

Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

---

Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)

---

2022

## Exploring the Impact of Social Media on the Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of Emerging Adults

Mark Ehlebracht  
ehle1428@mylaurier.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ehlebracht, Mark, "Exploring the Impact of Social Media on the Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of Emerging Adults" (2022). *Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)*. 2444.  
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/2444>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

Exploring the Impact of Social Media on the Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of Emerging Adults

By

Mark Scott Ehlebracht

Baccalaureate in Music (Hons), University of Ottawa, 1997  
Master of Divinity, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001

DISSERTATION

Submitted to Martin Luther University College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Doctoral Degree

Wilfrid Laurier University

2021

©Mark Scott Ehlebracht, 2021

## **Abstract**

The adoption of social media has been suggested to contribute to a syncretic behavior in emerging adults. The rate of innovation and change that occurred in the church during the Reformation, concurrent with the rise of the printing press, is similar to the rate of cultural change occurring today; a primary missional challenge of the Christian church is to incarnate the gospel in the digital world. While much research has been conducted on the effects of social media in a variety of demographics and its unintended consequences, limited research has examined the impact of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults in a Canadian context. A qualitative, inductive study of emerging adults explores how social media potentially disrupts, promotes, or interacts with their religious and spiritual belief. The study notes the gap that is created between those who have a hunger for spirituality and an openness to organized religion and faith communities that are viewed as neither resource or environment for questioning and exploration. In this study, all participants connectedness through social media emboldened their healthy questioning and critical understandings which, in turn, impacted their worldview. The study notes that theology is no longer centralized but rather generated in a cooperative way and the importance for faith communities to create, or recreate, an environment akin to a medieval village green. This will provide some context for Canadian faith communities to think through how to shift behaviors to deal appropriately with social media and online interaction while tending to the spiritual and religious needs of their people in addition to helping said faith communities navigate how to apply traditional rules to new technologies. The study outcomes are expected to contribute to the field of pastoral leadership by adding to the developing conversation about our changing contexts and how faith communities might engage a particular and vital demographic amidst rapid social and technological change.

## Acknowledgments

I would not have survived this ordeal without the help and support of a number of rock stars:

- My advisor, Dr. Kristine Lund, who offered wisdom, and insight, and who talked me off the ledge.
- My committee, Dr. Mark Harris, Dr. Nathan Rambukkana, Dr. Allen Jorgenson, Dr. Deanna Thompson, who offered editorial advice and encouraged me to dig deep and show up.
- My classmates and colleagues with whom I shared many coffees and ideas.
- The research participants who were eager to engage in conversation. For all of the ways you have given me pause, I am grateful.
- My St. Peter's community, who gave me time, freedom, and encouragement.
- My friends, the Heinz-White family, who showed up big when it mattered.
- My family, without whom none of this would have been possible:
  - My Oma and Tante Lina, whose faith inspired me and hymn singing, now together with the saints, sustained me.
  - My parents, Paul and Hildegard Ehlebracht, who instilled in me a love of learning, encouraged me, taught me, loved me immeasurably, and who have left their marks not only on the words I've written, but the path that I have chosen.
  - My parents-in-law, Wayne and Helen Stacey, who through their unwavering support, and moments of levity and love, have encouraged me to climb higher.
  - My children, Joshua, Rachel, and Caleb, who make everything possible, and life worth living. I don't know how I got so lucky.
  - My partner and beloved, Karen Ehlebracht, whose courage inspires me and whose patience, understanding, and love has been more than I deserve. Thank you for giving me space to be vulnerable and letting me make the journey I needed to make.

For all of the love, support, prayers, high-fives, laughter, tears, and Chai lattes with the double espresso shots: thank you.



## Table of Contents

INTRO	6
Research Question	8
Chapter Outlines	8
LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Heidegger	10
Declining Participation in the Christian Church	14
Developmental Issues	17
Contemporary Spirituality	20
Trust	31
Affordance	34
Authenticity	39
Conclusion	43
METHODOLOGY	46
Framework	46
Researcher	47
Participants	48
Data Collection and Procedures	48
Data Analysis and Coding	50
Conclusion	55
FINDINGS	57
Living with Integrity	64
Faith Community as Resource	67
Silence and Silencing	70
Meaning Making	71
Identity and Syncretic Behaviour	74
Trust and Beliefs	77
Interaction and World-View	80
Conclusion	83
DISCUSSION	84
Shift in Belief Systems	88
Living with Integrity	90
Faith Community as Resource	94
Silence and Silencing	101
Meaning Making	107
Identity and Syncretic Behaviour	111
Trust and Beliefs	117
Interpretation and World-View	123
On defining the terms <i>religion</i> and <i>spirituality</i>	132
Conclusion	134

CONCLUSION	136
Limitations and Future Direction	151
Theological Reflection	153
APENDICES	
Initial Questionnaire	162
Discussion Guide	167
Recruitment Graphic	170
Research Ethic Board Clearance	171
Research Ethics Board Modification Clearance	173
Initial Questionnaire Informed Consent Form	174
Follow-Up Interview Informed Consent Form	177
BIBLIOGRAPHY	181

## Introduction

The explosion of innovation and change that occurred in the church during the Reformation, concurrent with the rise of the printing press, is similar to the explosion in cultural change occurring today.<sup>1</sup> A primary missional challenge of the Christian church is to incarnate the gospel in the digital world. The statistics regarding Internet usage, device ownership, and social media are remarkable. The internet has 4.2 billion users and there are 3.03 billion active social media users. Internet users have an average of 7.6 social media accounts, social media users grew by 121 million between the second and third quarters of 2017 (that's 1 every 15 seconds), and Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp handle sixty billion messages a day.<sup>2</sup> Facebook, originally designed to connect students at Harvard University, now has more than 200 million users who upload 850 million photos and eight million videos every month.<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada reports that nearly all of Canadians use the Internet every single day, with the province of Alberta having the highest percentage of Internet users, and that 76% of all Canadians own a Smartphone, 71% own a laptop, and 54% own a tablet.<sup>4</sup> Further, when asked how they perceived technology, 77% of Canadians feel that it helps them communicate with others, 66% said that it saves time, 52% use the Internet to make more informed decisions, 36% feel the Internet helps them to be more creative, and over 60% of Canadians aged 15 – 64 believe that life is better as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah Dittmar and Skipper Seabold, "Media, Markets and Institutional Change: Evidence from the Protestant," *The Industrial Revolution as an Energy Revolution* | VOX, CEPR's Policy Portal, August 19, 2015, accessed June 17, 2018, <https://voxeu.org/article/media-markets-and-institutional-change-evidence-protestant-reformation>.

<sup>2</sup> Kit Smith, "121 Amazing Social Media Statistics and Facts" BrandWatch.com (October 2, 2018), accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/amazing-social-media-statistics-and-facts/>

<sup>3</sup> Ameer Khan, "Ethical Issues in Social Networking" (October 2015):3, doi: 10.13140/RG.2.1.4289.6080, accessed January 18, 2018. Referenced in TH664H, *Professional Ethics*, Winter 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada, "The Internet and Digital Technology," Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, November 14, 2017, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017032-eng.htm>.

result of technology use.<sup>5</sup> Paul McClure notes that despite the immense popularity, there may be unintended consequences to the use of internet technology.<sup>6</sup> Pornography and gambling industries have increased and internet use may underwrite antisocial behavior.<sup>7</sup> Declining participation of the younger generation in the Christian church is already well documented<sup>8</sup> as is “the reliance on one’s own conscience to guide behaviour rather than religious rules, the importance of friends and family, and the increasing significance of social media and popular culture.”<sup>9,10</sup> Based on a literature review, despite the abundance of research on religion and spiritual beliefs, and social networking and our well-being,<sup>11</sup> limited research has explored how these might converge. Thus, it is critical to explore the connection between participation in social networking and a person’s religiosity and spirituality.<sup>12</sup>

This qualitative, inductive study explores participants’ belief systems and begins to understand how social media disrupts, promotes, or interacts with religious and spiritual beliefs. This study explores the impact of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults in Canada. The study explores the following primary research question, which is informed by McClure’s research:<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>P.K. McClure, “Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age: The Effects of Social Networking Sites on the Religious Beliefs of Emerging Adults,” *Sociological Perspectives* 59, no. 4 (2016): 818, doi:10.1177/0731121416647361.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Christian, and P. Snell. *Souls in Transition*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Catto, "What Can We Say About Today's British Religious Young Person? Findings from the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme," *Religion* 44.1 (2013): 5, doi:10.1080/0048721X.2013.844740

<sup>10</sup> Beaudoin, Tom. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. John Wiley & Sons, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Initial findings indicate this is the research of Bargh and McKenna 2004; Hampton et al. 2011; Kross et al. 2013; Nie and Ebring 2002; Wellman 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Initial findings indicate this is the research of Beaudoin, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> See P.K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*, 819.

What is the impact of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults in Canada?

Social media has experienced explosive growth over the past thirty years. While not all research is in agreement as to whether the use of social media has a positive or negative effect on community and, specifically faith communities, an exploration of theological, spiritual, missional implications is called for. This will provide some context for Canadian faith communities to consider how to shift behaviors to deal appropriately with social media and online interaction while tending to the spiritual and religious needs of their people in addition to helping said faith communities navigate how to apply traditional rules to new technologies.<sup>14</sup> This study is necessary for the field of pastoral leadership because it will add to the developing conversation about our changing contexts and how faith communities might engage a particular and vital demographic amidst rapid social and technological change.

Following this introductory chapter, the structure of this dissertation shall be as follows:

Chapter two offers a literature review that informs the research and the developing conversation about our changing contexts and how faith communities might engage a particular and vital demographic amidst rapid social and technological change.

Chapter three explains the method of inquiry and its rationale. Given the complexity and nature of social media, generally, multiple disciplines are used to gain understanding of the use of social media (i.e. social science, data science). Philosophy provides the necessary basic foundation for the study that then weaves its way toward pluralism and contextualization.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Beaudoin, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Jiayin Qi et al., "Theories of Social Media: Philosophical Foundations," *Engineering* 4, no. 1 (2018):94, doi:10.1016/j.eng.2018.02.009.

Chapter four explores the findings of this study, grouping them under a common theme of the “shifting of belief systems” with the articulated reasons for those shifts forming the sub-themes of syncretic behaviour, interaction and world view, trust, identity, religious rules and guiding behaviour, silence, and meaning making.

Chapter five explores how these findings dovetail with previous research, or lack thereof, and discusses the gap that is created between those who have a hunger for spirituality and an openness to organized religion and faith communities that are viewed as neither resource or environment for questioning and exploration. In this study, all participants connectedness through social media emboldened their healthy questioning and critical understandings which, in turn, impacted their worldview

Chapter six concludes the study noting that theology is no longer centralized but rather generated in a co-operative way and the importance for faith communities to create, or recreate, a medieval village green. Study limitations and further research considerations are noted. A personal theological reflection is shared in a unique, study related style. In the appendices the reader will find ethics approval, the recruitment graphic, and consent form.

## Literature Review

To review the relevant literature for this study it was necessary to look at Heidegger's philosophy for interpretive phenomenological research, specifically *Being and Time*, *Dasein*, and being in the world, issues around the decline of participation in the Christian church, literature around contemporary spirituality specifically relating to connectedness, the sharing of information in a digital age from a behavioural perspective that includes trust, the affordances of social media, and authenticity.

I am keenly aware that “the study of social phenomena requires an understanding of the social worlds that people inhabit; worlds which people have already interpreted by the meanings they produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their shared everyday activities.”<sup>16</sup> I began my literature review by searching for literature related to social media, religiosity, and spirituality and emerging adults. Over time it evolved to include pieces relating to meaning making, various aspects of world-view, authenticity, and being

## Heidegger

The philosopher Martin Heidegger's 1926 work *Being and Time* explores ontologically what being means. Heidegger's philosophical tenets as they relate to research methods, interpretation, and understanding the lived experience are significant.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Philosophy of Research: Do All Social Scientists Use the Same Methodology? London: Sage Publications Inc., 2017, <http://methods.sagepub.com/base/download/StageSection/605>, accessed May 24, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Friesen, Norm & Henriksson, Carina & Saevi, Tone, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology in Education* (2012); T. Koch, T, Implementation of a hermeneutic inquiry in nursing: Philosophy, rigour and representation, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 24, (1996): 174–184; P. Benner, “The tradition and skill in interpretive phenomenology in studying health, illness and caring practices,” in *Interpretive phenomenology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994). ; M van Manen, *Researching the lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*, 2nd ed. (Ontario, Canada: Althouse Press, 1997)

In his work 1958 *What is Philosophy?* Heidegger explains that philosophy “consists in our corresponding to [answering to] that towards which philosophy is on the way. And that is—the Being of being.”<sup>18</sup> As the author Matt Whitlock notes in an essay on the philosophy of Heidegger, “philosophy is a dialogue with being. Being depends on us to bring it forth, but it is not all up to us. Being has something to say as well. Bringing forth the essence of a thing, and seeing the referential relationships that make a thing meaningful to us are examples of a correspondence with being.”<sup>19</sup> The definition of philosophy is, perhaps, difficult to settle on. Helpful is Heidegger’s returning to philosophy as a Greek word meaning “path.”<sup>20</sup> Philosophy, in Heidegger’s thinking, is a conversation with being. “Bringing forth the essence of a thing, and seeing the referential relationships that make a thing meaningful to us are examples of a correspondence with being.”<sup>21</sup> Heidegger spends a great deal of time turning this definition and notes that we are always in the conversation with being whether or not we are aware of it. “For, to be sure, although we do remain always and everywhere in correspondence to the Being of being, ... only at times does it become an unfolding attitude specifically adopted by us. Only when this happens do we really correspond to that which concerns philosophy which is on the way towards the Being of beings.”<sup>22</sup>

Heidegger rejects the notion that human beings are spectators of objects; for Heidegger these are inseparable and Heidegger asks the question “what does it mean to be?” Intrinsic to this question, and one of the central tenets of Heidegger’s philosophy, is that being in the world

---

<sup>18</sup>Martin Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (Twayne Publishers, 1958), p71.

<sup>19</sup> Matt Whitlock, "Heidegger On Philosophy Itself," A Rigid Designator, November 12, 2011, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://arigiddesignator.wordpress.com/2011/11/12/heidegger-on-philosophy-itself/>.

<sup>20</sup> Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Matt Whitlock, A Rigid Designator.

<sup>22</sup> Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, 73-75.



means being enmeshed and inseparable from the world.<sup>23</sup> Being inseparable from the world leads to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*. It is Heidegger's depiction of *Dasein* that is relevant to the context of this study. *Dasein*'s existence is shaped by the "they".<sup>24</sup> This "they" is an impersonal entity which is a lens to a "social reality specifically through encounters with equipment (ready to hand things), nature, and others."<sup>25</sup>

Heidegger shifted the dialogue regarding knowledge and identity by considering issues surrounding ontology (from the perspective of the meaning of being human) and moving debate beyond epistemology.<sup>26</sup> The Cartesian notions of the self, view the self as subject. Patricia Benner outlines this self as "[...] an uninvolved self passively contemplating the external world of things via representations that are held in the mind. This self *possesses* a body and, by extension, traits or attributes such as anxiety or self-esteem. The self is always seen as subject and the world or environment as object."<sup>27</sup> This has implications for meaning making since meaning would then be grounded in the actions of subjects.<sup>28</sup> Phenomenologists Charles Taylor, who draws on the work of Heidegger, and Hubert Dreyfus, argue that "traditional science constrains understanding of human agency, limits one's imaginative ability to generate questions and limits answers to those questions."<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> H.L Dreyfus, M.A Wrathall, M. A. (Eds.), *A companion to Heidegger*, 2nd ed., (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2007); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans J Macquarrie, E. Robinson, (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1927/2011)

<sup>24</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

<sup>25</sup> Marcella Horrigan-Kelly, Michelle Millar, Maura Dowling, (2016) "Understanding the Key Tenets of Heidegger's Philosophy for Interpretive Phenomenological Research," *The International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (2016): 15.

<sup>26</sup> Patricia Benner, *Interpretive Phenomenology: Embodiment, Caring, and Ethics in Health and Illness*, (SAGE Publications, 1994): 44.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 45.

Much of the understanding of the self (or one's self) is rooted in relationship, specifically, the relation of person to world, which is complicated by the emergence of a new "tethered self, permanently connected"<sup>30</sup> to world. "World is the meaningful set of relationships, practices, and language that we have by virtue of being born into a culture;"<sup>31</sup> this, for Heidegger, makes world a priori. Heidegger describes that world

comes not afterward but beforehand, in the strict sense of the word. Before hand: that which is unveiled and understood already in advance in every existent Dasein before any apprehending of this or that being. The world as already unveiled in advance is such that we do not in fact specifically occupy ourselves with it, or apprehend it, but instead it is so self-evident, so much a matter of course, that we are completely oblivious to it.<sup>32</sup>

The tension between the self as constituted by the world and the Cartesian understanding of self as possession is palpable; personal identity, notes Hoy<sup>33,34</sup> "is not a matter of ownership."<sup>35</sup> "It is thought that by getting clear about values, purposes, and choices, the radically free self can gain enlightened control over his or her life"<sup>36</sup> and hence, "causes us to privilege detached theorizing over practical activity."<sup>37</sup> Heidegger argues that the "detached, reflective mode of knowing the world exemplified by Descartes is dependent on a priori existence of world in which the meaning given in our language and culture is what makes a thing show up for us at all."<sup>38</sup> Heidegger writes "the modes of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy all have the function of bringing to the fore the characteristics of presence-at-hand in what is ready-to-hand. But the

---

<sup>30</sup> Tim Hutchings, Review of Network Theology, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1982), 165.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Ehlebracht, (2019) "Social Media and Othering: Philosophy, Algorithms, and the Essence of Being Human," *Consensus*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

<sup>34</sup> D. Hoy, Proceedings of Approaches to Interpretation Conference, California State University, Hayward, May 1986.

<sup>35</sup> D. Hoy, Proceedings of Approaches to Interpretation Conference, California State University, Hayward, May 1982, via Patricia Benner, *Interpretive Phenomenology*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Benner, *Interpretive Phenomenology*, 48.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

ready-to-hand is not thereby *just observed* and stared at.”<sup>39</sup> Heidegger goes on to discuss making sense of things through either unready-to-hand (stepping back partially and reflecting) or present-at-hand (stepping back fully and reflecting). Heidegger can become a useful lens when examining how people look at their devices and the world and the implications of hyper-connectivity. According to Karl E. Weick, Heidegger notes that in this stepping back fully or detaching fully from the world that overload can be experienced.<sup>40</sup> Arguably, these moments flow into data points of observing which flow into making sense, which becomes foundational for making meaning.

### **Declining Participation in the Christian Church**

Declining participation in church is a significant phenomenon in the life of many faith communities, particularly mainline protestant faith communities. Interestingly enough, there emerged an irony for mainline protestants in that their declining numbers may conterturally be a sign of success, or a symptom, of their ideas and theology. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell observed that ideas, undergirded by theology, of openness and tolerance may be contributing to the declining numbers.<sup>41</sup> David Haskell and Kevin Flatt, of Wilfrid Laurier University and Redeemer University College respectively, recently came to a similar opinion after their study on the decline of mainline Protestantism in Canada concluded that within Christianity, conservative faith communities continue to grow while more liberal, main-line denominations are in decline, attributing the growth and decline, respectively, to conservative

---

<sup>39</sup> Martin Heidegger, Joan Stambaugh, and Dennis J. Schmidt, *Being and Time*, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 103.

<sup>40</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 73-74.

<sup>41</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition*.

and liberal theologies.<sup>42</sup> While anti-institutionalism and the shifting scriptural hermeneutic of individuals are factors, as we seek to better understand young people, research indicates that there is an increase in young people responding to their parents' religion.<sup>43</sup> Richard Flory notes that while *Gen Xers* do want to live out religious commitments, they resist aligning themselves with old ideologies and follow the social implications of different religious teachings.<sup>44</sup> Further, there is "a move for Gen Xers away from rationalistic, propositional truth claims reliant on the proper exegesis of written text to truth validated by experience in the religious community."<sup>45</sup>

Researcher Allen Downey argued that internet use accounts for the twenty percent decrease in religious affiliation since 1990.<sup>46,47</sup> Downey analyzed the data from the General Social Survey, an American sociological survey that has measured attitudes and demographics since 1972 and attempted to determine how the drop in religious affiliation correlated with such things as socioeconomic status, education, and religious upbringing in the United States of America.<sup>48</sup> Each of these areas did have an impact on religious affiliation but could not, Downey discovered, account for the totality of the decline. Downey observes that "in the 1980s, Internet use was essentially zero, but in 2010, 53 percent of the population spent two hours per week online and 25 percent surfed for more than 7 hours. This increase closely matches the decrease in religious affiliation. In fact, Downey calculates that it can account for about 25 percent of the

---

<sup>42</sup> David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy," *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 4 (2016): , doi:10.1007/s13644-016-0255-4. Note: the church I currently serve (St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Kitchener, ON) was one of the participants in this study.

<sup>43</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition*.

<sup>44</sup> Richard W. Flory and Donald Earl Miller, *Gen X Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 247.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>46</sup> P.K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*, 821.

<sup>47</sup> Allen B. Downey, "Religious Affiliation, Education and Internet Use," arXiv:1403.5534 [stat], 10, retrieved February 15, 2017, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1403.5534>.

<sup>48</sup> ArXiv, "How the Internet Is Taking Away America's Religion," MIT Technology Review, September 19, 2014, , accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/526111/how-the-internet-is-taking-away-americas-religion/>.

drop.”<sup>49</sup> Downey notes that with the rise of the internet also comes the rise of the religious nones, meaning those who are religiously unaffiliated.<sup>50</sup> As above, Downey noted that the rise of the internet could not account for the totality of the decline and that other factors such as non-religious upbringings and post-secondary education bore a significant role in the increase of religious nones.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps this is not surprising given that religious affiliation has been on the decline for decades. Wuthnow shows that from the 1950s in North America, people gravitated towards a preference for the individual religious experience rather than institutional religion.<sup>52</sup> Those who consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious signal a movement of people away from organized religion. Further, they value choice and do not affiliate exclusively with one tradition.<sup>53</sup>

Putnam and Campbell note that 35 – 40% of Americans switch religious traditions.<sup>54</sup> This suggests that emerging adults feel free enough to leave the religious tradition of their family of origin.<sup>55</sup> That said, the broader environment in which the population, particularly emerging adults, finds itself in is also significant. Wuthnow contends that American spirituality has changed since the 1950s – including an environment that allows for religious pluralism and, in

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> P.K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*; (Baker, Joseph & Smith, Buster. (2009). The Nones: Social Characteristics of the Religiously Unaffiliated. *Social Forces - SOC FORCES*. 87. 1251-1263. 10.1353/sof.0.0181.; Michael Hout, and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations.” *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (2002): 165–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088891>; Bryan T. McGraw, Robert D. Putnam, and David E. Campbell. *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 4 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381612000771>.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Merino, “Irreligious Socialization? The Adult Religious Preferences of Individuals Raised with No Religion,” *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 1, (2012).

<sup>52</sup> Robert Wuthnow, “Religion and Television: The Public and the Private,” in *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media: Perspectives on the Relationship Between American Evangelicals and the Mass Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academie, 1990).

