and follow it in a way that's comfortable for you, not in a way that people tell you to do it."

Positive interactions with others	Social interactions that feel beneficial, either on or off campus	"I met with a lot of international students. So, definitely they come from an experience where, you know, they were very connected to their religion back home. So they're here. I also felt like, you know, talking with them, it made me feel more comfortable with my religion, because their experience is very, very similar to mine. And even better. So I felt more comfortable talking to them about religion, my religious practices."
Power dynamics	Unequal treatment, causing harm, or making people afraid due to social inequalities	"I think it didn't happen to me. But it happened to my dad once. He was wearing one of the things like forehead things that we wear, like to the temple. And we were coming out of the parking lot. And somebody looked at us and they were like, 'What are you wearing on your forehead?' And I was like, 'Oh, it's religious.' And then they just started preaching Christianity. They were like, 'Jesus is the only God. That's the religion you should be following.' And he got a little bit aggressive with it. And my dad didn't want to get in trouble. So he was like, 'Okay, I completely understand. I respect your opinion.' And we left from there."
Proselytizing/conversion efforts	Non-Hindus attempting to convert Hindu students to another religion	"They have different tables. There will be tables for religious tables also. And sometimes once we cross those tables, they will ask, 'Okay, do you follow this? Do you follow this XYZ?' Whatever. And sometimes even without celebration, there will be some religious group representatives, ovals and other sites, and they will start, 'Okay, do you believe in Jesus? Do you do this?' Three questions. 'Yes, yes, yes.' 'Okay. We would like to contact you. Give us your number.'"

Relationship building	Forming meaningful connections with other people on campus (students, faculty, staff, etc.)	"I feel happy about conversing on religious topics that I get. And we all will never open up to each person if some person is talking the way we trust people. Then only we open up also."
Religion as a source of comfort	Experiencing religious identity and/or practices as personally beneficial, reassuring, peaceful, calming, etc.	"For me, being away from home, religion is definitely a comfort zone. I feel it's a way for me to connect with God, and especially during tough times. I had a very huge fallout, like, a breakup with one of my friends recently, and it was a really bad incident. But then coming out of it, I prayed. I definitely sat down and I prayed. I read shlokas. I listened to audios that my grandma sent me. And it just really helped me calm myself down."
Stereotypes & misperceptions	Encountering incorrect assumptions about Hinduism by non-Hindus	"But I was like, we have this, like, powder called, it's called tilak. So we put it on our [gesturing to forehead], it's kind of, it's a pressure point here. So we put it here to—there's a lot of significance behind it. But someone came up to me and was like, do you guys put blood on your face? And I was like, it's red. So, I mean, it wasn't out of the blue for them to ask that. And I guess a lot of it comes from having patience. If I were to just be, like, no, go away, then they wouldn't learn. So a lot of it is being patient with them and explaining to them, look, no, this isn't blood. We do this as a religious practice."
Systemic privilege	Religious inequalities that operate on a deeper level, often taken for granted, less obvious than discrimination	"Maybe twisting they have done over time. Those twistings have become so solid that sometimes it gets into a more orthodox and fundamental model. But the flexibility of accommodating and assimilating other values and religious teachings and philosophies is still there."

Welcoming spaces	Physical spaces on or off campus where students feel a sense of belonging	"The priest was so nice. He started asking me where I'm from, what my parents do. And then when I told him where I'm from, he was like, 'Oh, my God, I know people there, too.' Like, we definitely connected. So, yeah, I felt really welcome. And he told me a lot of students from campus go there and, you know, get connected, and it's a safe space. So, yeah, it was definitely very welcoming."

Appendix F. Rajesh's Photos

Figure F1

Entrance to Arboretum on Regional Campus

Note. Text identifying the location on the sign has been obscured to protect privacy.

Figure F2

Path and Pavilion at Arboretum

Note. Identifying information on the plaque on the stone in the lower lefthand corner has been obscured to protect privacy.

Figure F3

Pavilion From Another Angle

Appendix G. Sunita's Photos

Figure G1

Entrance to Residence Hall Courtyard

Figure G2

Looking Up Into Art Installation at Art Museum on Campus