<sup>53</sup> Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

<sup>54</sup> Putnam and Campbell (2012)

<sup>55</sup> P.K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*

varying degrees, religious syncretism.<sup>56</sup> Wuthnow points to changing immigration patterns that lead to increased religious diversity. As such, being exposed to a variety and plethora of religions coupled with an increasing acceptance of religious pluralism, allows for a syncretism through the increasingly common belief that all religions function in essentially the same way.<sup>57</sup>

## Developmental Issues

Developmentally, emerging adulthood is uniquely distinguished from adolescence<sup>58</sup> and adulthood by five main features: *identity exploration, feeling in between, instability, focus on the self, and experimentation/possibilities*.<sup>59</sup>

*Identity exploration* may begin in adolescence, however, an identity is rarely achieved as adolescence draws to a close.<sup>60</sup> Rather, identity exploration continues into emerging adulthood through various life experiences including vocational and educational choices, worldviews, relationships, that allow them to determine what they want for themselves.<sup>61</sup> Further, increased exploration are expressed particularly in industrialized nations.<sup>62</sup> Delayed commitments to

---

<sup>56</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*, New ed. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998); Robert Wuthnow, 2007. *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Robert Wuthnow, *American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to Be a Better Nation Fall Short* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Paul K. McClure, "Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age: The Effects of Social Networking Sites on the Religious Beliefs of Emerging Adults," *Sociological Perspectives* 59, no. 4 (December 2016): 818–34.

<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties," *The American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (2000): 469–80. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>.

<sup>59</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>60</sup> Seth J. Schwartz, Byron L. Zamboanga, Koen Luyckx, Alan Meca, and Rachel A. Ritchie, "Identity in Emerging Adulthood," *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 2 (2013): 96–113; Gregory A. Valde, "Identity Closure: A Fifth Identity Status," *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 157, no. 3 (1996): 245–54.

<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*.

<sup>62</sup> Arnett, 2000; Carrie B. Douglass, "From Duty to Desire: Emerging Adulthood in Europe and Its Consequences," *Child Development Perspectives* 1, no. 2 (2007): 101–8. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2007.00023.x>.

workforce, residence, and family<sup>63</sup> emerging adults have more freedom for exploration; delay in these traditional markers is often accompanied by increased travel and time spent socializing.<sup>64</sup> Identity development is one of the most critical tasks for emerging adults<sup>65</sup> and is a key developmental process.<sup>66</sup>

*Feeling in between* is exactly as it sounds: emerging adults do not see themselves as either adolescents or adults; feeling adult in some ways, but not in others.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, responsibility for oneself, autonomy in decision making, and financial independence are key goals.<sup>68</sup>

*Instability* characterizes this feature of emerging adulthood through changes in residency, relationships, education, and vocation. Feelings of negativity or stress can develop during this time as, for example, living and employment become unpredictable<sup>69</sup> and movements towards self-awareness through acquiring different roles occur.<sup>70</sup>

*Focus on the self* is tied in with increasing independence. Shifts in who one is accountable to are notable. In adolescence this may be parents and teachers and in adulthood this may be spouses, employers, and/or children. Emerging adults, however, in an in-between period, are learning how to be responsible for themselves and self-sufficient.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Arnett, 2004.

<sup>64</sup> Douglass, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Seth J. Schwartz, James E. Côté, and Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Identity and Agency in Emerging Adulthood," *Youth & Society* 37, no. 2 (2005): 201–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x05275965>.

<sup>66</sup> Erik H. Erikson. *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1968).

<sup>67</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Are college students adults? Their conceptions of the transition to adulthood," *Journal of Adult Development*, 1, no. 4 (1994): 213–224. <https://doi-org.libproxy.wlu.ca/10.1007/BF02277582>; Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood," *Youth & Society*, 29, no. 1 (1997): 3–23.

<sup>68</sup> Arnett, 2014; L.J. Nelson, & S. S. Luster, "*Adulthood*" by Whose Definition? (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>69</sup> Arnett, 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Arnett, 2014; Alan Reifman, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, and Malinda J. Colwell, "Emerging Adulthood: Theory, Assessment and Application." *Journal of Youth Development* 2, no. 1 (2007): 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2007.359>.

<sup>71</sup> Arnett, 2004, 2014.

A period of *experimentation and possibilities* characterizes emerging adulthood. Arnett describes this as a period when “the fulfilment of all their hopes seems possible, because for most people, the range of their choices for how to live is greater than it has ever been before and greater than it will ever be again.”<sup>72</sup> Further, a sense of optimism can be prevalent as they recognize possibilities<sup>73</sup> Arnett offers they have multiple opportunities to shift direction, transform, and walk multiple paths.<sup>74</sup>

As emerging adults move through this developmental stage, they may encounter religion. James Fowler, building on the theories of Piaget and Kohlberg, outlines a developmental model based on faith that includes seven primary stages of faith: primal undifferentiated faith, intuitive-projective faith, mythic-literal faith, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and universalizing faith.<sup>75</sup> In the context of this study, of particular note are stages two, three, and four, mythic-literal faith, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith respectively.

In paraphrased sum, as expressed by Fowler:<sup>76</sup>

Stage two/mythic-literal faith occurs between the ages of 7 and 12 and is characterized by a belief in justice and fairness in religious matters and an anthropomorphic image of God. Stage three/synthetic-conventional faith occurs between age 12 to adult and is characterized by identification with a religious institution, belief system or authority, and growth of one’s personal or religious identity. Fowler notes that conflicts that occur when one’s belief system is challenged are often ignored as they threaten one’s faith-based identity.

Stage four/individuitive-reflective faith occurs between the ages of one’s mid-twenties to late thirties is often characterized by angst and struggle as one takes responsibility for one’s beliefs and/or feelings. Religious and spiritual beliefs can become more complex and

---

<sup>72</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 17.

<sup>73</sup> Kerri A. Murphy, David L. Blustein, Amanda J. Bohlig, and Melissa G. Platt, “The College-to-Career Transition: An Exploration of Emerging Adulthood,” *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 88, no. 2 (2010): 174–81. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2010.tb00006.x>.

<sup>74</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*.

<sup>75</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*



greater open-mindedness can lead to more struggle as different beliefs and traditions collide.

### Contemporary Spirituality

When speaking about spirituality, the study participants tended to use words such as “connected,” “nature,” “surroundings,” “awareness,” and “holistic.” This is perhaps congruent with the shift in popular beliefs towards the natural world.<sup>77</sup> One such contemporary spiritual idea is that the divine is present in all of nature and thus nature must be treated with respect; this idea is influenced by Eastern spiritual ideas.<sup>78</sup> Being connected, or rather inter-connected, is heightened in contemporary spirituality.<sup>79</sup> The interconnectedness with the natural world and the interconnectedness of life can produce two things: “a profound sense of responsibility for others and the earth”<sup>80</sup> and motivator for treating nature with respect.<sup>81</sup> In a much broader sense, interconnectedness may give a sense of purpose and increase tolerance for differences. In fact, contemporary spirituality tends to emphasize similarities rather than differences regarding religion, ethnicity, or sexual preferences, for example, and religions perceived as expressions of the same, deep, mystical truths.<sup>82</sup> Finally, the term holistic was used by several study participants when describing spirituality. Heelas and Woodland note that holistic involves self-in-relation.<sup>83</sup> Hence, this has implications for behaviour. Seeing oneself as a part of a larger, inter-connected

---

<sup>77</sup> Colin Campbell, *The Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era*, (Routledge, 2007).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Campbell, 2007; Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, Benjamin Seel, Karin Tusting and Bronislaw Szerszynski, “The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality” (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>80</sup> Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Basil Blackwell, 1996), p.25.

<sup>81</sup> Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal*, (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 2007).

<sup>82</sup> (Heelas, 1996; Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman, “Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 21 (2006): 201-222. 10.1080/13537900600655894.

<sup>83</sup> Heelas and Woodhead, 2005.

system, impacts sense of purpose around contributing to the whole. This might also refer to authenticity, specifically in becoming one's true self. On a related note, Hess discusses how social networks have connected people and how these connections are difficult to *disconnect* from.<sup>84</sup> When the Internet was still in the infancy of becoming a part of everyday life, there was concern that people would create multiple versions of themselves, personas, for the virtual world and thus lose themselves. This concern has proven itself to be largely true, but some qualifiers are necessary. danah boyd, a social media researcher who prefers her name be written in lower case, notes that young people express a need for multiple profiles using different sites to interact with different audiences for different purposes.<sup>85</sup> One could also say this is simply reflective of different parts of one's persona.

Emerging adults are "socially engaged," according to Smith and Snell because they are connected to one another via "technologically managed relationships."<sup>86</sup> According to Smith and Snell, this can lead to emerging adults not being as prepared to participate in in-person community<sup>87</sup> and more prone to narcissism.<sup>88</sup> Religious affiliation does have an effect on civic engagement and volunteering. Specifically, volunteer activity is greater for those who place importance on religion.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Mary Hess, "A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation," *Dialog* 53, no. 1 (March 2014): pp. 12-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12084>.

<sup>85</sup> See danah boyd, *It's Complicated the Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>86</sup> Christian Smith, and P. Snell, *Souls in Transition* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Tiffany Pempek, and Yevdokiya Yermolayeva, and Sandra Calvert, (2009) "College students' social networking experiences on Facebook," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 30 (2009): 227-238. 10.1016/j.appdev.2008.12.010.).

<sup>87</sup> Smith and Snell, 2009.

<sup>88</sup> J. M. Twenge, and W. K. Campbell, *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement*, (Free Press: 2009).

<sup>89</sup> David. S. Crystal, and Matthew DeBell, "Sources of Civic Orientation Among American Youth: Trust, Religious Valuation, and Attributions of Responsibility," *Political Psychology* 23 (2002): 113-132.

Rebecca Catto notes that young people are very likely to engage in online resources to learn more about their faith and, as a result, feel some tension between their commitments and engagement with society.<sup>90</sup> What emerges from the research is a challenge of what religion is and where it can be found and that we need to be sensitive to the religious identities (and how they develop) of emerging adults and not make assumptions.<sup>91</sup> For young people, behaviour is informed and guided by more than religious rules. “The reliance on one’s own conscience to guide behaviour rather than religious rules, the importance of friends and family, and the increasing significance of social media and popular culture each exert influence.”<sup>92</sup>

There is much lip service paid to the idea of meaning making<sup>93</sup> and, in the context of my research, the meaning-making of emerging adults. Anecdotally, many faith communities have given voice to St. Augustine’s thinking that if the heart is restless and unfulfilled it finds no meaning.<sup>94</sup> Could it be, then, that those who are alienated from institutional religion are looking for sources of meaning elsewhere?<sup>95</sup> Underlying this assumption is “an unquestioned view of the importance of metaphysical belief for individuals.”<sup>96</sup> The frameworks for meaning and, accordingly, frameworks that guide behaviour, are constructed through a complex process that blends social contexts and relationships such that spirituality may be of little importance in the day-to-day life of young people.<sup>97</sup> Phenomenologically speaking, the things that have value and

---

<sup>90</sup>Rebecca Catto, "What can we say about today's British religious young person? Findings from the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme," *Religion* 44, no. 1 (2013):1-27, 1, doi:10.1080/0048721x.2013.844740.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Rebecca Catto, "What can we say about today's British religious young person?"

<sup>93</sup> Meaning making is the process through which people interpret and make sense of life events, situations, relationships, and the self in the light of their previous knowledge and experience.

<sup>94</sup> Attributed to St. Augustine.

<sup>95</sup> Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, *Religion and Youth* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010), 37.

<sup>96</sup> Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, *Religion and Youth*, 37.

<sup>97</sup> Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, *Religion and Youth*,

significance also have qualitatively different concerns based on language, culture, and context.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, nothing can be understood outside of one's background. Thus, I would hold that our being and how we understand ourselves, and who we understand ourselves to be, is informed by pre-text (possibly a false or presumed purpose) and context (the surrounding environment). Further, as Jeremy Stolow articulates,

[...] the modern definition of technology [...] posits a fundamental divide between human and nonhuman agents. This divide is precisely what makes technology potentially threatening for authentic human experience, including the modes of ethical living that are said to shape religious ways of being-in-the-world. But were technology and culture ever so neatly detached from one another? [...] Is the tradition of critique of technology's 'inauthenticity' implicated in a deeper (unacknowledged?) set of assumptions about what it means to be human: assumptions that inform decisions of religion as a realm of experience, meaning, and authentic expression detached from and opposed to the instrumentality of technical things?<sup>99</sup>

It is noteworthy, and important, to recognize that the technical, and specifically in the context of this study, social media, is not an entity that is disconnected from everyday life.<sup>100</sup> The technical has typically been judged as flawed and inferior to face to face communication. "Even though, in practice, face-to-face communication can, of course, be angry, negligent, resistant, deceitful, and inflexible, somehow it remains the ideal against which mediated communication is judged as flawed."<sup>101</sup>

This is most notable as many emerging adults do not feel that in-person interaction is better or worse than a virtual interaction or connection; it simply is. The author Jesse Rice

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>99</sup> Jeremy Stolow, ed., "Deus In Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between," Fordham University Press, 2013, 13.

<sup>100</sup> Horrigan-kelly (sic), Marcella & Millar, Michelle & Dowling, Maura, 2016, Understanding the Key Tenets of Heidegger's Philosophy for Interpretive Phenomenological Research, The International Journal of Qualitative Methods.

<sup>101</sup> Sonia Livingstone, "Children and the Internet: Great Expectations and Challenging Realities," (Polity Press: Cambridge, UK, 2009, 26.

observes that there is no hierarchy between real and online experiences but rather that they are simply different ways of relating to one another.<sup>102</sup>

‘Community’ is not understood as a dichotomy between ‘real’ or ‘online’ relationships but as a composite of both. This growing reality forces us to adapt the way we think about community. It is no longer enough to define community in either good or bad terms, to debate whether one brand of relating (‘real’) is better than another (‘online’), though ... there is certainly a qualitative difference between the two. A more inclusive definition is needed, one that takes into account the fact that the always-on do not make traditional distinctions between real and online relationships.<sup>103</sup>

The traditional idea of community, integral to many faith communities, can be challenged when that community becomes virtual. One challenge is articulated by Sherry Turkle who notes that technology actually creates a chronic demand which leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation.<sup>104</sup> In fact, Turkle finds that newer “social technologies intensify individualism by creating a ‘communicative distance between people.’”<sup>105</sup> Some might argue, however, that it was actually Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press that began to divide the world by isolating people in the anti-social act of reading.<sup>106</sup> Turkle writes “We become accustomed to connection at a distance and in amounts we can control. Teenagers say they would rather text than talk.”<sup>107</sup> Turkle documents the phenomenon of teenagers not telephoning others due to its intrusive nature and offers “loneliness is failed solitude.”<sup>108</sup> Social media is changing the way people and organizations, including faith communities, communicate and interact with each

---

<sup>102</sup> Mark Ehlebracht, *Social Media and Othering*.

<sup>103</sup> Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 170–71. Previously referenced in TH765A, Martin Luther University College, Spring Term, 2017.

<sup>104</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 288.

<sup>105</sup> Paul McClure, Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior, and Belonging, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 56 (2017), 10.1111/jssr.12365.

<sup>106</sup> Franklin Foer, *World without Mind*, 25.

<sup>107</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, 29.

<sup>108</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, 288.

other.<sup>109</sup> Specific to faith communities, Hess references those who argue that faith formation must be embodied and so thus cannot be digital “but this is a wider reflection of arguments from the church that God came to earth in human form, and therefore incarnation must mean embodiment, although religious environments themselves are not always relational and embodied.”<sup>110</sup>

Social media is also impacting the idea and nature of community, both positively and negatively. According to Jesse Rice, “connection is the key to happiness”<sup>111</sup> and platforms like Facebook satisfy the powerful “human need for home.”<sup>112</sup>

Facebook has four home-like qualities: it’s ‘where we keep all the stuff that matters to us,’ including photographs and things that express who we are; it’s where we find family; it’s where we feel safe, because ‘we can control the environment;’ and it’s ‘where we can just be ourselves,’ displaying our images and reporting on activities on a platform ‘that dishes out a form of unconditional positive regard’ in spades.<sup>113</sup>

When commenting on several books, reviewer Tim Hutchings provides an apt description of how technology has impacted communities through the lens of connecting over geographical distances. “Telephone and radio communication retrieve some of the tribal experience of pre-literate culture, while also disembodiment and separating us. TV encourages empathy for a constant parade of far-off tragedies, but undermines our capacity to help those nearby. The

---

<sup>109</sup> Mark Ehlebracht, *Social Media and Othering*.

<sup>110</sup> Bex Lewis, “Social Media, Peer Surveillance, Spiritual Formation, and Mission: Practising Christian Faith in a Surveilled Public Space,” *Surveillance & Society* 16, no. 4 (2018): 517–32, 525 (accessed March 2, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v16i4.7650>. See also: Mary Hess, “A new culture of learning: implications of digital culture for communities of faith,” *Communication Research Trends* 32, no. 3 (2013): 13+, Gale Academic OneFile (accessed March 3, 2021), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A344496896/AONE?u=wate18005&sid=AONE&xid=9be28f93>.

<sup>111</sup> Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook*, 28.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>113</sup> Tim Hutchings, “Network Theology: Christian Understandings of New Media,” review of Dwight J Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009, Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009, Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community*, Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009, *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 1 (January 2012), 8, accessed March 24, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/12882072/Christianity\\_and\\_Digital\\_Media](https://www.academia.edu/12882072/Christianity_and_Digital_Media).

Internet encourages us to share information with everyone, but this ease of communication actually erodes true friendship.”<sup>114</sup> This transforming understanding of friendship may come as a result of the use of social media platforms.

Each user is constantly surrounded by an audience, an ‘invisible entourage,’ awaiting their next performance of self-revelation. Facebook homogenizes this audience, blurring boundaries between public and private and between different social contexts. Privacy and authority are confused when children and parents, employees and bosses become ‘friends.’ Peer and romantic relationships become harder to define. Time management and the self are blurred [...]<sup>115</sup>

The blurring of boundaries, together with the pressure to offer material and performance to a virtual audience and a social media platform driven economy of positive reinforcement, impact community and may warrant further investigation from a sociological position.<sup>116</sup> That said, it bears noting that figures such as Barry Wellman hold that this time is marked by “networked individualism.” Wellman (2001:2032) writes: “It is becoming clear that the internet is not destroying community but is resonating with and extending the types of networked community that have already become prevalent in the developed world.” Some argue that the internet promotes community enhancing activities.<sup>117</sup>

The exploration of the positive and negative effects of connection over distance is an ambiguous gift of media, writes Shane Hipps, noting that the “anonymous intimacy of virtual communities and social network sites provides just enough connection to keep us from pursuing real intimacy, which entails risk, exclusiveness, permanence and proximity.”<sup>118</sup> Examining the alienating effects of technology through various lenses is helpful. A Marxist perspective holds

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>117</sup> John Bargh, and Katelyn McKenna, (2004). “The Internet and Social Life,” *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55 (2004): 573-90.

<sup>118</sup> Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 114.

that “a key part in the control of the Proletariat is the use of alienation in all aspects of society, including the family, the education system and the media.”<sup>119</sup> Or using the work of Foucault as a lens, one might examine the concept Jesse Rice labels as “spontaneous order” that posits that “crowds, machines and insects all tend to fall into sync, generating unexpected outcomes. Those affected must adapt their behaviour to fit the new order.”<sup>120</sup> Facebook, Rice maintains, is a primary example with millions of users joining and their new habits have unanticipated consequences. Through Facebook, we can control the representation of self by “creating and operating our own little world.”<sup>121</sup> Philosophically and pragmatically, one might then engage a critical analysis of the attitude of “relational consumerism.”<sup>122</sup> By relational consumerism, Rice is referring to the sharing of sound-bytes of ourselves and consuming the sound-bytes of others. Rice notes that this can become a culture of status by which he means that as your participation increases (i.e. the more you post) the more your status within the environment goes up.<sup>123</sup>

So people are encouraged to post constantly and to be reading each other’s information. That’s one of the things that promotes relational consumerism and then promotes our emphasis on self expression, and especially on being clever, funny, or deep. We have to do something that grabs people’s attention, so then it becomes really a performance kind of persona. We start to really think hard about the things we post.<sup>124</sup>

This dovetails with danah boyd’s idea of tailoring messages to specific audiences.

Karen-Marie Yust affirms that social media is having an effect on the spirituality of adolescents and emerging adults alike. Whether through a general understanding of the internet

---

<sup>119</sup> CN Trueman, "Marxist Concepts," *History Learning Site*, May 25, 2015, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/sociology/theories-in-sociology/marxist-concepts/>.

<sup>120</sup> Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook*, 20-21.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>123</sup> Jesse Rice, “How Christians can really connect,” interview by Mary Faulds, *American Family Association Journal*, August 2010, online, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://afajournal.org/past-issues/2010/august/how-christians-can-really-connect/>

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*



and, by extension social media, as a third place where genuine conversation can take place<sup>125</sup> or through the development of a digital identity that is fundamentally polyphonic, meaning multiple, diverse, flexible, and pseudo-anonymous,<sup>126</sup> social media can have a significant impact on identity formation and relational consciousness. Tom Beaudoin offers further that there are connections between participation in a digital culture and the religiosity of young people.<sup>127</sup> Of course, social media can be used for purposes other than spiritual nurture and self-awareness. The idea of a “digital third place” cannot be taken completely altruistically and as a neutral force.

Technology and social media, as tools, are not neutral entities that are capable of shifting religious or societal behaviors on their own but instead are tools that humans use. The work of Foucault allows for some initial observations. Emerging adults tend not to want to be perceived as being narrow-minded or exclusivist when speaking about their faith and, as such, soften their claims “[...]by acknowledging the limitations of what they know about other religions.”<sup>128</sup> Paul McClure writes that

Pluralistic societies require strategies that defend, dismiss, or attempt to reconcile potentially opposing truth claims. Thus, for some, this means religious exclusivism, or the idea that only one religion is true. For others, however, the awareness of so many different ways to perceive ultimate reality suggests that there is very little truth to any religion. For others, pluralism means that all religions have some truth to them and the major world religions each give partial expression to that divine truth. These responses – exclusivism, secularism, and pluralism – make up three of the dominant religious strategies in the modern world.<sup>129</sup>

Beliefs are difficult to measure, particularly with uniformity across a diversity of cultures, traditions, and contexts. Wuthnow found that people can hold many beliefs, amassed from a

---

<sup>125</sup>Karen-Marie Yust, “Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children’s Spirituality,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 134, doi:10.1080/1364426x.2014.924908.

<sup>126</sup> Milad Doueihi as referenced in Karen-Marie Yust, 138.

<sup>127</sup> Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (John Wiley & Sons, 2000).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Paul K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*.

variety of faith traditions and practices, including those that are contradictory.<sup>130</sup> This is what Paul McClure names and concludes as ‘religious syncretism’ in his research.

One phrase that surfaces often is “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>131</sup> During my lifetime, these two words, “spiritual” and “religious,” have been used interchangeably, being understood by many as synonymous. In more recent years, they are understood as more distinct. Whether because of a movement towards deinstitutionalization and/or individualism, spiritual practice has moved away from the public rituals of institutional Christianity towards a more internal, in-dwelling, privately experienced God. I wonder, then, if it is possible to hold spiritual identities without being religious. Bredle et al examined the Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy scale, that contains within it a scale of spiritual indicators.<sup>132</sup> The twelve areas indicators<sup>133</sup> that respondents are asked to respond to with a scale ranging from “not at all” to “very much” are:

1. *I feel peaceful*
2. *I have a reason for living*
3. *My life has been productive*
4. *I have trouble feeling peace of mind*
5. *I feel a sense of purpose in my life*
6. *I am able to reach down deep into myself for comfort*
7. *I feel a sense of harmony within myself*
8. *My life lacks meaning and purpose*
9. *I find comfort in my faith or spiritual beliefs*
10. *I find strength in my faith or spiritual beliefs*
11. *My illness has strengthened my faith or spiritual beliefs*
12. *I know that whatever happens with my illness, things will be okay*

---

<sup>130</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010)

<sup>131</sup> Paul McClure, “Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior, and Belonging,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56 (2017).

<sup>132</sup> Jason Bredle, John Salsman, Scott Debb, Benjamin Arnold, and David Cella, “Spiritual Well-Being as a Component of Health-Related Quality of Life: The Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy—Spiritual Well-Being Scale (FACIT-Sp)” *Religions*, 2, (2011).

<sup>133</sup> FACIT-Sp-12, <https://www.facit.org/measures/FACIT-Sp-12>, accessed January 20, 2021.

The results are scored in terms of meaning, faith, and peace. Spirituality is not collapsible into religiosity with each deserving consideration separately or jointly.<sup>134</sup> Steensland et al. identified six spiritual orientations based on connections, namely: relational, emotional, cognitive, ethical, behavioural, and/or existential.<sup>135</sup> Combined with an additional 13 dimensions of spirituality (to the above FACIT scale), Steensland et al articulate types of spirituality, namely:<sup>136</sup>

1. *Spirituality and organized religion*
2. *Orientations towards God: belief in God*
3. *Orientations towards God: relationship with God*
4. *Beliefs outside traditions: belief in a higher being*
5. *Beliefs outside traditions: belief in something beyond*
6. *Relational spirituality: holistic connection*
7. *Ethical action*

It is important to consider spirituality, religiosity, and formation in the context of meaning-making. While experience and exploration in all of its capacities can be seen as formative, Brian Edgar's exploration of church adopted learning models, specifically those of classical Greece that held learning to be about things like the formation of character, personal development, and transformation is helpful<sup>137</sup> particularly as it is understood in the broader context of "learning to know, to do, to live together, and to be."<sup>138</sup> Diane Hockridge, quoting George Lindbeck in part notes that formation "concerns the development of a deep and personally committed appropriation of a comprehensive and coherent outlook on life."<sup>139</sup> It is when Hockridge articulates concerns around the issue of "[...] whether genuine community and interaction, and

---

<sup>134</sup> Brian Steensland, Xiaoyun Wang, and Lauren Schmidt, "Spirituality: What Does it Mean and to Whom?," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 57, (2018).

<sup>135</sup> Steensland et al., 2018.

<sup>136</sup> Steensland et al., 2018.

<sup>137</sup> Brian Edgar, "The Theology of Theological Education," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29, no. 3 (2005): pp. 208-217, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a385/2ce9a6181f0a07978c54ae004a93e25f7b74.pdf>.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Diane Hockridge, "What's the Problem? Spiritual Formation in Distance and Online Theological Education," *Journal of Christian Education* 54, no. 1 (May 2011): pp. 25-38, 26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002196571105400104>.

thus genuine formation, can take place [...] using web-based technologies”<sup>140</sup> that formation in the context of meaning-making through social media converges with this study. Replacing the idea of learning as preparatory prior to entering a given environment with entering an environment through simple curiosity is paramount <sup>141</sup> and I would suggest that social media, in its various forms, invites curiosity that can lead to further exploration and examination. It is, potentially, a way to gain further insight into a “generation that stays away from most churches in droves but loves songs about God and Jesus, a generation that would score very low on any standard piety scale but at times seems almost obsessed with saints, visions, and icons in all shapes and sizes.”<sup>142</sup> One could posit this comes as backlash against religious institutions that have sinned, or fallen short, but it could be simpler. In the case of Christianity, for example, people may find Jesus and Christianity to be compelling but experience a disconnect when the church, instead of creating a place where truth can be spoken and false pretenses dispensed with, acts with callous self-interest. This inhibits the creation of an environment where genuine spiritual growth and exploration can take place which requires trust.

## Trust

At this juncture, an examination of some of the literature around trust is imperative. Paul Ricoeur coined the phrase *hermeneutic of suspicion* which, broadly stated, was a refusal to take words at face value. Thus trust emerged thematically in two respects during the course of the study: the first as levels of trust relating to the accuracy of materials circulated by those within their networks and, two, levels of trust necessary for authenticity as it intersects with faith.

---

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>141</sup> Mary E. Hess, “A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation,” *Dialog* 53, no. 1 (March 2014): pp. 12-22, 13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12084>.

<sup>142</sup> Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, ix.

Creating and disseminating information through social media is very popular.<sup>143</sup> There is merit to the idea that social media users tend not to investigate or validate information if the information is being shared by someone within their (peer) network.<sup>144</sup> This is a trait of social media peers.<sup>145</sup> Studies have shown, however, that if the information is created by or shared amongst members of a social media group, a synchronized affinity develops amongst peers of the group towards such content.<sup>146</sup> The study noted that members within the group will add or personalize the information being shared but will share that information without self-regulation. Essentially they do so because the information is coming from a member of a group that they originally and already trust. Social media is used for various purposes, including connecting, information gathering, and affirmation of aspects of spirituality and religion that are congruent with lived experience.<sup>147</sup> Social-technical theory may have something to offer to this discussion. Social-technical theory<sup>148</sup> holds that the “infiltration of technology into social orientation” leads

---

<sup>143</sup> Aladwani, Adel & Dwivedi, Yogesh. (2018). Towards a theory of SocioCitizenry: Quality anticipation, trust configuration, and approved adaptation of governmental social media. *International Journal of Information Management*. 43. 261-272. 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.08.009.; X. Cao, and L. Yu, “Exploring the influence of excessive social media use at work: a three-dimension usage perspective,” *Int. J. Inf. Manage.* 46, (2019): 83–92. doi: 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.11.019; Hatice Kizgin, Bidit Dey, Yogesh Dwivedi, Laurie Hughes, Ahmad Jamal, Paul Jones, Bianca Kronemann, Michel Laroche, Lisa Peñaloza, Marie-Odile Richard, Nripendra Rana, Rene Romer, Kuttimani Tamilmani, and Michael Williams, “The impact of social media on consumer acculturation: Current challenges, opportunities, and an agenda for research and practice,” *International Journal of Information Management*, 51 (2019), 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.10.011.; A.S.T. Olanrewaju, N. Whiteside, M. A. Hossain, and P. Mercieca, “The influence of social media on entrepreneur motivation and marketing strategies in a developing Country,” Paper Presented at the conference on e-business, e-services and e-society, 2018.

<sup>144</sup> Mahmud A. Shareef, Kawaljeet K. Kapoor, Bhasker Mukerji, Rohita Dwivedi, Yogesh K. Dwivedi, “Group behavior in social media: Antecedents of initial trust formation,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Volume 105, 2020, 106225, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106225>, accessed January 3, 2020.

<sup>145</sup> Mohammad Reza Habibi, Michel Laroche, and Marie-Odile Richard, Marie-Odile, “Brand communities based in social media: How unique are they? Evidence from two exemplary brand communities,” *International Journal of Information Management*, 34, (2014): 123–132. 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2013.11.010.

<sup>146</sup> Mahmud A. Shareef, et al., “Group behavior in social media; and Shareef, Mukerji, Dwivedi, Rana, and Islam, 2019.

<sup>147</sup> As observed in this research study.

<sup>148</sup> See Leela Damodaran, John Nicholls, Alan Henney, Frank Land, and Barbara Farbey, (2005). “The contribution of sociotechnical systems thinking to the effective adoption of e-government and the enhancement of democracy,” *The Electronic Journal of E-Government*, 3, (2005).

to new behaviours that are separate from “attitudes towards technology and social behaviour.”<sup>149</sup> Social media behaviour, then, can be characterized by “new dimensions of integrity, dedication, and consensus, which are derived from technology, society, and organization.”<sup>150</sup>

There appears to be no consensus, however, on whether social media has a positive, negative, or neutral effect on trust. The position that social media has a positive effect on trust could be argued given that having information is integral to building trust and social media accelerates and facilitates the relaying of information more efficiently than in-person interactions. Social media affords its users the opportunity to learn detailed information about others within their networks and beyond. Knowing someone’s intentions and behaviours is an integral and necessary condition for developing trust.<sup>151</sup> Beaudoin, when studying Internet use, found that the greater the internet use, the greater the interpersonal trust, “when it is mediated by social resource motivation for internet use.”<sup>152</sup> Social resource motivation is using media for building social resources, social contacts, and social interactions.<sup>153</sup> That said, it is important to note that Facebook users, for example, typically form their connections based on existing relationships of trust.<sup>154</sup> This could well be somewhat of a *chicken-and-egg* scenario in that the data does not parse out whether social media builds trust or if it is the trusting who make use of

---

<sup>149</sup> As observed in this research study.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> C.R. Berger, and R.J. Calabrese, “Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication,” *Human Communication Research*, 1 (2), (1975): 99–112, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1975.tb00258.x>

<sup>152</sup> C.E. Beaudoin, “Explaining the relationship between internet use and interpersonal trust: Taking into account motivation and information overload”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 550-568.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Namsu Park, Kerk Kee, and Sebastián Valenzuela, “Being Immersed in Social Networking Environment: Facebook Groups, Uses and Gratifications, and Social Outcomes,” *Cyberpsychology & behavior : the impact of the Internet, multimedia and virtual reality on behavior and society*, 12, (2019): 729-33. 10.1089/cpb.2009.0003.

social media; I suspect motivations for the social media use will be significant in this regard. Regardless, the hermeneutic of suspicion can remain strong despite motivation.

It is useful, then, for the worlds of faith and spirituality, which some define as a question of being,<sup>155</sup> and science and technology to seek each other out and enter into continued conversation;<sup>156</sup> how do these things interact and influence one another? A new paradigm to address the influence of new technologies on meanings, values, social and religious frameworks and the derived norms<sup>157</sup> is called for. “In interaction with random objects, the post-human [a person constantly connected by information networks] will construct a new reality totally based on available networks and the information within them.”<sup>158</sup> This has potential implications for faith communities as young people increasingly view the world as a constantly present field. This is a particular world view and, as such, determines what experiences are acquired and directs actions.<sup>159</sup> In a constantly shifting landscape with evolving technology, how one moves through healthy skepticism towards trust can be exceptionally complex.

## **Affordance**

James Gibson is credited with conceiving the concept of affordance in ecological psychology. By affordance, Gibson was articulating and referencing the specific relationship between animal and environment. “The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the

---

<sup>155</sup> Ben Van Lier et al., “Technology Encounters Spirituality.” *Studies in Spirituality* 24 (2014): 341, doi:10.2143/SIS.24.0.3053502.

<sup>156</sup> Ben Van Lier et al., “Technology Encounters Spirituality,” 342.

<sup>157</sup> Ben Van Lier et al., 343.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill.”<sup>160</sup> That said, Gibson notes that affordances are to be understood as a relational property.<sup>161</sup> Gibson’s key insight was that

we do not perceive the environment as such, but rather perceive it through its affordances, the possibilities for action it may provide. Fire, for example, affords warmth, illumination, and cooking, but at the same time it may also afford injury to the skin. What delineates warmth from injury is not always clear and depends on the species ability to detect the limit. What fire affords, then, is not merely a question of its physical properties, but its relation to a specific organism.<sup>162</sup>

Similarly, “the affordance of a chair, for instance, is that you can sit on it. Of course, you can also use a chair for other purposes, for instance, as a step to get something from a top shelf or as a place to rest your feet. But those are unintended affordances— possibilities observed or selected by a user, but not intended by the designer.”<sup>163</sup>

Social media has built within it structural affordances that enable certain actions that differ from offline communication. Fox and Moreland articulate them as connectivity (connecting many people together simultaneously), visibility (information is very accessible and users can see messages from other users), social feedback (users respond and comment on posts), persistence (content remains visible after the communication), and accessibility (constant communication is possible).<sup>164</sup> Boyd and Ellison say that all social media platforms have three

---

<sup>160</sup> J.J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach To Visual Perception*. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 127.

<sup>161</sup> Taina Bucher, and Anne Helmond. 2017. “The Affordances of Social Media Platforms.” In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, edited by Jean Burgess, Thomas Poell, and Alice Marwick, (London and New York: SAGE Publications Ltd), 4.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Patti M. Valkenburg and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski, *Plugged In: How Media Attract and Affect Youth*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 220.

<sup>164</sup> J. Fox, and J.J. Moreland, (2015). “The dark side of social networking sites: An exploration of the relational and psychological stressors associated with Facebook use and affordances,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, 45, (2015): 168–176. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.083>



components that are essential: a place for users to construct a profile, the ability to link others to this profile, and the ability to exchange content.<sup>165</sup>

“As a concept that captures the relationship between the materiality of media and human agency, affordance continues to play an important role in media studies and social media research specifically.”<sup>166</sup> While the technology is significant, more so in the context of this study are how communicative practices and interactions shift as a result of these affordances, such as with mobile media.<sup>167</sup> “Whereas some scholars have used affordance almost synonymously with the features of technology, others have focused on the social structures that are formed in and through a given technology.”<sup>168</sup>

Of particular interest in the context of this study are identity and social affordances. Identity affordances include opportunities for identity development and portrayal. Social media include high-identity affordance platforms and low-identity affordance platforms. Facebook is an example of a high-identity affordance platform where users upload profile pictures, share life events, develop and populate timelines, list their likes; further, Facebook maintains an expectation that users use their own, “real” names or versions thereof. The platform Reddit, a low-affordance platform, identifies users via user names and the emphasis is on contributions to

---

<sup>165</sup> D. Boyd, and N. Ellison, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, (2008): 210-230. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x>

<sup>166</sup> Taina Bucher, and Anne Helmond, *The Affordances of Social Media Platforms*, 11. See also Ellison, N. B., & Vitak, J. (2015). Social network site affordances and their relationship to social capital processes. In S. S. Sundar (Ed.), *The handbook of the psychology of communication technology* (pp. 205–227). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118426456.ch9>

<sup>167</sup> Taina Bucher, and Anne Helmond, *The Affordances of Social Media Platforms* See also Jeffrey Boase, “Personal Networks and the Personal Communication System. Information,” *Communication and Society*, 11, (2008): 490-508; Rasmus Helles, “Mobile Communication and Intermediality,” *Mobile Media & Communication* 1, no. 1 (January 2013): 14–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157912459496>; Ian Hutchby, and Simone Barnett, (2005). “Aspects of the sequential organization of mobile phone conversation,” *Discourse Studies*, 7, (2005): 147-171. [10.1177/1461445605050364](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605050364).

<sup>168</sup> *The Affordances of Social Media Platforms*.

group conversations as opposed to personal identity. Platforms that allow users to develop identity may present benefits to those seeking to explore their identities. Online, people have the opportunity to project an impression of themselves, negotiate positioning within a group, and disseminate what is contextually valued. This not about misrepresentation, although a possibility, but more about experimentation and expression without typical meaning making cues (i.e. facial expressions) and the constraints and pre-conceived notions around socio-economic status.

Social affordances are “the social structures that take shape in association with a given technical structure.”<sup>169</sup> It is no surprise then that this includes a sense of belonging to a group, perhaps focused on an interest, religion, social group, or experience.<sup>170</sup> Belonging can be enhanced with things such as tagging or hashtags, that serve to identify and connect a community of users via a specific term or topic. Further, social media can allow users to participate in metavoicing.<sup>171</sup> Metavoicing is “engaging in the ongoing online knowledge conversation by reacting online to others’ presence, profiles, content and activities. We refer to this affordance as metavoicing, rather than voicing, because the individual is not simply voicing his or her opinion, but adding metaknowledge to the content that is already online.”<sup>172</sup>

The sense of belonging, that can come through social affordances via social media, is noteworthy. Maslow’s 1968 hierarchy ranks belonging as third, only after physiological and

---

<sup>169</sup> Hector Postigo, “The Socio-Technical Architecture of Digital Labor: Converting Play into YouTube Money.” *New Media & Society*, 18, no. 2 (February 2016): 332–49, 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541527>.

<sup>170</sup> K. Lundby, “Patterns of Belonging in online/offline interfaces of religion,” *Information, Communication, and Society*, 2011, 14, pp 1219-1235.

<sup>171</sup> A. Majchrzak, et. al., “The Contradictory Influence of Social Media Affordances on Online Communal Knowledge Sharing,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2013, 19 (1), pp 330-345.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

safety needs have been met, and before the pursuit of esteem and self-actualization.<sup>173</sup> Kohut viewed belonging as independent from other needs.<sup>174</sup> Lee and Robbins divided belonging into three components: companionship, affiliation, and connectedness.<sup>175</sup> Companionship takes various forms and is satisfied through various means over one's lifetime. In infancy, companionship is provided by a parent figure. Later in life, it could be a toy, a friend, or a romantic partner. As one moves through various life stages and experiences, particularly around spirituality and religion, there too can emerge a need for companionship. This companionship can be filled, in part, by identifying those with shared interests; in other words, likeness is a basis for companionship. Affiliation is aligning oneself in a group or association.<sup>176</sup> That said, at this juncture, pursuing affiliation, individuals are "slightly more comfortable with the differences that exist in all relationships."<sup>177</sup> Connectedness relates to the "depth of connection between individuals and friends and the wider community" and social connectedness is defined as "the subjective awareness of being in close relationship with the social world."<sup>178</sup> Further, they "may seek connections with others outside of their comfort zone and relate to peers who are different from themselves. Therefore, relationship complexity is a major component of social connectedness."<sup>179</sup>

---

<sup>173</sup>Elizabeth A. Vincent, "Social Media as an Avenue to Achieving Sense of Belonging Among College Students," *VISTAS Online*, [https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/social-media-as-an-avenue.pdf?sfvrsn=f684492c\\_8](https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/social-media-as-an-avenue.pdf?sfvrsn=f684492c_8), accessed January 4, 2021.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup>R.M. Lee, and S.B. Robbins, "Measuring belongingness: The Social Connectedness and the Social Assurance scales," *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 42(2), (1995): 232–241. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.42.2.232>

<sup>176</sup> Elizabeth A. Vincent, *Social Media as an Avenue to Achieving Sense of Belonging*.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* See also Lee and Robbins, 1998, 338.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

Belonging is integral to the exploration of religious and spiritual beliefs. Social media has been found to contribute to “a sense of community,”<sup>180</sup> increases in self-esteem,<sup>181</sup> life satisfaction,<sup>182</sup> “facilitating social interactions offline,”<sup>183</sup> and “higher quality and quantity of friendships.”<sup>184</sup>

In sum, James Gibson is credited with conceiving the concept of affordance in ecological psychology. Social media has built within it structural affordances, namely connectivity, visibility, social feedback, persistence, and accessibility.<sup>185</sup> Of particular interest in the context of this study are identity and social affordances. Identity affordances include opportunities for identity development and portrayal. Social media include high-identity affordance platforms and low-identity affordance platforms. Social affordances include the sense of belonging to a group, and metavoicing or adding metaknowledge to existing content.

### **Authenticity**

A thread that ran through the study, crescendo-ing at various points, is the notion of authenticity. Merriam-Webster defines authenticity, in part, as: (1) worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact; (2) not false or imitation; (3) true to one's own personality, spirit, or character. Most interesting is that the terms authenticity and identity are quite intertwined at times within literature. That said, some authors use the terms

---

<sup>180</sup> Sara Kathleen Henry, “On Social Connection in University Life,” *About Campus*, 16, no. 6 (January 2012): 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.20083>.

<sup>181</sup> Amy Gonzales, and Jeffrey Hancock, (2010). “Mirror, Mirror on My Facebook Wall: Effects of Exposure to Facebook on Self-Esteem,” *Cyberpsychology, behavior and social networking*, 14, (2010): 79-83. 10.1089/cyber.2009.0411.

<sup>182</sup> Bargh and McKenna, 2004.

<sup>183</sup> Wade Jacobsen, and Renata Forste, “The Wired Generation: Academic and Social Outcomes of Electronic Media Use Among University Students,” *Cyberpsychology, behavior and social networking*, 14, (2010):275-80. 10.1089/cyber.2010.0135.

<sup>184</sup> *Social Media as an Avenue to Achieving Sense of Belonging*.

<sup>185</sup> Fox and Moreland, *The Dark Side of Social Networking Sites*, 2015.

interchangeably while others keep the two terms separate. Cranton posits that to find one's identity means to become more authentic.<sup>186</sup> Tisdell<sup>187</sup> on the other hand, argues that it is possible to create an identity that is inauthentic or unauthentic and the task is to move towards an identity that is more authentic.<sup>188</sup> Kreber, et al., make the observation that Parker Palmer, in his book *The Courage to Teach*, does not use the word authentic instead speaking about identity and integrity.<sup>189</sup> On integrity he writes: "that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not [...] It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am."<sup>190</sup> Palmer also links authenticity to spirituality. By this he suggests that spiritual development is comprised, in part, of the movement towards a more authentic identity or a more authentic self.

Heidegger speaks on authenticity. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger distinguishes between everydayness, authenticity, and inauthenticity. Everydayness in essence means doing what everyone else is doing; in other words, our beliefs and actions are not directed by one's self. For Heidegger "authentic existence involves confronting the truth, opening oneself up to one's own limitless possibilities, not being defined by social norms, and not clinging to comfortable routines."<sup>191</sup> Everydayness and inauthenticity are different. Inauthenticity, for Heidegger, happens when people conceal their own "finite openness" and so in order to authentically live, humans need to come to terms with their mortality.<sup>192</sup> Perhaps most significant

---

<sup>186</sup> P. Cranton, P., *Becoming an authentic teacher in higher education*, (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Co, 2001).

<sup>187</sup> Elizabeth Tisdell, (1998). "Poststructural Feminist Pedagogies: The Possibilities and Limitations of Feminist Emancipatory Adult Learning Theory and Practice," *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48, (1998): 139-156. 10.1177/074171369804800302.

<sup>188</sup> Carolin Kreber, Monika Klampfleitner, Velda Mccune, Sian Bayne, Miesbeth Knottenbelt, "What Do You Mean By 'Authentic'? A Comparative Review of the Literature On Conceptions of Authenticity in Teaching," *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58, (2007): 22-43.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., (Jossey-Bass, 2007), 13.

<sup>191</sup> Kreber, et al., *What Do You Mean By "Authentic"?*, 31.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

in the context of this study is Heidegger also believing that “to authentically live means to choose the possibilities [...] that are uniquely one’s own, to become, or be, what one already is, and to accept responsibility for one’s own existence.”<sup>193</sup> This understanding is not moral, it is ontological.<sup>194</sup> Heidegger held that one could “exist without being moral, and act morally without authentically existing.”<sup>195</sup> It is the difference between *existentiell*, under which morality falls, and existential, where authenticity falls.

As many of the study participants searched or leaned into their identities, their authentic selves, and living authentically, Charles Taylor’s (words are helpful:

Briefly, we can say that authenticity (A) involves (i) creation and construction as well as discovery, (ii) originality, and frequently (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true [...] that it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and (ii) self-definition in dialogue.<sup>196</sup>

Notable here is the phrase “horizons of significance.” For Taylor these horizons have to be substantial, something that matters deeply, and matters not just for me, but for society as a whole.<sup>197</sup> Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.”<sup>198</sup>

Identity is not only drawn from theological understandings but also from the communities in which one is situated: family of origin, traditions, social class are all factors in the construction

---

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 32. See also M. Zimmerman, The development of Heidegger’s concept of authenticity. Eclipse of the self (Rev. ed.), (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 30.

<sup>194</sup> Kreber, et al., “What Do You Mean By “Authentic”?”, 32.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 66.

<sup>197</sup> Kreber, et al., “What Do You Mean By “Authentic”?”, 35.

<sup>198</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 40.

of identity. “But with the modern age came a new social mobility and with it the idea of the individual. The modern shift, however, replaced this external source of authority with the notion that, in Taylor’s words, ‘the source we have to connect with is deep in us.’”<sup>199</sup>

Williams stated that fifty-two percent of those using social media joined an online religious group of some form.<sup>200</sup> Elizabeth Vincent holds that this could be a forum where people can ask significant questions and *be who they truly are*.<sup>201</sup> This would appear to be congruent with Musters appeals for “greater vulnerability” and for more “real people” within church communities.<sup>202</sup> Specifically, Musters references the offline church as a place and environment where people do not feel safe to be themselves (who they truly are). This is rooted, Musters notes, in past experiences, a fear of rejection, and peoples’ “wired” need to try and meet the expectations of others.

While scientific research into the consequences of the religious condemnation of the gay and lesbian community remains at an early stage, countless blogs, news articles, and the like anecdotally describe, often in vivid detail, painful experiences of dissonance for those who identify as gay or lesbian between faith communities, the practices and theologies of faith communities, their embedded theologies and beliefs and their need to live authentically. Christianity has never been monolithic in its identification of transcendent truths. There is

---

<sup>199</sup> Karen Swallow Prior, *Identity and Story: A Case Study in Jane Eyre and Charles Taylor*, May 17, 2017, accessed March 2, 2021,

<https://www.liberty.edu/ace/index.cfm?pid=33057&author=Dr.+Karen+Swallow+Prior>.

<sup>200</sup> Myron Williams, “Community, Discipleship, and Social Media,” *Christian Education Journal*, 12, no. 2 (November 2015): 375–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131501200209>.

<sup>201</sup> See Elizabeth A. Vincent, *Social Media as an Avenue to Achieving Sense of Belonging Among College Students*.

<sup>202</sup> Claire Musters, *Taking Off the Mask: Daring to Be the Person God Created You to Be*, (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2017)

difference of hermeneutic and opinion, certainly, and this is often characteristic of religion. In the public sphere, although we have made great strides in Canada in terms of inclusivity, we may still be experiencing the lingering effects of our efforts to remove gay and lesbian people from that sphere through legislation, classifications, and understandings of morality. Bowen and Bourgeois and Mohipp and Morry note that when people interact with those of other races, ethnicities, or sexual orientation, “their prejudices diminish and their tolerance increases.”<sup>203</sup> And so, as Wallis notes, “religion can inflict harm and injustice as well as motivate and inform the fight for social justice.”<sup>204</sup> Religious beliefs can be used to build up, empower, console, and inspire. They can also be used to tear down, dehumanize, and demonize. It is the later, sadly, that some have experienced through the faith communities of their childhood and beyond: beliefs that can harm and oppress.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this review was to survey literature on how religion, spiritual beliefs, and social media converge. Exploration of said connections through the lenses of the philosophy of being, identity, authenticity, and technology as mediator were key. Heidegger shifted the dialogue regarding knowledge and identity by considering issues surrounding ontology (what it means to be a human being) and moving debate beyond epistemology.<sup>205</sup> Declining participation

---

<sup>203</sup> A.M Bowen, and M.J. Bourgeois, (2001). “Attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students: the contribution of pluralistic ignorance, dynamic social impact, and contact theories,” *Journal of American college health*, 50, 2, (2001): 91–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448480109596012>; C. Mohipp, C. and M.M. Morry, “The Relationship of Symbolic Beliefs and Prior Contact to Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbian Women,” *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, 36, 1, (2004): 36–44. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087214>

<sup>204</sup> Melendez, Michael P., and Michael C. LaSala. “Who’s Oppressing Whom? Homosexuality, Christianity, and Social Work.” *Social Work* 51, no. 4 (2006): 371–77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23721221>.

<sup>205</sup> Patricia Benner, *Interpretive Phenomenology: Embodiment, Caring, and Ethics in Health and Illness*, SAGE Publications, 1994, 44.



in the (Christian) church is observed as early as the 1950's. In North America, people gravitated towards a preference for the individual religious experience rather than institutional religion. The changes in the religious landscape of North America also includes an environment that allows for religious pluralism and, in varying degrees, religious syncretism. Being connected, or rather inter-connectedness is heightened in contemporary spirituality. Social media is a tool that encourages both individualism and hyper-connectivity which compliments the shift in the religious landscape. In a broad sense, interconnectedness may give a sense of purpose and increase tolerance for differences, emphasizing similarities rather than differences regarding religion, ethnicity, or sexual preferences; religions can be perceived as expressions of the same, deep, mystical truths. Paul Ricoeur coined the phrase *hermeneutic of suspicion* which, broadly stated, was a refusal to take words at face value. The hermeneutic of suspicion can be applied to various aspects of religious and spiritual beliefs, and social media, particularly the dissemination of information. James Gibson is credited with conceiving the concept of affordance in ecological psychology which has been applied to other disciplines and contexts, including social media. Some authors use the terms identity and authenticity interchangeably while others advocate for keeping the two terms separate. There are links between authenticity and spirituality, most notably that both come from a deep inner place. Heidegger's insights on authenticity are particularly noteworthy as he weaves together choice, being, and responsibility. This is important as one fleshes out Heidegger's ontology and one that would explore Heidegger's discourse of the relation of beings to Being and his conceptions of truth and temporality.

This researcher is keenly aware that "the study of social phenomena requires an understanding of the social worlds that people inhabit; worlds which people have already interpreted by the meanings they produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their shared

everyday activities.”<sup>206</sup> It is useful, then, for the worlds of faith and spirituality, which some define as a question of being,<sup>207</sup> and science and technology to seek each other out and enter into continued conversation.<sup>208</sup> Particularly noteworthy, and where there may be a gap in the literature, is how the modern Christian church, as experienced by several participants, has shunned mystery, perhaps in a quest for certitude. While emerging adults are open to religion, and can be drawn towards ancient faith and ritual, ancient faith can be synonymous with ancient prejudices and traditional power structures. Some of the studies in this literature review, (i.e. Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne, "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy," 2016) do not go far enough and move past attributing liberal approaches to doctrine as the source of mainline denominational decline. Emerging adults may be drawn to mystery, ancient faith, ritual, and liturgy, but are also repelled by hierarchy, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, and ecclesial systems of capitalism. A return to ancient faith needs to come with a denunciation of ancient injustice, think inclusivity and equality for example. This researcher wishes there was more in-depth, scholarly research on this phenomenon and how ancient faith can be a pseudonym for conservative social values and how that manifests itself outside of the realm of religious trauma.

---

<sup>206</sup> *Philosophy of Research: Do All Social Scientists Use the Same Methodology?*, London: Sage Publications Inc., 2017, <http://methods.sagepub.com/base/download/StageSection/605>, accessed May 24, 2019.

<sup>207</sup> Ben Van Lier et al., "Technology Encounters Spirituality." *Studies in Spirituality* 24 (2014): 341, doi:10.2143/SIS.24.0.3053502.

<sup>208</sup> Ben Van Lier et al., *Technology Encounters Spirituality*, 342.

## Methodology

### Framework

This research called for a qualitative, interpretivist approach, that included social constructivism and phenomenology. People are complex, and intricate, and their interactions are unique; hence, different people can “experience and understand the same ‘objective reality’ in very different ways and have their own, often very different, reasons for acting in the world...”<sup>209</sup> While the method and framework could not produce completely valid causal statements about the social world and, in particular, a definitive identification of the causal relationship between social media and the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults in Canada, it did allow for empathetic understandings of the observed phenomena. This researcher recognizes that there are many ways of interpreting the world, that there can be multiple realities, and that no single point of view can ever describe the entire picture.<sup>210</sup> This theoretical framework is appropriate for the research matter at hand given that it is rooted in two key beliefs, namely, a relativist ontology that “perceives reality as inter-subjectivity that is based on meanings and understandings on social and experiential levels”<sup>211</sup> and a transactional or subjectivist epistemology that recognizes that “people cannot be separated from their knowledge; therefore there is a clear link between the researcher and the research subject.”<sup>212</sup>

The point of the research, from an interpretivist point of view, was to gain in-depth insight “...into the lives of respondents and to gain an empathetic understanding of why they act in the

---

<sup>209</sup>Zeynep Yad, "What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?" *Quora*, June 6, 2017, accessed June 17, 2018, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-positivism-and-interpretivism-in-social-research>.

<sup>210</sup> Zeynep Yad, “What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?”

<sup>211</sup> John Dudovskiy, "Interpretivism (interpretivist) Research Philosophy," *Research-Methodology*, accessed June 16, 2018, <https://research-methodology.net/research-philosophy/interpretivism/>.

<sup>212</sup> John Dudovskiy, "Interpretivism.”

way that they do.”<sup>213</sup> This approach allowed me, through preliminary questionnaires and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, to begin to understand the potential links between social media and its impact on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults, what is specific, unique, and deviant in relation to the phenomenon, and the role of relative knowledge such as time, context, and culture.

The research framework attempted to make inquiry in logically related steps and ensure rigor with data collection and analysis.<sup>214</sup> Open ended interviews are most appropriate when studying social phenomenon. “The study of social phenomena requires an understanding of the social worlds that people inhabit; worlds which people have already interpreted by the meanings they produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their shared everyday activities.”<sup>215</sup> What’s more, social media may undermine plausibility structures that are defined as “the social context in which any cognitive or normative definition of reality is plausible.”<sup>216</sup>

## **The Researcher**

The researcher has worked in parish ministry for 19 years and holds a Baccalaureate in Music (honors) and a Master of Divinity. Participants had no direct relationship with the researcher that represented a conflict of interest. One participant holds membership in the faith community currently served by the researcher.

---

<sup>213</sup> Zeynep Yad, “What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?”

<sup>214</sup> John Creswell, and Cheryl Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Methods*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2018.

<sup>215</sup> Philosophy of Research: *Do All Social Scientists Use the Same Methodology?*, London: Sage Publications Inc., 2017, <http://methods.sagepub.com/base/download/StageSection/605>, accessed May 24, 2019.

<sup>216</sup> P.K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*, 820.

## **Participants**

The sample was drawn from emerging adults irrespective of gender who are between the ages of eighteen through thirty-five with varying frequencies of use of social media, including none. The original study design, including recruitment, was modified as a direct result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. While recruitment posters were posted on university campuses, in coffee shops, and libraries in the Kitchener-Waterloo area, this was very shortly before the pandemic closed these facilities impacting recruitment. Participants were further recruited through various ecclesial email networks, National and Synodical offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, campus pastors (of post-secondary Canadian schools), and social media including Twitter and Facebook.

Interested respondents were asked to respond to an initial electronic questionnaire through Qualtrics to assist with participant selection for follow-up interviews. Informed consent was required for each participant, at each stage. This researcher anticipated 15-18 participants for the study, including the follow-up interview. In the end, 18 people responded to the recruiting and all but one (an American citizen living outside of Canada) were each sent a personalized link for the initial electronic, questionnaire, 15 people began the questionnaire, 14 people completed the questionnaire, and 11 agreed and participated in a follow-up interview.

## **Data Collection and Procedures**

This study used a combination of data gathered from an initial questionnaire and follow-up interview. The initial questionnaire is included as Appendix #1

Given the lower than anticipated numbers of participants, email invitations were sent out to each person who completed the questionnaire which became its own variant of random

sampling, bordering on snowball sampling. All follow-up interviews were shifted from in person to being conducted using the Zoom platform. Again, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated this and modification requests were submitted, and approved by, Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board. In preparation, the *General Ethics Guidelines*, specifically those pertaining to videoconferencing tools, were reviewed. As the research did not involve type 3 data<sup>217</sup>, the Zoom platform could be used. Additionally, this researcher reviewed the privacy and confidentiality concerns inherent with the use of videoconferencing tools. While the confidentiality of data cannot be guaranteed while in transmission on the internet, every effort was made to ensure as much online security as possible; participants accessed the platform for the interview through secure, personal links, that were not shared with anyone other than the participant and emailed to only the participant in advance. This researcher did not use a public or open Wi-Fi connection for the interview and encouraged each participant to do the same. Consent procedures that would have taken place in person were modified accordingly. Verbal, recorded consent at the beginning of the interview was obtained for the following:

- that participants agree to their interview being recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis
- that participants agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes from this research
- that participants agree to the use of direct quotations attributed to them only with their review and approval
- that participants have reviewed and understand the information contained in the consent document emailed to them in advance
- that participants agree to participate in this study

---

<sup>217</sup> Type 3 data involves the collection of restricted data such as social insurance numbers, credit card numbers, and/or health information.

In short, the consent form was reviewed with each participant before receiving the participant's verbal consent and confirmation that they each had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.

After consent procedures, Zoom interviews began with a screen sharing of a grid originally conceived by John Roberto. Because of the Zoom platform, numbers were added to the grid to facilitate the locating exercise. It was noted to the participants that the numbers were for reference because of the medium and not evaluative. At the end of the interview, arrangements were made to electronically send each participant a \$10CDN gift card of their choice to Tim Hortons or Starbucks.

### **Data Analysis and Coding**

Demographic participant features coded by the researcher included: age, denominational affiliation (if any), parental attendance, attendance, and time spent on social media. Follow-up interviews with participants, informed by their responses to the initial questionnaire, helped identify and explore factors that impacted the participants' ability or disposition to question (their) religious or spiritual beliefs.

Open, axial and selective coding was used to analyze the raw, interview data with the goal of identifying and organizing the data thematically through systematic investigation. Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach to analyze the data and better understand the participants' lived experience was used. Van Manen's approach provides four steps of data analysis in an effort to develop the structure of meaning of texts or themes, specifically (1) uncovering thematic aspects, (2) isolating thematic statements, (3) composing linguistic

transformations, and (4) gleaning thematic descriptions.<sup>218</sup> Memos were used to assist the analysis. The researcher maintained a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon of the impact of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults remained central throughout the process. Participants were asked at the end of the interview if there was anything that they felt they wanted to add that was not discussed but that they felt important to include.

The researcher transcribed the interviews from the recording within two weeks of the interview. Recordings were stored in the Zoom cloud (via Wilfrid Laurier University) until downloaded on my computer for transcription; recordings were deleted by September 30, 2020. Participants were not part of the transcribing or analysis process and were not aware of how any of the other participants responses or perspectives.

Saturation was achieved from two perspectives. The first, from Cathy Urquhart who defines saturation as “the point in coding when you find that no new codes occur in the data. There are mounting instances of the same codes, but no new ones”<sup>219</sup> and Lisa Given who offers that saturation occurs at “the point at which ‘additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes.’”<sup>220</sup> Secondly, saturation was achieved in the data provided by the participants themselves, namely as Robin Legard et al. offer, “probing needs to continue until the researcher feels they have reached saturation, a full understanding of the participant’s perspective.”<sup>221</sup> Accordingly, saturation was satisfied in both data analysis and data collection.

---

<sup>218</sup> Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (SUNY Series in the Philosophy of Education), State University of New York Press, 1990.

<sup>219</sup> Cathy Urquhart, *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013), 194.

<sup>220</sup> Lisa M Given, *100 Questions (and Answers) About Qualitative Research*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2016), 135.

<sup>221</sup> Robin Legard, Jill Keegan, Kit Ward, In-depth interviews in: J Ritchie, J Lewis, eds, *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (London: Sage, 2003), 139–169, 152.



To mitigate as much as possible for bias in the initial questionnaire and discussion guide designs, focused consultation occurred with a professional who designs surveys and teaches statistics at a University as a part of their work. This heightened my awareness of how questions were crafted through a particular lens birthed via my unique *Sitz im Leben*, but ultimately a middle-class, white, male, Western, main-line Christian perspective. Memo writing and comparative analysis, both reflective in nature, helped minimize bias. Using learnings gleaned from a graduate level course on ways of interpreting, the researcher was keenly aware of the interplay of pre-text, text, and context. In other words, there is the text itself and what it actually says, there is the context, what's the place and time, the setting in which the words are uttered or written, and then the pretext or what a researcher brings to the text that informs or shapes what is heard and how it is heard. Memo writing helped separate pre-conceived notions that included thoughts about understandings about what it means to be spiritual versus being religious, and thoughts around a person's potential syncretic behavior and the reasons for it, with theories emerging from the data.<sup>222</sup> Memos included relevant social media content, specific websites frequented by participants, categories, emerging thematic elements for future coding, and theories from the research to this point.

The researcher coded the transcripts without the assistance of coding software/programs. The analysis took place both while coding and in the weeks subsequent to allow time for reflection. The codes were created following the (Zoom) interviews and were informed by the data, including the initial questionnaire, for the purpose of analysis.<sup>223</sup> Van Manen's four step approach of data analysis – uncovering, isolating, composing, gleaning – as noted above was

---

<sup>222</sup> Melanie Birks and Jane Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage Publications, 2011).

<sup>223</sup> Cathy Urquart, *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage Publications, 2013).

used<sup>224</sup> and helpful in representing the participants' experiences and organizing and articulating the observed phenomena. Further, methodologically, van Manen's four step approach was underpinned with a specific philosophical interpretation of phenomenology, namely a hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological approach.<sup>225</sup> Van Manen describes it thus: "Phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experiences, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the 'texts' of life, and semiotics is used here to develop a practical writing or linguistic approach to the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics."<sup>226</sup> This approach became particularly important when exploring the theme of meaning making. "Meaning comes from the interpretation of people as they engage in the world and it emerges when consciousness engages with them. Meaning cannot be described as objective or subjective. Objectivity and subjectivity need to be carried and held together permanently to construct the meaning."<sup>227</sup> Van Manen's approach "is an attempt to explore experience without bracketing the researcher's understandings about that experience."<sup>228</sup> This approach was particularly helpful to mitigate bias formed through my own experiences with social media and perspectives of it.

Codes were created during the analysis process which began with an initial identifying of broad thematic elements. During multiple listenings and readings of each interview/transcript, thematic statements were isolated using holistic, selective, and line by line approaches to identify essential themes in an effort to capture the essence of the phenomenon.<sup>229</sup>

---

<sup>224</sup> Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (SUNY Series in the Philosophy of Education), State University of New York Press, 1990.

<sup>225</sup> DR Carpenter, Phenomenology as Method, in J Helen, S Speziale, DR Carpenter, eds, *Qualitative Research in Nursing: Advancing the Humanistic Imperative*, Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2007, 75-101.

<sup>226</sup> Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 4.

<sup>227</sup> Sudkhanoung Ritruethai, Wilaiporn Kwumwong, Rachel Rossiter, Mike Hazelton, "Thematic Analysis guided by Max van Manen: Hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological approach" *Journal of Health Science Research*, Vol 12, No. 2: July – December 2018, 40-48, 42.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 45.

Trustworthiness is an important aspect of any research, and in particular qualitative research. The authors Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba outline strategies to establish trustworthiness, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.<sup>230</sup> Credibility finds its basis in a truth value which lays bare the level of confidence of the researcher in the findings of the investigated phenomenon. The truth, in this instance, is derived from the lived experience(s) of the participants which is their unique reality and does not necessarily lead to universal truths.<sup>231</sup> Transferability concerns itself with applying the findings of one study to other contexts and was limited due to the particularity of the subject matter. That said, thematic elements of trust, understandings of religion and spirituality, and shifts in one's religiosity and spirituality as one moves through the life experience and the reasons for them, can find potential broader application in other contexts. Lincoln and Guba assert that credibility cannot exist apart from dependability, which is understood as the assertion that "...findings are distinctive to a specific time and place, and the consistency of explanations are present across the data."<sup>232</sup> The rapid change of a significant piece of the phenomenon, namely social media and by extension the accompanying technology and devices, makes the obtaining of similar results, if replicating the research, challenging. To address this, the research design is outlined in detail such that it can serve as a precursor to future projects.<sup>233</sup> Confirmability concerns itself with the objectivity of the investigated phenomenon and whether the findings are from the participants lived experiences and are free from the biases of the researcher.<sup>234</sup> This researcher established clear protocols and guidelines for the follow-up interviews that were strictly adhered to (i.e. the

---

<sup>230</sup> Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalist inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985.

<sup>231</sup> Laura Lemon & Jameson Hayes, Enhancing trustworthiness of qualitative findings: Using Leximancer for qualitative data analysis triangulation. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 604-614.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 605.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

same language and prompting was employed; environmental considerations such as clothing and background were consistent on my part). Recording the interviews prevented me from adding or excluding participant data and manually coding the interview transcripts using van Manen's method helped to mitigate bias.<sup>235</sup>

Ethical considerations were thoroughly considered and addressed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained separately for the initial questionnaire and for the follow-up interview. Consent for the initial questionnaire was obtained as a part of the questionnaire via the opening screen which served as a portal for the remainder of the questionnaire. Prior to the interview, participants received an email outlining the study, including risks, benefits, and confidentiality considerations. The information was reviewed with each interview participant before obtaining verbal consent. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 35 and were living in Canada which qualified them for the study. Recorded materials were deleted as of September 30, 2020. When the project is finished, all data, with identifying information removed, will be moved to a USB flash drive, which will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home. This raw data will be retained for 5 years after which it will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and the erasure of all files on computers and other electronic storage devices. The de-identified data will be kept for 5 years and will then be destroyed by the principal investigator and identifying information will be stored separately from the data and will be kept for 5 years and will then be destroyed by the principal investigator.

## **Conclusion**

---

<sup>235</sup>Writing Center, Ashford University, San Diego California, [https://writingcenter.ashford.edu/sites/default/files/inlinefiles/Dissertation%20Chapter%203%20Annotated%20Sample\\_0.pdf](https://writingcenter.ashford.edu/sites/default/files/inlinefiles/Dissertation%20Chapter%203%20Annotated%20Sample_0.pdf), accessed September 5, 2020.

This research called for a qualitative, interpretivist approach, that included social constructivism and phenomenology. People are complex, and intricate, and their interactions are unique; hence, different people can “experience and understand the same ‘objective reality’ in very different ways and have their own, often very different, reasons for acting in the world...”<sup>236</sup> The point of the research, from an interpretivist point of view, was to gain in-depth insight “...into the lives of respondents and to gain an empathetic understanding of why they act in the way that they do.”<sup>237</sup> This approach allowed me to begin to understand the potential links between social media and its impact on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults, what is specific, unique, and deviant in relation to the phenomenon, and the role of relative knowledge such as time, context, and culture. The sample was drawn from emerging adults irrespective of gender who are between the ages of eighteen through thirty-five with varying frequencies of use of social media, including none. The original study design, including recruitment, was modified as a direct result of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Open, axial and selective coding was used to analyze the raw, interview data with the goal of identifying and organizing the data thematically through systematic investigation. Max van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenological approach to analyze the data and better understand the participants’ lived experience was used. This approach was particularly helpful to mitigate bias formed through my own experiences with social media, faith communities, and perspectives of both.

---

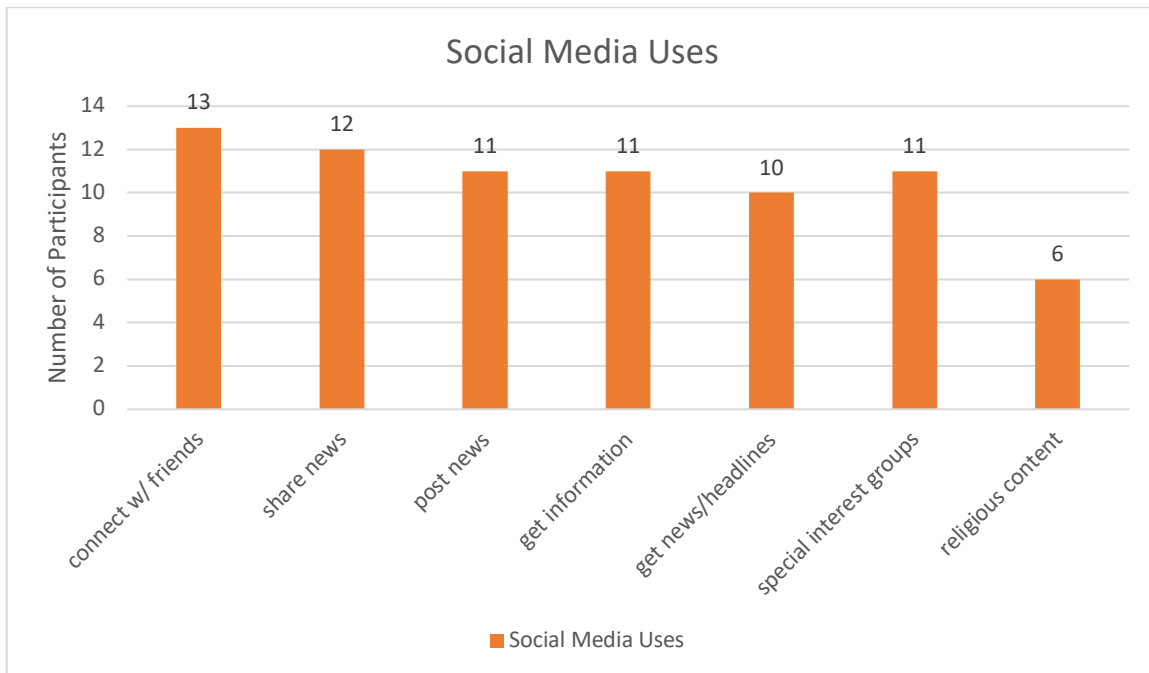
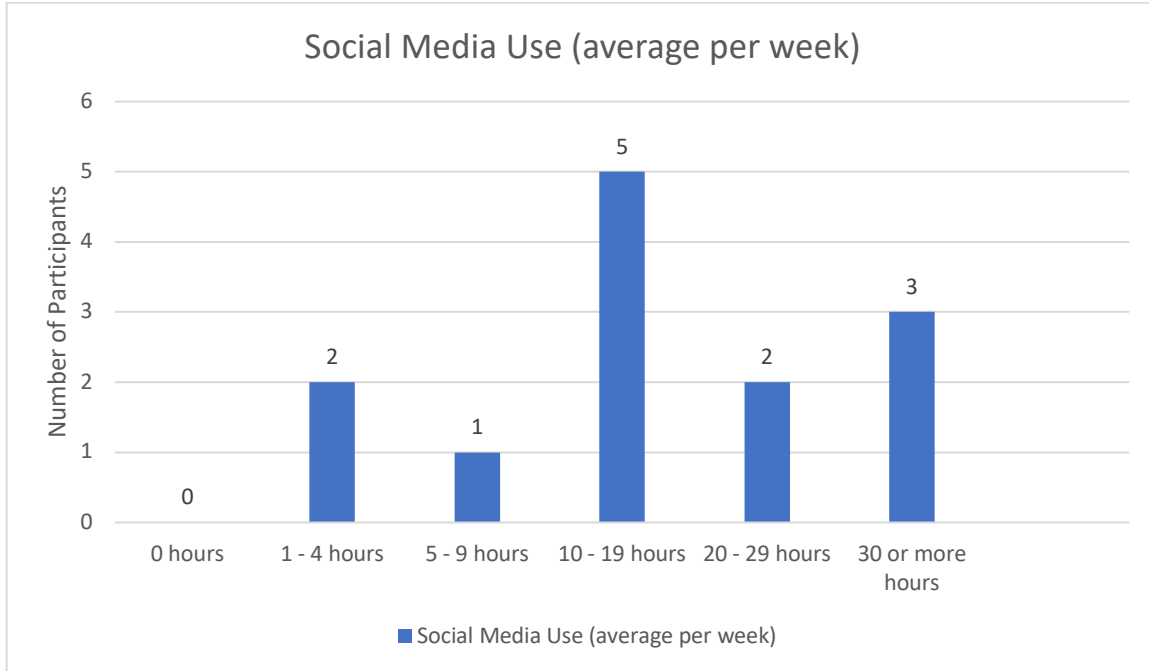
<sup>236</sup>Zeynep Yad, "What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?" *Quora*, June 6, 2017, accessed June 17, 2018, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-positivism-and-interpretivism-in-social-research>.

<sup>237</sup> Zeynep Yad, “What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?”

## Findings

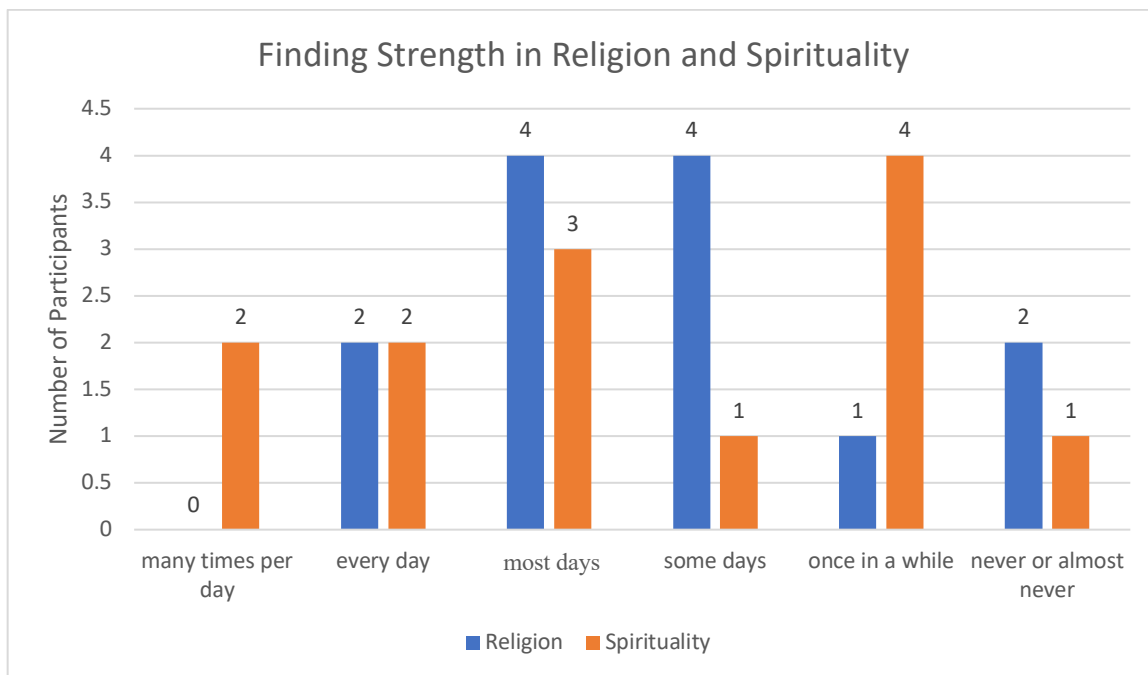
The primary purpose of this study was to explore how social media potentially disrupts, promotes, or interacts with the religious and spiritual beliefs of people aged 18 – 35 in a Canadian context. Participants' experience and feedback, through an initial questionnaire and follow-up interviews, added insight to the research question. Through an analysis of the questionnaire responses and the follow-up, semi-structured, interviews, valuable information was obtained about shifts in belief systems, syncretic behaviors, trust, and identity in as much as they each relate to religious and spiritual beliefs. Further, but more limited, information was obtained about participants perceptions of how faith communities have helped or hindered honest explorations of self, relation of self to the world, and world view. In this chapter, the research question will be addressed with supporting evidence that includes non-identifying quotations and feedback from the participants.

Of the thirteen participants, three identified as Christian, seven as protestant, one as Roman Catholic, one as Bahá'i faith, and one did not identify. The majority of participants, ten in total, identified with a faith/denomination for ten years or longer and eleven were connected to a faith community at the time of the study. Of those connected with a faith community, connection came in singular and multiple ways: seven indicated that their connection came through membership, eleven through attendance at religious services, and eight through attendance at a faith community's groups and/or events; three participants did not attend worship at the place where they hold membership but still worshipped in varying degrees within their faith/denomination and two participants worshiped outside of their faith/denomination. All participants used social media with one participant using it for 3 – 4 years, three participants using it for 5 – 9 years, and nine participants for ten or more years.

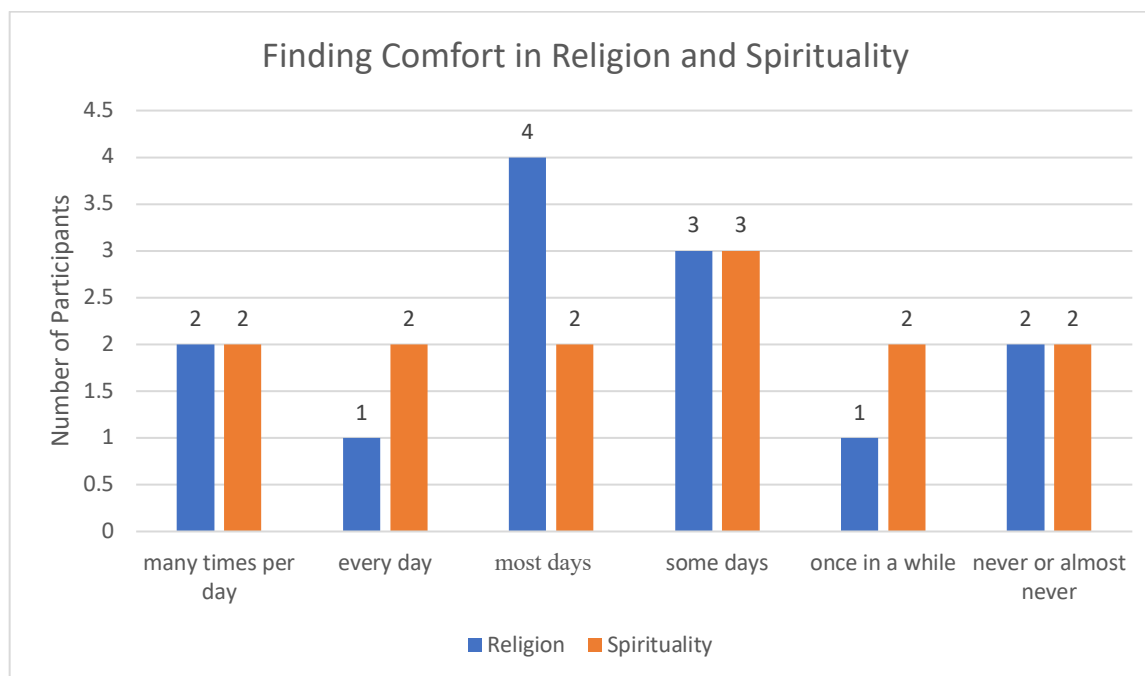


In an effort to gain insight into how participants experienced the religious and spiritual as lived experience, various initial questions were asked. When participants were asked if and how

often they “felt the presence of a higher power in their life,” all the participants experienced some degree of this feeling. Specifically 2 participants stated that they have this experience many times per day, 1 participant every day, 2 participants most days, 3 participants some days, and 5 participants replied they had this feeling once in a while. Turning to questions exploring strength and comfort of religion and spirituality yields some interesting findings, most notably that, despite an apparent push away from organized religion, all questionnaire respondents still derived some comfort and strength from religion.







10 participants disagreed with the statement “I was not very interested in religion until I began to ask questions about the meaning and purpose of my life” with 10 participants stating that their religious questions came out of tensions in their lives and in their relation to the world, 11 participants stating that their religious questions come out of the condition of the world, and 9 participants valued religious doubt and uncertainty. That said, participants were evenly divided on the further probe of whether questions are far more central to a religious experience than are answers with 5 participants agreeing, 5 participants disagreeing, and 3 neither agreeing nor disagreeing. The participants ranged in their responses as to whether it was important to follow the religious beliefs of their parents with 4 participants agreeing, 2 participants neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and 7 participants disagreeing.

There was strong agreement regarding meaning-making from participants with 12 participants agreeing with the statement that it is important for them to make meaning in their lives. 7 participants identified as being spiritually hungry, 11 participants were open to organized religion, and 9 participants valued organized religion. Of note, 9 participants strongly disagreed

with the statement that obedience to religious doctrine was the most important aspect of their faith. Finally, 12 participants expected their religion to grow and change as they grow and change with 1 participant strongly disagreeing with said idea.

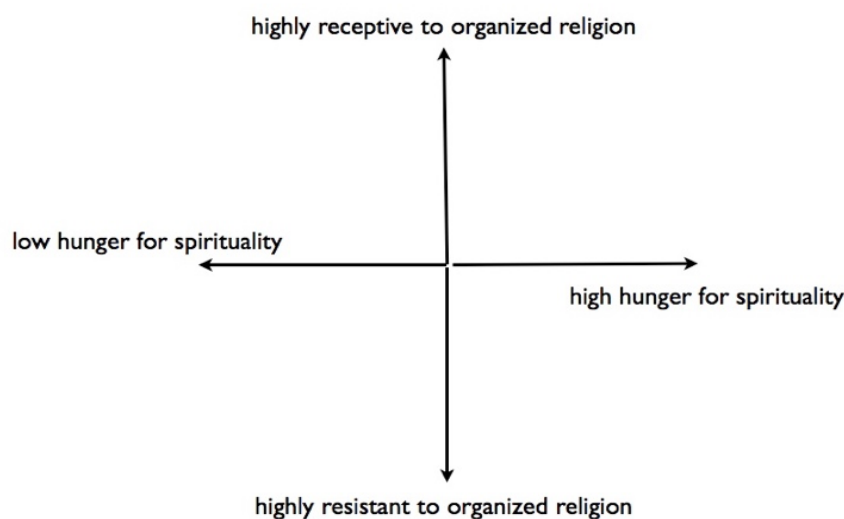
### **Shift in Belief Systems**

Several themes emerged from the research data. The common theme for each and all of the participants was the shifting of belief systems. Each participant experienced shifts in their belief systems and the articulated reasons for those shifts can form the sub-themes, namely, of syncretic behaviour, interaction and world view, trust, identity, religious rules and guiding behaviour, silence, and meaning making.



At the outset of the research, it was necessary to attempt to gain insight into the religious and spiritual beliefs of the participants and if those beliefs had shifted, before moving into an exploration of what accounted for those evolutions.

Each interview began with a screen share and asking participants to locate themselves on John Roberto's grid. Further probing questions including asking why they had located themselves there and if they would have always located themselves there.



238

[Roberto's] framework posits a matrix with two perpendicular axes – one which marks a spectrum from resistance to receptivity with relation to religious institutions, and one which marks a spectrum from low personal hunger for spiritual engagement, to high hunger for personal spiritual engagement. This matrix then offers a way to recognize that there might be at least four scenarios in which people could be found: one in which they experience a high receptivity to religious institutions and a high hunger for spirituality, one in which there is resistance to institution yet high hunger, one of low hunger and high resistance, and one in which there is receptivity to religious institution but low hunger.<sup>239</sup>

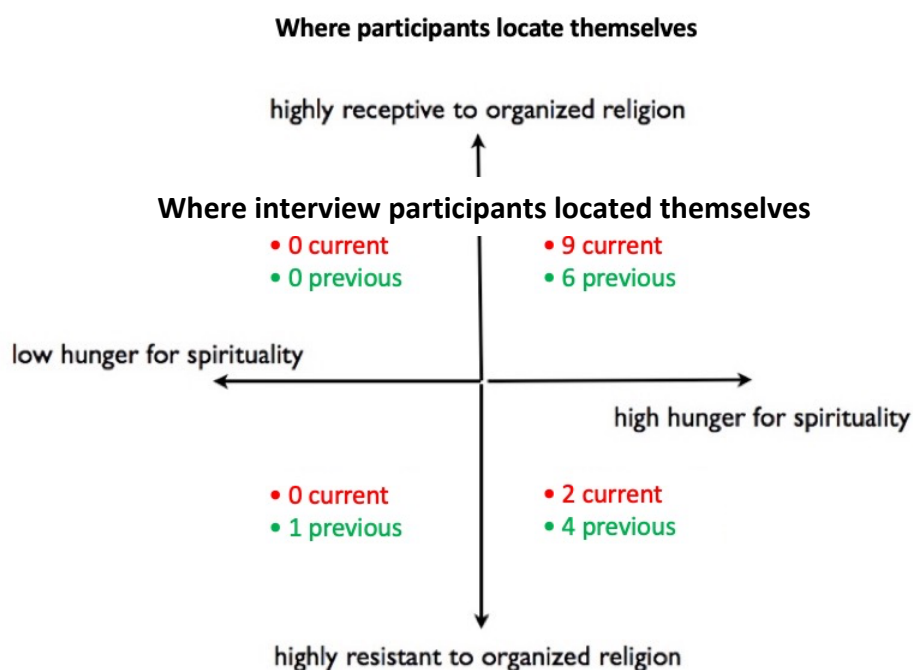
In this context, one understands the term “hunger” as an adjective as in having a craving or strong desire, akin to yearning, and “receptive” to mean openness or a willingness to consider.

<sup>238</sup> Mary E. Hess, “A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation,” *Dialog* 53, no. 1 (March 2014): pp. 12-22, 18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12084>.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

Of those interviewed, a number of shifts were observed within and between quadrants as indicated on Roberto's grid below:<sup>240</sup>

Of the shifts, 6 participants reported being more receptive to organized religion, 4 participants reported a decrease, and 1 participant remained the same; 7 participants reported an increase in "hunger for spirituality," 3 participants reported a decrease, and 1 participant remained the same. Overall, just over half of those interviewed were more receptive to organized religion and "hungrier" for spirituality. Further, participants who were more hungry for spirituality were also more receptive to organized religion while no participant was more receptive to organized religion without a shift towards an increase in hunger for spirituality. One interpretation of the observed data could be that as their hunger for spirituality increased, participants were more receptive to organized religion as a means to further explore and/or give



<sup>240</sup> Ibid (with indicated findings).

expression to their spirituality. Like participant 4 noted “Spirituality comes first. And spirituality can be filtered through the lens of Christianity as a traditional structure.”

### **Living with Integrity**

How participants understand religion and spirituality is crucial. Participant 3 offered that religion was exclusively about “adhering to doctrine” and being “tied to a system” and participant 8 offered that religion was about “following rules and tenets.” While these viewpoints were not necessarily surprising, within the interviews there emerged an overwhelming impression from 9 participants that their resistance to organized religion came from seeing it as the embodiment of an oppressive institution particularly as it set forth its definitions or explanations of how the world works. “I believe in a higher power,” said participant 3, “but the [faith] community I was a part of did not allow for any interpretation. It was about rules.” Participant 9 offered “I have an active belief in God but religion should *not* be prescriptive.” Participant 7 noted that “religion exists to keeps spirituality in check and accountable” by which they meant that as their spirituality drove them towards exploring deeper questions, religion was there to control the answers. It was difficult to categorize the participants neatly, and perhaps that is noteworthy, if only because it may signal a break-away from traditional boundaries found in religion. 9 participants disagreed with the statement that “there was only one true faith” with participant 4 offering “no one group has a monopoly on the truth.”

An overwhelming majority of participants (10) stated that they considered themselves to be spiritual and for 8 participants, based on their responses and non-verbal cues, it seemed deeply personal in so far as it communicated an intimate acquaintance with spirituality. When asked the question “Describe what being spiritual means to you,” 6 participants articulated their

understanding through a sensory lens. “Spirituality is choosing to live life as committed to something greater than self and to the earth,” said participant 8. Participant 1 said that spirituality is “describing within, and even more than what’s sensory,” by which they meant that which could be seen and or touched, and participant 9 offered that spirituality is “understanding within and how I fit into the world.” Outside of the sensory articulation, three participants expressed similar sentiments to participant 2 who stated that spirituality was “diving into a faith that’s not black and white.”

As participants each navigated the complexity of their context, it was interesting to note what guided participants’ behavior. Relationships, spirituality, and conscience figured prominently. Participant 11 spoke passionately about spirituality as “giving back” to the world through “love and acts for others.” It was clear from the participants that their behavior is guided by more, if at all in one particular instance, than religious rules. Participant 3 spoke strongly about this offering:

Religion is about rules. And it seems top down. If I’m going to do something for someone it’s going to be because I want to, not because I have to out of fear or coercion. I’m not trying to appease some higher power. Or some church. Or the morality police.

Two clear findings that emerged from the follow-up interviews were, first, that the traditional institution of the church was no longer functioning with the authority it has enjoyed in past generations and, second, that many interview participants rejected the church defined boundary markers of religious identity while still believing in God and practicing that belief outside of church gatherings. In fact, while 9 respondents felt that attending worship was important, few of them attended worship services regularly (5 attending only a few times per year).

I am averse to [my church body] telling me what to believe. I believe in God. And religion is being tied to a system...practices. My belief finds expression in mission work, courses, engaging texts, and journaling. (Participant 11)

I need non-judgemental freedom to practice my faith. I haven't found that yet in church. It's more important to be a good person than to be a good attender. (Participant 8)

Less forceful, but equally notable, were 3 participants who articulated with more specificity what informs their - in their words - "moral compass." "I look to philosophy for guidance. I understand my own religion. But I'm really drawing from Kant and others" said participant 1. Participant 3 offered "I give back to the natural world because I feel connected to the natural world which informs how I am in the world, particularly leaving [the world] untouched." "The reliance on one's own conscience to guide behaviour rather than religious rules, the importance of friends and family, and the increasing significance of social media and popular culture (Catto 2014; Beaudoin 2000)"<sup>241</sup> each exert influence. In part this can be explained with participants' increasing curiosity as they age coupled with an increase in opportunities to experience new things (i.e. school, work, travel). But in a very real sense this may also come out of an increasing sense of connectedness. Participant 6 gave expression to this saying "spirituality is having connectedness to your surroundings, including people." Accordingly, that which informs and influences behavior are constructed through complex processes that blend contexts and surroundings and relationships. Phenomenologically speaking, the things that have value and significance also have qualitatively different concerns based on language, culture, and context.<sup>242</sup> Examples of this might include freedom, or parenting children, or mourning, or rituals that have incredible meaning in a physical context and a different meaning in a virtual context. If we are

---

<sup>241</sup> Rebecca Catto, *What can we say about today's British religious young person?*

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

beings constituted by our own interpretations and understandings, it is imperative to recognize the importance of background. “Nothing can be encountered independent of our background understanding. Every encounter is an interpretation based on our background.”<sup>243</sup> Thus, our being and how we understand ourselves, and who we understand ourselves to be, is informed by pre-text (possibly a false or presumed purpose) and context (the surrounding environment).

### **Faith Community as Resource**

When a number of the study participants had questions, many of them did not go to the faith communities they were a part of, nor did they see the institution as a resource.

Participants found organized religion a vehicle that did not allow for that fuller exploration and/or expression either because of constraints, perceived constraints, or beliefs and practices that were incongruent with their lived experiences, specifically an often experienced judgmentalism, creating a gap, that pushed participants towards exploring their spirituality through other vehicles. Participant 6 articulated this phenomenon as “I have a real desire to have the freedom to disagree, to discuss [things] intellectually. I hold the institution with a light touch.”

One reason that participants did not reach out to the communities that they had been a part of and already had history and/or membership with, was disconnect. A number of participants tried to articulate the disconnect they felt with “their” faith communities by speaking about how the faith communities they were familiar with cared about different things than they did. Participant 2 said

---

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 52.



The church seems to parse and parse and parse Jesus again and again. So many details to get tangled up in. But that's not even really it. It becomes about drilling down into stuff that I don't really care about. I don't care about some of the doctrine that is so important to them. The issues they fixate on are not important to me.

Another furthered the disconnection piece by talking about how they felt "sandwiched" between their faith community and their peers, particularly when reflecting on issues of faith and doctrine, as with participant 5.

My church gets caught up in talking about things that mean little to me. Sometimes I feel that there is no room for my questions in the middle of all of these other questions...that seem more important – at least to them. And it's not like I can go and talk about it with some of my friends – like the doctrinal stuff – because most of them have never been to a church like mine and so wouldn't know the things [doctrines] in question.

Participant 1 articulated that it was a personal event that led to disillusionment.

When I was in high school, I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. I was in and out of the hospital. I stopped going to church. I was disillusioned not just with the church but also and maybe more that there is a God. Who or what I put my faith in has changed.

Also noteworthy was one participant who offered, almost as a part of what I would describe as a sigh, "my questions are too offensive for the church." Ultimately, whether through a perception of exclusion or a feeling of disconnect, said participants felt there was no room for their questions and, rather than dismissing the questions, sought to explore them through other means. Whether perceived or real, there was simply no room in their institutions for the participants' belief systems to shift or evolve.

While the participants identified as being connected with a particular faith (10 identifying as Christian), they practiced their faith in less traditional ways (i.e. not attending worship, faith community activities). "I think it's really important to help people and to worship," said participant 8, "but I don't think that has to be in a group. I do those things a lot on my own." Participant 9 offered "journaling and discussing my spirituality with friends...thinking about that

stuff...is what I do. My childhood church had so many rules – like from the elders, or about communion. I’ve become way more critical now and so look elsewhere.” Some of these less traditional ways included more self-directed spiritual quests with direction from a variety of sources, most notably social media. “Social media has really shaped my faith. There were times in my life where it provided a forum for reading and questioning” said participant 10. “I find that my faith is strengthened by social media. [Interviewer asks how] I’m careful about tunnel vision and feedback loops but it strengthens my beliefs through affirmation” said participant 7. “Before I came out, when I was exploring my sexuality, I found strength through social media that I didn’t find in the church. I wanted to know what the Bible said and what God thinks without all the judgement and baggage” said participant 9.

They did consume religious content, but half of participants did not consume this content in traditional form (books, magazines, pamphlets; printed or electronic) but rather via social media (5 participants). Specifically, religious content via social media came in the form of forums, advocacy groups with spiritual roots (sometimes Christian, but non-denominational), and specific issue or need based searching as relating to faith (i.e. LGBTQ rights, feminism, women in the priesthood, gender identity). Further, amongst participants there was a clear movement away from traditionally authoritative sources of religious identity as noted in their embracing of informal and personal faith practices. “Having communion is important to me. But that’s something I do on my own. I know there are rules about this stuff, but I do it anyway” said participant 1 before adding “it’s just me and God. Feels more personal.” Another participant spoke about lighting candles and sitting quietly in their room before engaging in extemporaneous prayer saying “sometimes I pray for five minutes, sometimes for a lot longer. It’s not

prescriptive. And it's not as flowery as the prayers in church. But I feel connected to a higher power.”

When asked how their spirituality finds expression, participants spoke about seeking to understand, journaling, connecting mind, body, and soul and paying attention to their energy, gardening, hiking, yoga, meditation, achieving inner peace, and examining how you see the world. One participant spoke about expressing their spirituality by taking a nature walk and contemplating the creation they were seeing like the plants or the animals before adding “it's one of the few places where I think about the world and how I fit into it” (Participant 3). One participant spoke about spirituality as an antidote to a “shame hangover.” “With all of my flaws, religion told me I didn't belong. Spirituality dismantles the embedded systems that assign identities” (Participant 6). All participants acknowledged feeling the “presence of a higher power in their lives” but seem to choose more informal pathways to connect with that higher power. That said, what remains curious is that despite this movement away from organized religion to a more personal, private approach that may find expression publicly, 7 participants valued organized religion and 9 stated they were open to it.

### **Silence and Silencing**

This leads into another sub-theme of shifting belief systems: silence and silencing. Three participants, in particular, spoke passionately, and I would add heartbreakingly, about “staying quiet” for various reasons that included family and institution. Participant 1 recounts

I grew up in the church. But I'm agnostic now. Religion is all about following rules. Coloring in the lines. Conforming. When I think about who I am – and being authentic is really important to me – I've seen the church that says everyone is welcome push people away who don't...[pause]...fit a mold or certain image. I feel I can't really be me.

Participant 5 was pointed:

My appearance doesn't line up with the church. Not even close. I mean, my world is diverse. But I don't look like the majority of the people in my faith community. [Interviewer asks what do you mean by look like?] The way I dress. The way I act. [...] I hung around with people that people in the church thought were bad influences. I'm tired of the church's disapproval. It sucks. And that was for little things. I can't imagine what they'd say about big things.

The reasons for being silenced or feeling silenced can be quite varied. Sometimes personal exploration combines with a particular event or events, as with participant 9:

I go to church to appease my mom. I am really uncomfortable with how the church feels about homosexuality. They hate me before they know me. I think [religious] people want to be good, do good, help people. But they can also be judgemental. Use harsh language. [...] When I was a kid in elementary school I asked a question about Jesus loving gay people and it was never answered. I'm not out publicly and I've got a family member who is really aggressive about the church. Inclusivity is really important to me. When my church voted to not allow same-sex blessings, I checked out. I don't have that interpretation of Scripture. I don't like the gatekeeper piece. I'm not gay but that's my neighbour. And the stuff that people were saying before the vote. There is no place for my voice in that community.

While the reasons and circumstance of each participants' story relating to silence varied, what was clear from the emotion that accompanied participants words was that each instance was quite personal.

### **Meaning-Making**

Meaning making is a way forward that can navigate tensions in formation, namely validation, authority, empathy, constraints, contradiction, and digital spaces can, indeed, be experienced as deeply relational.<sup>244</sup> Again, adults aged 18 - 35 find themselves in a very characteristically unique phase of life. "The features marking this stage of life are intense identity exploration, instability, a focus on self, feeling in limbo or in transition or in between,

---

<sup>244</sup> Mary E. Hess, *A New Culture of Learning*, 17.

and a sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope.”<sup>245</sup> The religious and spiritual beliefs of the participants and the socio-cultural terrain and meaning making that inform them are neither static nor determined. In fact, of particular note was how 7 participants used the terms “spirituality” and “meaning-making” almost interchangeably. Participant 5 offered that spirituality was a moving away from that which is “embedded in systems,” particularly “politics,” to “connecting with others and the world. This is one way to learn who you are and how you fit into the world...by examining yourself in relation to something or someone else.” Diane Hockridge, quoting George Lindbeck in part notes that formation “...concerns the development of a deep and personally committed appropriation of a comprehensive and coherent outlook on life.”<sup>246</sup> Seven participants articulated how they felt that the intense curiosity to explore and engage their surroundings, or the world, had not been nurtured in the faith communities of their childhoods (participant 4 noted this stopped “around Grade 5”) and that, according to participant 2, the “church was out of its depth.” Social media, for ten of the participants, has filled this gap and invited a curiosity for further exploration and examination. It is, potentially, a way to gain further insight into a “generation that stays away from most churches in droves but loves songs about God and Jesus, a generation that would score very low on any standard piety scale but at times seems almost obsessed with saints, visions, and icons in all shapes and sizes.”<sup>247</sup>

---

<sup>245</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 6.

<sup>246</sup> Diane Hockridge, “What’s the Problem? Spiritual Formation in Distance and Online Theological Education,” *Journal of Christian Education* 54, no. 1 (May 2011): pp. 25-38, 26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002196571105400104>.

<sup>247</sup> Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, ix.

Intrinsic to meaning making for nine of the eleven interview participants was a mixture of gratitude and recognizing and alleviating suffering. Participant 5, speaking in the context of the pandemic, reflected on “the good” that has emerged during this time, saying:

I have to say that it’s brought a lot of disconnected families together. My own family usually doesn’t eat together all that often. Our schedules are crazy. But we’re eating together more because we’re all stuck in the house together. Sometimes they stand on my last nerve but I’m thankful.

Participant 9 noted that their faith community had not seen the value of streaming and virtual interactions before the pandemic before noting that the leaderships’ stance had softened to accommodate new realities. They offered: “I’m thankful that my church went online. It’s way more accessible now and, to be honest, I had the feeling if millions of people are online and my church isn’t, it’s like their saying those people don’t matter.”

Suffering, and more particularly working towards alleviating that suffering, emerged in the context of meaning making with nine of the interview participants. Pandemic related hardships were noted by seven participants. “Our healthcare workers are overworked. And the way we treat old people in those homes is horrible. If anything it’s a justice issue,” said participant 5 before adding “and justice is about love.” Other hardships noted by these participants included economic hardship, isolation, and abuse. Further, six participants spoke about issues that the pandemic has brought more acutely to the fore. Participant 2 said “the inequality is striking. Some populations are affected by COVID – and die – at higher rates than others” and participant 5 offered “the way we treat certain workers – the ones in the meat packing places, the migrant workers, people in the service industry – it’s not good. And who is working those jobs? People of color, people who are poorer...people who have no choice but to work in dangerous conditions.” Participant 6 noted “when I look at the world and see or read about all of the

suffering, I struggle with how to reconcile that with God.” The connection to meaning making became clearer when the given nine participants moved beyond identifying the suffering to articulating its alleviation. “I wrote a letter to my MP expressing my outrage at the state of the nursing homes and how we treat old people. The system has to change. I believe we can’t treat people like this” said participant 5. “The poor were not just dropped down from God. People are poor because of the structures we created...Indigenous communities. [pause] I feel called to do something. [interviewer asks: what does that mean?] Faith for me means hope. There’s always hope. But we can’t just pray for something to happen. We need to make it happen” said participant 2. Meaning making cannot erase suffering, but the empathetic quality present in the participants’ responses leads to more meaning making which could be impetus for action and the conduit to change.

### **Identity & Syncretic Behavior**

While the majority of interview participants identified as Christian (10 participants), almost the same number were reluctant to be labelled as religious (9 participants) but entirely comfortable being labelled as spiritual (11 participants). The data from the questionnaire, coupled with the interview data, indicated a leaning towards an inverse relation between amount of time spent on social media and religiosity amongst participants. It was observed that as participants’ social media use increased, the less likely participants were to attend religious services, pray, or affiliate formally with a religious tradition. While 9 participants identified with a particular denomination, follow-up interviews indicated that for half of the participants this was essentially in title only perhaps as a remnant of childhood or as a public aligning of their family religion.

Karen-Marie Yust affirms that social media is having an effect on the spirituality of adolescents and emerging adults alike. Whether through a general understanding of the internet and, by extension social media, as a third place where genuine conversation can take place<sup>248</sup> or through the development of a digital identity that is fundamentally polyphonic, meaning multiple, diverse, flexible, and pseudo-anonymous,<sup>249</sup> social media can have a significant impact on identity formation and relational consciousness. When we contemplate what it means to be human, we tend to use words like individuality, spontaneity, moral autonomous agents - things that point us towards wrestling with the naming of the intersection of mind, body, self, identity, belief, desire, and free will;<sup>250</sup> what we are describing, essentially, is personhood.<sup>251</sup> A clear narrative emerged with three participants who voluntarily disclosed that they identified as gay or lesbian; sexual orientation was not part of the selection criteria. Five participants acknowledged the importance of spirituality in their lives but how they struggled reconciling their sexual orientation with the religious messaging and teaching from faith communities, including those of their childhoods. Participant 3 offered:

I only ever heard one sermon in my church where LGBTQ stuff came up. I don't remember exactly what was said but I still remember how it made me feel. And it's not good. [Interviewer asks "why's that?"] Because it just talked about how wrong it was and how bad it was according to the bible. I don't remember what the bible verses were but I do remember everyone nodding along.

Participant 11 said

It always bothered me that we seemed to always talk about people instead of with people. And the choir director at the church was gay. When people got angry about same sex marriage in my church, saying how it was wrong. But when the director's name would come up, people would say 'oh, that's different.' [...] Weird lines were being drawn.

---

<sup>248</sup>Karen-Marie Yust, "Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children's Spirituality," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 134, doi:10.1080/1364426x.2014.924908.

<sup>249</sup> Milad Doueihi as referenced in Karen-Marie Yust, 138.

<sup>250</sup> "Department of Philosophy," Philosophy of Human Nature | Department of Philosophy, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://departments2.shc.edu/philosophy/philosophy-human-nature>. Previously referenced in TH648X and TH648Z.

<sup>251</sup> From a Western perspective.



Participant 7 said “there is so much in the world that challenges self-worth. I didn’t need my faith to do that too.” What is particularly notable in this regard are two things: the study participants that identified as gay or lesbian were very engaged with their spirituality and had rich spiritual lives and, as some turned away from religion as animated through their faith communities, social media acted as a bridge to explore their spirituality. One participant remarked “my family is very religious and I was afraid of what they would think. I am well-aware of what the doctrine says. I wondered if God thought I should be cast out too?” What emerged for said participants was a push to move beyond the tenets of their respective religions to deeper explorations of, in this case, theology, particularly as it relates to value, connection, and belonging. “I never felt like I could be my true self,” said participant 8. “It was only when I went to university that I was able to talk with people in a freer way. I felt a belonging that I’d never felt before.” Participant 6 was more pointed: “religion seemed to have answers that didn’t cut it for me but my spirituality gave space for the questions.”

As a researcher, I entered into this study with the posture that syncretic behavior, as it relates to religious and spiritual belief, was typically negative and self-serving in that people could engage in tailor making their own spirituality to suit their own (selfish) purposes (i.e. selecting only the parts of a belief system that suit you, or are not challenging). But this was clearly something more. This was about searching and finding a theological message about inherent self-worth that was not coming from their varied denominations. This searching and finding was formative as the participants sought to locate themselves on an expansive, socio-cultural map.

## Trust & Beliefs

Paul Ricoeur coined the phrase *hermeneutic of suspicion* which, broadly stated, was a refusal to take words at face value. 100% of participants stated that they would not share content without first verifying the truth or legitimacy of the content, regardless of the origins of the content. When probed, participants noted that this included even if the content originated or was being shared within their personal network of friends. Participants offered:

Participant 9: “I always cross reference content before sharing it”

Participant 6: “I know how harmful disinformation can be. I want to counter that.”

Participant 8: “I fundamentally believe that everyone has value. I don’t want to share antiquated messages about things we know better about now...like being queer. It’s not a disease.”

The hermeneutic of suspicion is, by its nature, a posture of distrust of words to draw out meaning and meanings that were perhaps unintended. While the term is fitting to a degree within the context of this study, there was sense that this suspicion was a positive thing and, in some cases, almost a duty or obligation. Participant 2 said “How can you not verify something before passing it along. Even if you disagree with it. If you blindly pass something along, you’re part of the problem” and participant 3 offered “We cannot blindly accept reality. How do you know what’s real, anyway?”

When asked about what has most influenced their religion or spirituality, the responses covered a wide spectrum that can be broken down into three main areas, namely, people, events, and experiences. Some spoke plainly and/or passionately about people who had influenced their beliefs.

At this point, I’d have to say that my parents have influenced my beliefs the most. They took me to church and Sunday School when I was little and we did stuff like say grace before meals. Even though we didn’t talk about it a lot, it was clear they believed in something bigger.

Another offered

My family and my friends [have influenced my beliefs]. Being able to share experiences – and go through them with others – was huge. And not only that but to be able to talk to some of them about those experiences was big. I remember once actually bringing up the question with someone “What does this mean?” and I was totally thinking about it in a God kind of way.

And finally

Talking with friends and my pastors over the years really influenced my beliefs.

Others spoke about events that were pivotal in the shaping of their beliefs.

When I moved out – when I was on my own...I mean away from home – that was a big deal. I found myself thinking more critically about things in a different [school] environment.

Another offered

For me it was really two things: growing up, and a nasty church split. A community that I had been a part of for a long time was just ripped apart. People were saying lots of things. Sides were taken. Some of the congregation went with one pastor. Others stayed. It was a mess. When you see Christians behaving like I did – that was tough.

And one participant talked about going through a diagnosis of depression and anxiety, and the accompanying hospital stays, was pivotal as they were “thrust” into a place from where they asked various theological questions most notably relating to God and suffering.

Seven of the participants pointed to opportunities to explore or think about their perspectives and world views broadening, mostly notably through education. One participant encapsulated this when they said

For me it was education. When I went on to higher learning, I thought more about religion. I thought about myself. I thought about my sexuality.

When participants were asked the question “how has social media influenced your beliefs?” responses were varied. Six participants spoke about their interaction with others, and more specifically time with others, being augmented through social media. They expressed similar sentiments to participant 10 who offered “engaging with other peoples’ posts has been eye opening. It’s influenced my beliefs through different views and exposure. The content is a part of that but so is the interaction part.” Two participants articulated a direct connection between accessing information and their beliefs. “It’s really helped shape my beliefs by giving me access to informative content...like black lives matter,” said participant 3. “Sometimes you seek the information out. Sometimes it’s put before you.” Participant 7 offered “Yes. It has shaped [my] beliefs in ways I don’t even realize...like gay rights.” Study participants embrace being exposed to different cultures, values, perspectives, and belief systems. Sharing information through social media has influenced how participants see others, the world, and themselves by providing a space to explore ideas and to express themselves more freely. That said, there was hesitation or suspicion from two participants. Participant 3 said “[Social media] has not...not really anyway. Social media is simply community-based thinking and I don’t know if I can trust that right off the bat.” “Social media has influenced my beliefs a little,” said participant 2. “I know what I believe. But social media helps me refine that.” This was consistent with eight of the participants who spoke about how social media connected them to a broad range of topics and perspectives. While they did acknowledge the presence of algorithms and the “inauthenticity” that can be present of social media, it was the idea of stepping outside of one’s comfort zone and what one knows to truly understand what one knows. In the words of participant 5 “you only know your faith when you step outside it.”

## Interaction and Worldview

People are complex, and intricate, and their interactions are unique; hence, different people can “experience and understand the same ‘objective reality’ in very different ways and have their own, often very different, reasons for acting in the world...”<sup>252</sup> While completely valid causal statements about the social world and, in particular, definitive identification of a causal relationship between social media and world-view in the participants cannot be made in the context of this study, the interpretation of elements can lead to empathetic understandings of the observed phenomena such as the effect of hyper-connectivity and world that is constantly present. All of the participants stated that they used social media to “connect with people” and to “stay in touch.” Seven of the participants worried that they might be “too connected” and 6 participants stated that they unfollow people or groups as a matter of self-care. Participant 10 stated that when they moved away for school “all of my interactions were essentially virtual which led to more screen time which led to going down more rabbit holes which definitely put me in some feedback loops.” Participant 6 offered that their [world] views had shifted dramatically because of their hyper-connectivity. “I have friends and people all over the world that I converse with, sometimes on a daily basis. We talk about all kinds of stuff. Important stuff.” Nine participants spoke about being connected with friends, people, and groups – in various places around the world - relating to social justice and democracy. In the context of this study, while hyperconnected-ness can be linked to isolation and loneliness, all participants connectedness through social media emboldened their healthy questioning and critical understandings which, in turn, impacted their worldview. Participant 4 said “I have discussed

---

<sup>252</sup>Zeynep Yad, "What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?" *Quora*, June 6, 2017, accessed June 17, 2018, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-positivism-and-interpretivism-in-social-research>. Previously referenced in TH761F, Martin Luther University College, Spring Term, 2018.

issues we're facing here in Canada with people in Africa and they share the issues they're facing and how they're dealing with them." During the interviews, I had the very real sense that social media, despite its drawbacks, was enabling exposure to ideas and cultures and beliefs that might not otherwise have been encountered. "It's important to explore other religions and spiritualities, especially if you need to" said one participant. "Lived experience says that exploring other beliefs is ok" said another. Participant 5 offered "if you don't doubt, how would you know what you think. And so exploring other beliefs is essential." While these statements represented a majority, or nine of the participants, there was hesitation expressed amongst two participants, one of whom said

I struggle a little with exploring other beliefs and religions. Ultimately there is a right and a wrong. But this is a slippery slope and so I think this is dangerous. So I haven't had a desire to explore other religion. (Participant 10)

Exposure to broader or different ideas and systems not only includes spiritual and religious beliefs but also shapes how the participants engage the world. Participant 4 offered "being connected has helped me hone my critical thinking [...] which helps me determine action." Participant 8 noted that "I never appreciated how Western my thinking is." Of course, there are many ways of interpreting the world, here can be multiple realities, and no single point of view can ever describe the entire picture.<sup>253</sup>

Structuralism is understood as an approach "that finds meaning in relation to things, rather than in isolation."<sup>254</sup> Things cannot, then, be understood in isolation, but rather in the context of larger systems or structures which, in turn, also do not exist in isolation, but rather are formed

---

<sup>253</sup> Zeynep Yad, "What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?"

<sup>254</sup> Avinash Singh, "STRUCTURALISM," *Academia.edu - Share Research*, 1, accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.academia.edu/34709638/STRUCTURALISM>.

through perceptions of the world.<sup>255</sup> Social systems, as noted by the sociologist Anthony Giddens, are more than merely mechanical outcomes.<sup>256</sup> Participant 11 said they were “very intentional about making sure to follow and converse with people whose views were different in a major way.” In fact, a number of the participants worldviews were intentionally challenged. “I used to do my fair share of self-loathing – believing what society was telling me, until I got on this [online] group” said participant 3. Participant 7 offered “in hindsight I was internalizing messages of transphobia and needed to break out of that. Some online and friend groups helped me do that.” One participant spoke about how one experience in university that lead to several other experiences challenged their worldview.

“I had some pretty...well...what I would now call cringeworthy views, especially about homeless people. I thought they were just lazy or something was wrong with them. But then some people in my dorm were making sandwiches for a soup kitchen and invited me to come along. [...] Over the course of that night, I began to see the broader personal and social issues that go into this.”

One participant spoke directly, albeit in a tongue and cheek way, about being challenged theologically. “I never thought about how God interacts with the world. I thought for a long time he was just a dude on a cloud with a beard.”

The overall sense from no fewer than nine of the participants was an openness and willingness to question why they believe what they believe and, by extension, becoming aware of and challenging bias. What was clear was that this did not, and perhaps could not, happen in isolation but rather in relationship. Indeed, as with structuralism, the attention “from elements and their natural properties to the relationships among elements and to the relational, or system-

---

<sup>255</sup> Nasrullah Mambrol, "Structuralism," *Literary Theory and Criticism*, March 20, 2016, 3, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://literariness.org/2016/03/20/structuralism/>.

<sup>256</sup> Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method a Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*, (London: Hutchinson, 1977), 121.

acquired, properties that depend on such relationships.”<sup>257</sup> Time spent on social media, in the context of these participants, in addition to being used socially, was used as a vehicle to gain insight into wider society, the self, and the world with some participants’ motivation (i.e. participants 3 and 7, above) being self-care rooted in a (low) value judgement of self and others to have a broader perspective; intentionality was common in either case.

## **Conclusion**

Several themes emerged from the research data. The common theme was the shifting of belief systems divided into sub-themes of living with integrity, faith community as resource, silence and silencing, meaning making, identity and syncretic behaviour, trust and beliefs, and interaction and world-view. Broadly understood by the participants, intrinsic to religious and spiritual beliefs was engaging large questions about life, moving towards greater self-awareness, and connecting with others. As participants looked for meaning, investigations of life, death, and purpose loomed large. Participants approached religion and spirituality differently. Approaches and understandings were influenced by faith community connections and messaging, childhood household beliefs, and motivations that included identity exploration, validation, activism, and curiosity. Although participants articulated a continued openness to organized religion and a “high hunger” for spirituality, social media filled a gap for a number of participants when they felt organized religion was either “out of its depth,” constrained by too many boundaries, or posturally incongruent with their lived experiences, specifically in their spiritual quests.

---

<sup>257</sup> Avinash Singh, "STRUCTURALISM," *Academia.edu - Share Research*, 1, accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.academia.edu/34709638/STRUCTURALISM>.



## Discussion

As the belief systems of emerging adults continue to shift, it is important that their world views be appreciated and understood, both in their origins and interplay with belief, in order for faith communities to better create multiple and varied access points. In this study, through initial questionnaires and follow-up, semi-structured interviews, eleven participants shared valuable information regarding shifts in their belief systems, syncretic behaviour, interaction and world view, trust, identity, living with integrity, silence, and meaning making. Through candid conversations with participants, for which I am indebted, I was able to gather responses to the research question: What is the impact of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of adults aged 18 – 35 in Canada?

In this study, participants discussed their religious and spiritual beliefs, how those beliefs formed and continue to be shaped, and what resources meet their spiritual and religious needs. They expressed their understandings of religion and spirituality, and shared experiences that influence their openness to organized religion and their hunger for spirituality. They spoke of the importance of meaning making and connectedness, and most articulated belief systems that were syncretic, shifting, and formed from experience.

Despite the abundance of research on religion and spiritual beliefs, and social networking and our well-being,<sup>258</sup> limited research has explored how these might converge. I explored the connection between participation in social networking and a person's religiosity and spirituality,<sup>259</sup> and the inclination of specific, frequent, social media users to hold different beliefs regarding accepting the idea that many religions can be simultaneously true, and can hold

---

<sup>258</sup> See Bargh and McKenna 2004; Hampton et al. 2011; Kross et al. 2013; Nie and Ebring 2002; Wellman 2001.

<sup>259</sup> Initial findings indicate this is the research of Beaudoin, 2010.

a disposition to tailor making their own religiosity or spirituality.<sup>260</sup> Participants' stories revealed that spiritual and religious beliefs are rooted in identity, relationship, and context.

In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, he discusses rationality and historicity and how they oppose one another as well as the idea of "being-with-others." In this regard, some theological connections can be made between the theologian Martin Luther (together with other reformers) and Heidegger in their understandings of the "other." Heidegger's writing and the Augsburg Confession find commonality in the characterization of the taking care of others.<sup>261</sup> Specifically here I am thinking of Article 4 or justification by grace through faith in that now that one does not have to worry about one's salvation, one is now free to care for neighbour. But more deeply, if theology is "faith seeking understanding,"<sup>262</sup> then one can wonder what is at stake for the spiritual and/or religious? The way we think about ourselves? Theological assumptions? How we understand tradition? How we interact and navigate our physical and virtual contexts? Relationships, whether past, present, or future, have meaning and the idea of belonging becomes especially powerful in a context that is broader than those in the *real* world.<sup>263</sup> Researchers Jiayin Qi, Emmanuel Monod, Binxing Fang, and Shichang Deng offer a helpful weaving together of Heidegger's shared world theory and Social Networking Sites.

#### Heidegger's Shared World Theory

- The meaning of my posts on SNS to those who matter to me is that I care for them
- I want to tell them on SNS that my concern for them is constitutive of my identity
- On SNS, I want to tell those I care for that the existence of others defines me
- The world I show to the others I care for on SNS is the world I take care of. This world contributes to the definition of my being
- On SNS, I want those who care to know that my existence is nothing without them, and that my existence is for their sake

---

<sup>260</sup> P.K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*.

<sup>261</sup> See Heidegger's *On Being and Time* and (especially) Articles II and IV of "The Augsburg Confession" in *The Book of Concord*, trans. By Theodore Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959.

<sup>262</sup> Attributed to Anselm

<sup>263</sup> Jiayin Qi et al., "Theories of Social Media: Philosophical Foundations," 100.

- The moments of my timeline on SNS show the world I care of
- My posts are a way to tell to the others I care for that I am nothing but “being-with” them and being for them
- On SNS, I want to express that I am nothing but a “being-with-others” that is encountered in the shared surrounding world being taken care of
- Any knowledge about myself is grounded in “being-with-others,” as represented by the posts on the timeline on my SNS
- To understand me is to understand the way I am with the others in the world and the way they make my existence meaningful, as shown on the timeline of my SNS
- On the posts of my SNS, you can see how I see the world and myself through the others I care for
- My posts on SNS show that I am nothing but a being-in-the-world to be related to others<sup>264</sup>

Certainly, it is useful for the worlds of faith and spirituality, which some define as a question of being,<sup>265</sup> and science and technology to seek each other out and enter into conversation.<sup>266</sup> Anecdotally, there is an increasingly noisy call from many in the researcher’s own denomination<sup>267</sup> for a new paradigm to address the influence of new technologies on meanings, values, social and religious frameworks and the derived norms.<sup>268</sup> Accordingly, the aforementioned influence has implications for faith communities as young people increasingly view the world as a constantly present field. This particular world view determines what experiences are acquired and directs actions.<sup>269</sup>

The research called for a qualitative, interpretivist approach. People are complex, and intricate, and their interactions are unique; hence, different people can “experience and understand the same ‘objective reality’ in very different ways and have their own, often very

---

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>265</sup> Ben Van Lier et al., “Technology Encounters Spirituality.” *Studies in Spirituality* 24 (2014): 341, doi:10.2143/SIS.24.0.3053502.

<sup>266</sup> Ben Van Lier et al., “Technology Encounters Spirituality,” 342.

<sup>267</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

<sup>268</sup> See also Ben Van Lier et al., 343.

<sup>269</sup> Ben Van Lier et al., 347.

different, reasons for acting in the world...<sup>270</sup> From a philosophical perspective, this meant entering the research with the understanding that there are many ways of interpreting the world such that there can be multiple realities (i.e. the idea of reality as a social construct), and no single point of view can ever describe the entire picture.<sup>271</sup> This theoretical framework is appropriate for the research matter at hand given that it is rooted in two key beliefs, namely, a relativist ontology that “perceives reality as inter-subjectively that is based on meanings and understandings on social and experiential levels”<sup>272</sup> and a transactional or subjectivist epistemology that recognizes that “people cannot be separated from their knowledge; therefore there is a clear link between the researcher and the research subject.”<sup>273</sup>

“The study of social phenomena requires an understanding of the social worlds that people inhabit; worlds which people have already interpreted by the meanings they produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their shared everyday activities.”<sup>274</sup> What’s more, social media may undermine plausibility structures that are defined as “the social context in which any cognitive or normative definition of reality is plausible.”<sup>275</sup> Of the many choices that impact how we see reality, Peter Berger says “modernization leads to a huge transformation in the human condition from fate to choice.”<sup>276</sup> Further, the idea that “a singular religious tradition should dictate what its adherents believe or practice becomes anathema.”<sup>277</sup>

---

<sup>270</sup>Zeynep Yad, "What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?" *Quora*, June 6, 2017, accessed June 17, 2018, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-positivism-and-interpretivism-in-social-research>.

<sup>271</sup> Zeynep Yad, “What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?”

<sup>272</sup> John Dudovskiy, "Interpretivism (interpretivist) Research Philosophy," *Research-Methodology*, accessed June 16, 2018, <https://research-methodology.net/research-philosophy/interpretivism/>.

<sup>273</sup> John Dudovskiy, "Interpretivism.”

<sup>274</sup> *Philosophy of Research: Do All Social Scientists Use the Same Methodology?*, London: Sage Publications Inc., 2017, <http://methods.sagepub.com/base/download/StageSection/605>, accessed May 24, 2019.

<sup>275</sup> P.K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*, 820.

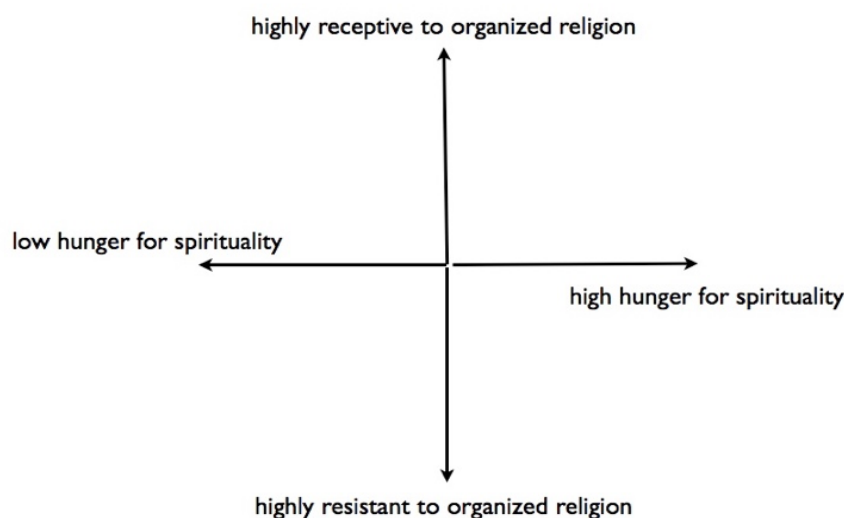
<sup>276</sup> Peter Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*, (Boston, MA: De Gruyter Moulton, 2014), 5.

<sup>277</sup> P.K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*, 820.

## Shift in Belief Systems

Several themes emerged from the research data. The common theme for each and all of the participants was the shifting of belief systems. Each participant experienced shifts in their belief systems and the articulated reasons for those shifts can form the sub-themes of syncretic behaviour, interaction and world view, trust, identity, living with integrity, silence, faith community as resource, and meaning making. At the outset of the research, it was necessary to attempt to gain insight into the religious and spiritual beliefs of the participants and if those beliefs had shifted, before moving into an exploration of what accounted for those evolutions.

As noted in the findings, each interview began with a screen share and asking participants to locate themselves on John Roberto's grid. Further probing questions including asking why they had located themselves there and if they would have always located themselves there.



278

Of particular interest, in the context of this study, is the how spirituality and religious beliefs are

---

<sup>278</sup> Mary E. Hess, "A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation," *Dialog* 53, no. 1 (March 2014): pp. 12-22, 18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12084>.

embodied or disembodied in a virtual, specifically social media, context. Mary Hess pushes against the idea that faith formation cannot occur in a digital space with various counter examples:

What if there are ways in which digital spaces can be experienced as deeply relational and embodied, while at the same time there are examples of religious environments that are *not* relational and embodied? Such examples would contradict the underlying assumptions and invite movement into a space that might truly be *constructive* of cross-categorical meaning, not simply reflective of it.<sup>279 280</sup>

Indeed, just over half of those interviewed were more receptive to organized religion and “hungrier” for spirituality. Further, participants who were hungrier for spirituality were also more receptive to organized religion while no participant was more receptive to organized religion without a shift towards an increase in hunger for spirituality. One interpretation of the observed data could be that as their hunger for spirituality increased, participants were more receptive to organized religion as a means to further explore and/or give expression to their spirituality. That said, giving expression to one’s spirituality can involve a great deal of struggle, as noted in Fowler’s stage 4 (intuitive-reflective faith). None of the participants ignored the conflicts that can occur when one’s belief system is challenged, a key characteristic of Fowler’s

---

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Relationships can develop through social media for a variety of reasons. For some, it is a byproduct of using a particular social media platform, for others it may come as a group gathers virtually around a hobby or particular interest or perhaps develops out of a specific goal such as finding a partner, loving relationship, or roommate. Various platforms gear themselves towards various means and ends. For everyday life and friendship one may use Facebook; for career oriented goals or needs, one could use LinkedIn; Flickr for hobbies; eHarmony for dating, and so on. Genuine connection need not, if ever, require an in-person experience. Further, evaluating a person’s genuineness or trustworthiness uses different cues virtually than in-person.

stage three (synthetic-conventional faith), but rather seemed to lean into the conflict as they learned to be self-sufficient and explored their identity.

What is clear from the study, is that cross-categorical thinking is necessary and imperative. Hess notes “that the struggle to embrace the deeply contradictory reality of religious institutions is often too much for people, who flee either into fundamentalist religious spaces, or flee religious spaces all together.”<sup>281</sup> This phenomenon was observed in this study in so far as many participants moved from the *physical* faith community environment to the virtual in a search for an environment that allowed for question and critique, reflection and contemplation. Many participants described the faith community environment as rigid and rules based – in other words, an environment that did not allow for a fluidity of movement between categories and found the necessary relationality for engaging deeper religious and spiritual exploration and questioning.

### **Living with Integrity**

For those connected with faith communities, in particular, the dynamic interplay of piety, embedded theology, and deliberative theology<sup>282</sup> rose to the forefront. Participant 11 offered

To be religious is to be tied to a system – a group of stories, practices, beliefs, an organization. I am averse to the ELCIC [Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada] telling me what to believe. I find the question “what does this mean?” empowering. Now that I have children, teaching my kids spiritual practices has influenced my own spirituality immeasurably. Whether engaging texts or online resources or courses [...] I’m looking for deeper pieces.

---

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> See Summary of Howard Stone and James Duke (pp 36-39) in *Spiritual and Theological Reflection* by Thomas St. James O’Connor and Elizabeth Meakes.

Piety, embedded theology and personal experience can compete with one another and the maintenance and exacerbation of a ranking system of ourselves and others exists to reassure ourselves of our value; all easily observed phenomena on social media. We desperately watch how people respond to our tweets and we dare not say something that causes others to shame us.<sup>283</sup> Participant 6 spoke about spirituality as an antidote to a “shame hangover” saying “with all of my flaws, religion told me I didn’t belong. Spirituality dismantles the embedded systems that assign identities” and Participant 7 said “there is so much in the world that challenges self-worth.”

Indeed, the preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber says that knowing that God values us more than anything – and that God has no ranking system – is a difficult reality to accept.<sup>284</sup> Dialogue questions here harken back to our understandings of who we are, whose we are, our value in God’s eyes, and what is important in life.

The right to know and be known is a basic human need. [...] even those who are expressing mundane thoughts reveal a hunger for the ties of relationship. And more important, they expose the undeniable longing for the bigger sacred something that lies beyond the semiotic of “somethingness.” All of this bears more than a passing resemblance to honest biblical faith. An organic and vital faith gives us the ability to make imagined into real, virtuality into actuality. And what else is revival if not the willingness to see what God wants to do and then heading off in that direction?<sup>285</sup>

Accordingly, this has implications for religious and spiritual beliefs and, in particular, the understanding of what it is and how it finds expression. Whether we understand religious and

---

<sup>283</sup> Referenced in TH648Z.

<sup>284</sup> Nadia Bolz Weber, *Comparing Ourselves to Others; A Sermon on Pride, Despair and Scapegoats*, October 26, 2016, accessed November 6, 2017, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2016/10/comparing-ourselves-to-others-a-sermon-on-pride-despair-and-scapegoats>. Referenced in TH761E, Martin Luther University College, Fall Term, 2017.

<sup>285</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival*, (The Crown Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2012), 181-182, referenced in TH761E.



spiritual beliefs as guideposts for learning, life journey, or response and openness, they are not static. In short, religious and spiritual beliefs can shape who we are and how we move through this life.<sup>286</sup>

How participants understand religion and spirituality is crucial. Participant 3 offered that religion was exclusively about “adhering to doctrine” and participant 8 offered that religion was about “following rules and tenets.” While these viewpoints were not necessarily surprising, within the interviews there emerged an overwhelming impression from 9 participants that their resistance to organized religion came from seeing it as the embodiment of an oppressive institution particularly as it set forth its definitions or explanations of how the world works. “I believe in a higher power,” said participant 3, “but the [faith] community I was a part of did not allow for any interpretation. It was about rules.” Participant 9 offered “I have an active belief in God but religion should *not* be prescriptive.” Nine participants disagreed with the statement that “there was only one true faith” with participant 4 offering “no one group has a monopoly on the truth.”

An overwhelming majority of participants (10) stated that they considered themselves to be spiritual. When asked the question “Describe what being spiritual means to you,” 6 participants articulated their understanding through a sensory lens. “Spirituality is choosing to live life as committed to something greater than self and to the earth, ” said participant 8. Participant 1 said that spirituality is “describing within, and even more than what’s sensory,” by which they meant that which could be seen and or touched, and participant 9 offered that spirituality is “understanding within and how I fit into the world.” Outside of the sensory articulation, three

---

<sup>286</sup> Daniel Erlander, *Baptized, We Live*, Holden Village, 1981.

participants expressed similar sentiments to participant 2 who stated that spirituality was “diving into a faith that’s not black and white.”

Theoretically, Charles Taylor’s work *A Secular Age* may offer insight. In the work, Taylor describes what he names “the buffered self,” namely “...essentially the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement. And disengagement is frequently carried out in relation to one’s whole surroundings, natural and social.”<sup>287</sup> Taylor posits that “buffered individuals” determine their lives “without ever sensing a need to consult a higher authority or to adhere to institutional doctrines. [Hence,] individuals are increasingly less likely to affiliate with religious organizations because such institutions provide little explanatory value or social capital outside of what self-sufficient individuals can obtain on their own.”<sup>288</sup> As participant 8 expressed: “all the information I need to make my own...informed...choices is right at my fingertips. 24/7. There’s an app for everything.”

As participants each navigated the complexity of their context, it was interesting to note what guided participants’ behavior. Relationships, spirituality, and conscience figured prominently. Participant 11 spoke passionately about spirituality as “giving back” to the world through “love and acts for others.” It was clear from the participants that their behavior is guided by more, if at all in one particular instance, than religious rules. Participant 3 spoke strongly about this offering:

Religion is about rules. And it seems top down. If I’m going to do something for someone it’s going to be because I want to, not because I have to out of fear or coercion. I’m not trying to appease some higher power. Or some church. Or the morality police.

---

<sup>287</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>288</sup> Paul McClure, “Modding My Religion: Exploring the Effects of Digital Technology on Religion and Spirituality,” ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018, 82.

Two clear findings that emerged from the follow-up interviews were, first, that the traditional institution of the church was no longer functioning with the authority it has enjoyed in past generations and, second, that many interview participants rejected the church defined boundary markers of religious identity while still believing in God and practicing that belief outside of church gatherings.

I need non-judgemental freedom to practice my faith. I haven't found that yet in church. It's more important to be a good person than to be a good attender. (Participant 8)

“The reliance on one’s own conscience to guide behaviour rather than religious rules, the importance of friends and family, and the increasing significance of social media and popular culture (Catto 2014; Beaudoin 2000)”<sup>289</sup> each exert influence. In part this can be explained with participants’ increasing curiosity as they age coupled with an increase in opportunities to experience new things (i.e. school, work, travel). Background is also important as it serves as a lens for interpretation and understanding. “Nothing can be encountered independent of our background understanding. Every encounter is an interpretation based on our background.”<sup>290</sup> Thus, our being and how we understand ourselves, and who we understand ourselves to be, is informed by pre-text (possibly a false or presumed purpose) and context (the surrounding environment). This was observed at several points during the participant interviews, particularly in relation to the interplay of sexual orientation and religiosity.

### **Faith Community as Resource**

---

<sup>289</sup> Rebecca Catto, *What can we say about today's British religious young person?*

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

There are varied explanations from scholars as to what could account for declines in religiosity and religious participation. Putnam and Campell, for example, posit that social and political movements can produce reactionary anti-religious sentiments in oscillating fashion.<sup>291</sup> They attribute this to a “slackening of institutional commitment” and a “creeping secularism” among youth who have an “antipathy toward organized religion.”<sup>292</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell observed that openness and tolerance, undergirded by theology, may be contributing to the declining numbers.<sup>293</sup> While Smith applauds this openness to diversity, he worries that this culture has failed them leaving them “lacking in conviction or direction” and in “larger visions of what is true and real and good, in both the private and the public realms.”<sup>294</sup>

David Haskell and Kevin Flatt, of Wilfrid Laurier University and Redeemer University College respectively, recently came to a similar conclusion after a study on the decline of mainline Protestantism in Canada.<sup>295</sup> Haskell and Flatt concluded that decline of mainline protestant faith communities can be directly attributed to their more liberal theology and belief. While anti-institutionalism and the shifting scriptural hermeneutic of individuals are factors, as we seek to better understand young people, research indicates that there is an increase in young people responding to their parents’ religion.<sup>296</sup> Richard Flory notes that while *Gen Xers* do want to live out religious commitments, they resist aligning themselves with old ideologies and following the social implications of different religious teachings.<sup>297</sup> Further, there is “a move for Gen Xers

---

<sup>291</sup> Putnam and Campell 2012, 566.

<sup>292</sup> Putnam and Campell; see also McClure, 78.

<sup>293</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition*.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>295</sup> David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy," *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 4 (2016): , doi:10.1007/s13644-016-0255-4. Note: the church I currently serve (St. Peter’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Kitchener, ON) was one of the participants in this study.

<sup>296</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition*.

<sup>297</sup> Richard W. Flory and Donald Earl Miller, *Gen X Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 247.

away from rationalistic, propositional truth claims reliant on the proper exegesis of written text to truth validated by experience in the religious community.”<sup>298</sup>

Researcher Allen Downey (2014) argued that internet use accounts for the twenty percent decrease in religious affiliation since 1990.<sup>299,300</sup> Downey analyzed the data from the General Social Survey, an American sociological survey that has measured attitudes and demographics since 1972 and attempted to determine how the drop in religious affiliation correlated with such things as socioeconomic status, education, and religious upbringing in the United States of America.<sup>301</sup> Each of these areas did have an impact on religious affiliation but could not, Allen discovered, account for the totality of the decline. “In the 1980s, Internet use was essentially zero, but in 2010, 53 percent of the population spent two hours per week online and 25 percent surfed for more than 7 hours. This increase closely matches the decrease in religious affiliation. In fact, Downey calculates that it can account for about 25 percent of the drop.”<sup>302</sup> Still, correlation does not equal causality.

The majority of interview participants in this study (9 of the 11) demonstrated and articulated an increased fascination with spirituality, which Heelas et. al posit as a reason for religious decline. Some may refer to this cohort as the *spiritual but not religious*. Spirituality, for this cohort, can involve anything from Jesus, to art, to music, or yoga. It is often about searching more than dwelling, namely, looking for meaning and something to believe in rather than accepting, for example, the religion of one’s parents despite its familiarity. Nine participants

---

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>299</sup> P.K. McClure, *Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age*, 821.

<sup>300</sup> Allen B. Downey, “Religious Affiliation, Education and Internet Use,” arXiv:1403.5534 [stat], 10, retrieved February 15, 2017, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1403.5534>.

<sup>301</sup> ArXiv, “How the Internet Is Taking Away America's Religion,” *MIT Technology Review*, September 19, 2014, , accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/526111/how-the-internet-is-taking-away-americas-religion/>.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

disagreed with the statement that “there was only one true faith” with participant 4 offering “no one group has a monopoly on the truth.” Participant 10 referenced all of the negative connotations – the “baggage” – that religion has, particularly its rigidity and how that was incompatible with their changing context.

All of the participants spoke, in varying degrees, of the significance of new experiences and the challenges that accompany changes in life stages to their spirituality. As one participant noted, for them it was the experience of moving away from home to attend school that was particularly significant. Participant 7 said,

When I moved out – when I was on my own...I mean away from home – that was a big deal. I found myself thinking more critically about things in a different [school] environment.

Indeed, for many of the participants, as with emerging adults, it was the experience of moving away from home, particularly when attending post-secondary school, that exposed them in a more formal way to worldviews different from their own, particularly around issues of social justice. That said, six of the eleven participants referenced an exposure to ideas and views different from their own through the broad reach of social media in which they were engaging well before moving out. Three participants spoke about career choices that gave them pause and provided the impetus to begin reflecting on larger questions of purpose and what they wanted to contribute to society, and five participants specifically referenced an illness or death that brought heightened reflections about an afterlife or eternity. Participant 1 articulated that it was a personal event that lead to disillusionment.

When I was in high school, I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. I was in and out of the hospital. I stopped going to church. I was disillusioned not just with the church but also and maybe more that there is a God. Who or what I put my faith in has changed.

Whether through moving out, entering post-secondary education, a career decision, or event, participants revised their perspectives on faith. It is remarkable then, that when a number of the study participants had questions, many of them did not go to the faith communities they were a part of, nor did they see the institution as a resource. Further, ten of the participants identified as being “cradle” Christians, meaning that they had been brought up in the context of a faith community, with seven noting their active participation – at their parents’ behest – of attending Sunday School. Still, at many of the aforementioned significant junctures, as beliefs are questioned and reflected upon, participants found organized religion a vehicle that did not allow for that fuller exploration and/or expression either because of constraints, perceived constraints, or beliefs and practices that were incongruent with their lived experiences, specifically an often experienced judgmentalism, creating a gap, that pushed participants towards exploring their spirituality through other vehicles. As noted in the findings, a number of participants tried to articulate the disconnect they felt with “their” faith communities by speaking about how the faith communities they were familiar with cared about different things than they did.

The idea of community, regardless of the benefits, had four of the participants experiencing the tension between individual libertarianism and utopian collectivism. Franklin Foer lifts this out as he speaks about communes, what they tried to accomplish, how they failed, and makes the observation that what communes failed to accomplish, computers would finish.<sup>303</sup> The communes of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s desired, essentially, a sense of wholeness, of oneness. The spirit of counterculture and technology have each rubbed off on each other.<sup>304</sup> “The idea [of the commune] was that you’d go back to the land and you’d get some sort of new

---

<sup>303</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 22.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

consciousness that would show how everything relates to everything else and that living in this collective sort of existence would make us all much better human beings.”<sup>305</sup> Participant 3 noted how spirituality did this for them saying,

Spirituality is about connectedness to one’s surroundings...nature...spaces...[pause] As I think more critically about things, particularly when I am out in the natural world, I understand [better] within and how I fit into the world.

Terminologies like wholeness, one-ness, co-operation, sharing, authenticity, and “a self-conscious awareness of our place in a larger system,”<sup>306</sup> were words and themes articulated with various nuance by the participants, speak to the aforementioned tension. With technology, Foer posits, we really can exist in a commune; the world really can be one.

Philosophically, it may speak to the tension between the human condition in a virtual world and the human condition in the physical world. J.C.R. Licklider, when explaining how his invention of the internet would ease social isolation, reportedly said “‘life will be happier for the on-line individual’ and how Tim Berners-Lee described the possibilities of the World Wide Web he created [saying] ‘hope in life comes from the interconnections among all the people in the world.’”<sup>307</sup>

Foer wonders if social media, while enabling individual expression, could well be destroying individual forward thinking. “If you know your thoughts are being read you are less likely to engage with possibly, I don’t know what to say, just like risky thoughts, risky ideas. That could put a stifle on all sorts of things: scientific advancements, advancements in

---

<sup>305</sup> Angela Chen, "Franklin Foer on How Silicon Valley Is Threatening Our Humanity," *The Verge*, September 10, 2017, accessed April 3, 2018, <http://www.theverge.com/2017/9/10/16263366/franklin-foer-book-world-without-mind-silicon-valley-technology-publishing-journalism>.

<sup>306</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 23.

<sup>307</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 26, referenced in TH648X and TH648Z.



psychology, et cetera, et cetera.”<sup>308</sup> Despite Foer’s concern, seven participants in this study, perhaps because they’ve grown up with social media or have spent a significant part of their life familiar with it, are unphased at the thought of turning around an idea in a *public sphere*, perhaps because of their growing up with social media (i.e. hyperconnectivity as a part of life). This applied both to matters of new ideas or faith.

Authenticity was significant for ten of the participants. And while the majority of participants expressed an openness to organized religion, five participants experienced a lesser welcome into Christian community for what they perceived as a failure to meet certain predetermined criteria. Participant 6 captured this when they said “With all of my flaws, religion told me I didn’t belong.” Participant 9 said

“Before I came out, when I was exploring my sexuality, I found strength through social media that I didn’t find in the church. I wanted to know what the Bible said and what God thinks without all the judgement and baggage.”

Whether perceived or real, there was simply no room in their institutions for the participants belief systems to shift or evolve.<sup>309</sup>

One wonders if, given that the majority of participants when speaking about religion, used words such as “rules,” “doctrine,” “adherence,” “prescriptive,” “potential manipulation,” “tied to a system,” and “accountability,” faith communities might do well to allow space for the mysteriousness of the divine and the sacred. Participants were not longing for answers they wanted to hear, necessarily, but to be heard and allowed space to explore questions; it is in a

---

<sup>308</sup> Brett McKay in Franklin Foer, Podcast #372: World Without Mind.

<sup>309</sup> It is disheartening that so many of the study participants had consistently negative experiences surrounding, in particular, gender and sexuality issues. To be clear, there are churches in Canada that support LGBTQIA+ persons. For an initial offering of resources, visit [www.reconcilingworks.org](http://www.reconcilingworks.org) or [holycrosslutheran.ca](http://holycrosslutheran.ca)

sense entering into an interactive mystery. Participant 9 offered “journaling and discussing my spirituality with friends...thinking about that stuff...is what I do. My childhood church had so many rules – like from the elders, or about communion. I’ve become way more critical now and so look elsewhere.” The philosopher Aristotle is reported to have said “nature abhors a vacuum,” by which he meant that nature requires every space to be filled with something. The participants in this study had questions, many of them significant, that they wanted to engage spiritually but no fewer than seven of the participants felt that faith communities would not be open to their questions. This feeling came through experiences, presumptions, and fear. And so a gap, or a vacuum, was created, and, if Aristotle is correct, that needed to be filled. For many participants, social media stepped into that gap providing venue and forum for exploration. “Social media has really shaped my faith. There were times in my life where it provided a forum for reading and questioning” said participant 10. Whether about seeking truth, exploring the intersection of faith and life, participants were looking for more than prescribed answers – they were looking to engage, to contemplate, and to go deeper, and they were looking for space and forum and, at times, companions, through and with which to do this.

### **Silence and Silencing**

An unexpected theme emerged over the course of the interviews: silence and silencing. “As metaphors for privilege and oppression, to speak and be heard is to have power over one's life. To be silenced is to have that power denied. [...] Silence is thus emblematic of

powerlessness in our society.”<sup>310</sup> Silencing takes many forms. In the context of this study, some of the participants spoke about remaining silent or being silenced and the reasons for that.

#### Participant 1

I grew up in the church. But I’m agnostic now. Religion is all about following rules. Coloring in the lines. Conforming. When I think about who I am – and being authentic is really important to me – I’ve seen the church that says everyone is welcome push people away who don’t...[pause]...fit a mold or certain image. I feel I can’t really be me.

Participant 5 was pointed:

My appearance doesn’t line up with the church. Not even close. I mean, my world is diverse. But I don’t look like the majority of the people in my faith community. [Interviewer asks what do you mean by look like?] The way I dress. The way I act. [...] I hung around with people that people in the church thought were bad influences. I’m tired of the church’s disapproval. It sucks. And that was for little things. I can’t imagine what they’d say about big things.

The reasons for being silenced or feeling silenced can be quite varied. Sometimes personal exploration combines with a particular event or events, as with participant 9:

I go to church to appease my mom. I am really uncomfortable with how the church feels about homosexuality. They hate me before they know me. I think [religious] people want to be good, do good, help people. But they can also be judgemental. Use harsh language. [...] When I was a kid in elementary school I asked a question about Jesus loving gay people and it was never answered. I’m not out publicly and I’ve got a family member who is really aggressive about the church. Inclusivity is really important to me. When my church voted to not allow same-sex blessings, I checked out. I don’t have that interpretation of Scripture. I don’t like the gatekeeper piece. I’m not gay but that’s my neighbour. And the stuff that people were saying before the vote. There is no place for my voice in that community.

Experiences that involve being unable to tell one’s story or authentically explore questions relating to the intersection of life and religious and spiritual beliefs are particularly distressing. Stories are important – for meaning making, for exploration, for life. Stories are that which can

---

<sup>310</sup>C.E. Ahrens, (2006), Being Silenced: The Impact of Negative Social Reactions on the Disclosure of Rape, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 38: 31-34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-006-9069-9>, accessed October 25, 2020.

lift us up and empower, or can form the prison which confines us. In particular, not being able to engage in the telling of one's story, the extension of which is being heard, for the participants always injured. The participants who spoke about being silenced interpreted the silencing as a metric of their value; in other words, they felt they had no value in their faith communities and that they were "less than." Participant 9 noted that the best thing for them about social media is that they "found inclusivity around LGBTQ issues" that they hadn't found in their faith community.

Silencing can take many forms that include harassment, being cut out of conversations, being dismissed, or devalued through not having a place within, in this case, a faith community. Simon Sinek, notes there is a desire to belong, or fit in, with a group.

Our desire to feel like we belong is so strong that we seek it out. This is what gangs offer a teenager in the inner city. With no strong family unit and no strong school bonds, a young, disenfranchised man or woman will join a gang to feel like a part of something. That sense of belonging is important to us because with a sense of belonging, with a sense that we are surrounded by people who understand us and see the world as we see it, we feel more comfortable. We feel safer. We're even able to form bonds of trust much easier.<sup>311</sup>

[And]

The goal is not to bend or change ourselves so we fit the norm; the goal is to find the group in which we are the norm. No matter who we are, no matter what our values or beliefs, our tastes or proclivities, there is an entire culture or subculture out there just like us. I learned that, instead of expending energy to fit into the group, it's better to expend energy to find the group in which you fit.<sup>312</sup>

We are social beings, then, wanting to fit in or belong. Not belonging can also be a form of silencing. That said, speaking one's truth can have consequences for relationships, for fitting in,

---

<sup>311</sup> Simon Sinek, "Fitting In: Simon Sinek," AskMen (October 12, 2010).

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

and, depending on the reaction of other individuals or communities, can impact our religious and spiritual beliefs.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault contemplated the concept of power. Specifically, he noted disciplinary power, biopolitical power, and – most thought-provoking in the context of this study – sovereign power.<sup>313</sup> Sovereign power is the power that emanates through a leader who believes that, as leader, they are either exception to, or maker of, the law. “Pastoral power is an extension of disciplinary power, and an alternative perspective to sovereign power, which is focused on repression or having power over. Pastoral power is a productive power that produces subjects. It is concerned with both individuals and totalization, and in so doing produces the submissive subject.”<sup>314</sup> As the sheep are dependent on a shepherd, obedience is prized in this relationship particularly as it relates to theological or spiritual matters such as salvation.<sup>315</sup> The dynamic that is created, then, is unequal, strengthening those in leadership (not necessarily singular) and disempowering the “sheep” or the “flock.” To that end, and noteworthy, the participants in this study, particularly those who had experienced negative interactions with their faith community, were reclaiming their power, in a sense, through a collective challenge to a historical monopoly on information, taking hold of relevant information themselves, and refusing to accept information and claims *carte blanche*.

---

<sup>313</sup> See Paul Rabinow, ed, *The Foucault Reader: An introduction to Foucault’s thought* (London, Penguin, 1991).

<sup>314</sup> Leona M English, *Foucauldian pastoral power and feminist organizations: a research direction for adult education*, St Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada. Paper presented at SCUTREA 34th Annual Conference, University of Sheffield, 6-8 July 2004, <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003587.htm>, accessed January 3, 2021.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

“There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”<sup>316</sup>

In other words, for Foucault, knowledge and power are inextricably intertwined. Foucault developed theories that explored the relationship between power and knowledge and, consequently, how these were used as forms of social control. “What authorities claim as 'scientific knowledge' are really just means of social control. Foucault shows how, for instance, in the eighteenth century 'madness' was used to categorize and stigmatize not just the mentally ill but the poor, the sick, the homeless and, indeed, anyone whose expressions of individuality were unwelcome.”<sup>317</sup> Foucault writes:

The community acquired an ethical power of segregation, which permitted it to eject, as into another world, all forms of social uselessness. It was in this *other world*, encircled by the sacred powers of labor, that madness would assume the status we know attribute to it. If there is, in classical madness, something which refers elsewhere, and to *other things*, it is no longer because the madman comes from the world of the irrational and bears its stigmata; rather, it is because he crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic.

In fact, the relation between the practice of confinement and the insistence on work is not defined by economic conditions; far from it. A moral perception sustains and animates it. When the Board of Trade published its report on the poor in which it proposed the means ‘to rend them useful to the public,’ it was made quite clear that the origin of poverty was neither scarcity of commodities nor unemployment, but “the weakening of discipline and the relaxation of morals.”<sup>318</sup>

Dr. Mary Philip of Martin Luther University College notes that “with knowledge comes power, and knowledges can become subjugated knowledges.”<sup>319</sup> Steven Ogden says that

Likewise, in churches, the shepherds have a tendency to exercise epistemological power over the sheep. Church leaders are regarded as bearers or guardians of knowledge who

---

<sup>316</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York NY: Vintage Books, 1978), 27.

<sup>317</sup> Philip Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*. Kettering: Index Books, 2004, 187. Referenced in TH648Z.

<sup>318</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2002), 54.

<sup>319</sup> Mary Philip, TH648Z: *Other Ways of Reading, Interpreting, and Being*, Martin Luther University College, Fall Term, 2018.

have been divinely authorized as shepherds, for shepherds speak to the sheep on behalf of *the* good shepherd. This means that the church community—that is, both the church leaders and the congregants—has a tendency to interpret leaders’ interpretations as *true* and to develop a culture of obedience. Moreover, a church leader’s divinely authorized epistemic authority and oversight of a church’s formal and informal conversations (i.e., its discursive practices) are further reinforced by rituals and practices, like commissioning, ordination, and enthronement, that increase the sense of authority for these leaders. These rituals and the elevated language we use to describe almost all actions and relationships in the church serve to obscure power relations, as the complex relations between leaders and followers are colored by a piety that is inflected by words like *sacrifice* and *obedience*.<sup>320</sup>

The participants in this study who felt silenced, either because of their experiences or perceptions of their contexts, were seeking inclusion and recognition. Some might term this as “wanting to be seen” which is apt since this is a critical component of belonging whether in a community or in a society. I wonder if being seen is a part of being human. That said, I would be remiss as a researcher and theologian if I did not acknowledge that silence can also be a positive choice, as in periods of contemplation for example, and is a fundamental right. Everyone has the basic, fundamental right to silence, particularly when significant power differentials are at play and the consequences significant or extreme: torturous situations, disciplinary processes, court cases, issues of life or death, to name but a few. While things like torture, in the literal sense, lie outside of the scope of this paper, it is the voices of the unheard and the unseen – literally and figuratively – the sheep, that continue to remain in sharp focus. Those who *have* historically and typically been heard in the context of this study include people and ideals alike: pastors, faith communities, capitol “C” church, ecclesial traditions, homophobia, stereotypes, praxis, doctrine, and various hermeneutics.

---

<sup>320</sup> Steven G. Ogden, *Ekklesia As Open Space: Responding to the Church’s Power Problem*, January 28, 2019, <https://theotherjournal.com/2019/01/28/ekklesia-as-open-space-responding-to-church-power-problem/#easy-footnote-bottom-4-11792>, accessed January 3, 2021.

## Meaning-Making

It is noteworthy that accompanying word “meaning” is the word “make.” Richard Kearney writes that “the ancient term for wisdom, *sapientia*, comes from *sapere*, to taste. *Sapere-savourer-savior*. This epistemological line reminds us that our deepest knowing is tasting and touching. [...] Ordinary language knows this, and philosophical language is no more than an extrapolation of what we already know ‘deep down.’”<sup>321</sup> Perhaps the words “meaning” and “knowledge,” then, can find commonality in the term “make” through its association with the both with the tactile and the imaginative act.

We, as human beings, both subject and object always and forever, somehow observe the diversity of human experience and assimilate it into some kind of framework; we make sense (another metaphorical use). Humans make both things and frameworks, and the frameworks serve as conceptual strategies and patterns for bringing clarity and order to the things, and thus place those things in our broader experience.<sup>322</sup>

Ross is correct when he notes this as a component of being human and as such, it is “human action directed to an end [and] some broader interpretive horizon.”<sup>323</sup>

Meaning making is a way forward that can navigate tensions in formation, namely validation, authority, empathy, constraints, contradiction, and digital spaces can, indeed, be experienced as deeply relational.<sup>324</sup> Again, adults aged 18 - 35 find themselves in a very characteristically unique phase of life. “The features marking this stage of life are intense identity exploration, instability, a focus on self, feeling in limbo or in transition or in between, and a sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope.”<sup>325</sup> Ross suggests that meaning

---

<sup>321</sup> Richard Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015), 16. Referenced in TH648X.

<sup>322</sup> Jameson Ross, *Making Meaning*, <https://www.pastortheologians.com/articles/2020/4/2/making-meaning>

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Mary E. Hess, *A New Culture of Learning*, 17.

<sup>325</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 6.



making – birthed, in part, from reflecting on our experiences – come from our “creatureliness,” or “made-in-the-image-of-Godness.”<sup>326</sup>

Our making meaning or making sense or making something out of a tough situation is an aspect of our participation in the triune God who made us. Making meaning out of our experience, imaginatively looking for links and drawing out significance, brings about newness: a new view of whatever situation, yes, but more than that, a new person, insofar as we are no longer who we were before this experience and act of making meaning, but also a new opportunity for meaning-making for those who interact with our meaning-making.<sup>327</sup>

As participant 7 shared: “It’s strange. As I thought about identity, sexuality, and orientation, I sensed a pull towards a greater understanding of myself and who God made me to be. I keep thinking about God’s character.”

Contemplation, arguably, is intrinsic to meaning making, if only because it includes the process of pondering the intersection of faith and lived experience. Henri Nouwen posits that faith comes about along three polarities, namely, solitude which allows a person to be open to God,<sup>328</sup> hospitality that allows a person to experience God, and prayer that allows for a spiritual reality.<sup>329</sup> The psychologist Gordon Allport posits that faith emerges from meaning making and moves an individual through various stages, the final of which is the falling away of immature faith assumptions.<sup>330</sup> While forming religious beliefs is not intrinsic or exclusive to contemplation, contemplation is necessary to derive meaning from the lived experience, and to locate themselves in and in relation to the world and, potentially, the sacred. Participant 5

---

<sup>326</sup> Jameson Ross, *Making Meaning*.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, in *Ministry and Spirituality*, edited by Henri Nouwen, 170-286, New York: Continuum, 1998, 199.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>330</sup> Gordon Allport, *The Individual and His Religion: A Psychological Interpretation*, (New York: MacMillan, 1950), 57.

offered that spirituality – a term they used interchangeably with meaning making - was a moving away from that which is “embedded in systems,” particularly “politics,” to “connecting with others and the world. This is one way to learn who you are and how you fit into the world...by examining yourself in relation to something or someone else.”

Diane Hockridge, quoting George Lindbeck in part notes that formation “...concerns the development of a deep and personally committed appropriation of a comprehensive and coherent outlook on life.”<sup>331</sup> Seven participants articulated how they felt that the intense curiosity to explore and engage their surroundings, or the world, had not been nurtured in the faith communities of their childhoods (participant 4 noted this stopped “around Grade 5”) and that, according to participant 2, the “church was out of its depth.” Social media, for ten of the participants, has filled this gap and invited a curiosity for further exploration and examination.

Intrinsic to meaning making for nine of the eleven interview participants was a mixture of gratitude and recognizing and alleviating suffering. Gratitude is from the Latin word *gratus*, which means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness (depending on the context).<sup>332</sup> It is a deep appreciation that goes beyond a thank you. Participant 5, speaking in the context of the pandemic, reflected on “the good” that has emerged during this time, saying:

I have to say that it’s brought a lot of disconnected families together. My own family usually doesn’t eat together all that often. Our schedules are crazy. But we’re eating together more because we’re all stuck in the house together. Sometimes they stand on my last nerve but I’m thankful.

Participant 5, when their response was probed when I asked *how can one be thankful for people who stand on your last nerve*, noted how in the process of being thankful, of gratitude, they

---

<sup>331</sup> Diane Hockridge, “What’s the Problem? Spiritual Formation in Distance and Online Theological Education,” *Journal of Christian Education* 54, no. 1 (May 2011): pp. 25-38, 26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002196571105400104>.

<sup>332</sup> Merriam-Webster, 2019.

realized that the source of the thing for which they were grateful lied, in part, outside of themselves. In this case, it was the act of coming together as a group and as a family in the midst of a turbulent time, an act that no one person could accomplish on their own. Gratitude can become a springboard for connecting with something larger than themselves. This can be a higher power, people, or nature. As noted earlier, for one participant, being in a natural environment allowed them the space or the lens through which they could see how they fit into the world.

Suffering, and more particularly working towards alleviating that suffering, emerged in the context of meaning making with nine of the interview participants. While suffering can cause distress because the meaning that people ascribe to a particular event or suffering can challenge their assumptions and the way they navigate their contexts, meaning making ultimately can alleviate some of the distress by reducing this discrepancy.<sup>333</sup> This does not mean, however, that meaning making or belief remains static. As with participant 6 who noted “when I look at the world and see or read about all of the suffering, I struggle with how to reconcile that with God.” While some may understand struggle as a part of God’s will, others may question whether God exists at all. There appeared to be great benefit in the meaning making attempts, which led some to see themselves or their purpose differently or to even sense their spirituality more acutely.

The connection to meaning making became clearer when the given nine participants moved beyond identifying the suffering to articulating its potential alleviation.

“The poor were not just dropped down from God. People are poor because of the structures we created...Indigenous communities. [pause] I feel called to do something. [interviewer

---

<sup>333</sup> M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall & Peter Hill, Meaning-making, suffering, and religion: a worldview conception, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 22, no.5 (2019): 467-479.

asks: what does that mean?] Faith for me means hope. There's always hope. But we can't just pray for something to happen. We need to make it happen" said participant 2.

Meaning making cannot erase suffering, but the empathetic quality present in the participants' responses leads to more meaning making – or contemplation thereof - which could be impetus for action and the conduit to change.

### **Identity & Syncretic Behaviour**

When we think of the definition of human, we often gravitate towards articulating that in biological terms – like a collection of atoms and neurons. When, however, we contemplate what it means to be human, we tend to use words like individuality, spontaneity, moral autonomous agents - things that point us towards wrestling with the naming of the intersection of mind, body, self, identity, belief, desire, and free will.<sup>334</sup> To be sure, our identities are layered, and,

range from the intimately personal and unique to the broadly collective and binding. Identities are a way of making sense of who we are and as such may be the result of a very individual process of reflection and choice and an empowering expression of beliefs, tastes and values. However, identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. They may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others, often as a result of inequalities of power and authority. In this case identities may be divisive and repressive or even rebellious and subversive.<sup>335</sup>

Whether from a psychological, biological, narrative, or anthropological viewpoint, identity can be an unclear and complicated concept. Depending on the context, for example, it is reasonable to suggest that the answer to the question “Who are you?” can be answered in a variety of ways

---

<sup>334</sup> "Department of Philosophy," *Philosophy of Human Nature* | *Department of Philosophy*, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://departments2.shc.edu/philosophy/philosophy-human-nature>. Previously referenced in TH648X and TH648Z.

<sup>335</sup> Rebecca Kay, “Identity and Marginality,” *eSharp 6:1 (Autumn 2005)*, 1, [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_41175\\_en.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_41175_en.pdf), referenced in TH648Z.

(i.e. I am a parent, a pastor, a partner, a child, a student, a tax payer). John Locke argues that personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity with connections between such things as desires, beliefs, memories, and character traits.<sup>336</sup>

On a philosophical level, Locke's view can become challenging when one contemplates that it may be possible, then, for a future person (i.e. when person x evolves out of an experience to become person y) to be "psychologically continuous with a presently existing person."<sup>337</sup> If the properties that are essential, rather than contingent, to someone's being are changed, is it still the same person? (i.e. are you the same person before and after you lose a finger, or suffer from advanced Alzheimer's disease).<sup>338</sup> What determines which past or future being is you?<sup>339</sup> "Suppose you point to an old class photograph and say, 'That's me.' What makes you that one, rather than one of the others? What is it about the way she relates then to you as you are now that makes her you? [...] What makes it the case that anyone at all who existed back then is you?"<sup>340</sup> These questions lead to what is referred to as persistence conditions, namely, "what does it take for a person to persist from one time to another – to continue existing rather than ceasing to exist?"<sup>341</sup> Exploring the persistence question often reveals a criterion of personal identity. "A criterion is a set of non-trivial necessary and sufficient conditions that determines, insofar as that is possible, whether distinct temporally indexed person-stages are stages of one and the same continuant person."<sup>342</sup> This was observed in the study when Participant 5 offered, "my beliefs

---

<sup>336</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. R. S. Woolhouse (London: New York, 2004) and discussed in Carsten Korfmacher's, "Personal Identity," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/person-i/>

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> James Fearon, *What is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?*, unpublished manuscript, November 3, 1999, Stanford University, Department of Political Science, 12, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf>

<sup>339</sup> Eric T. Olson, "Personal Identity," 2.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Carsten Korfmacher, "Personal Identity," 3.

and thoughts about God may be changing, and how I express that, which has caused some friction with my family, but I'm still me. Changed, but me. Like, I'm still their [child].”

The philosopher Martin Heidegger shifted the dialogue regarding identity by considering issues surrounding ontology (what it means to be a human being) and moving debate beyond epistemology.<sup>343</sup> The Cartesian notions of the self, view the self as subject. Patricia Benner outlines this self as “[...] an uninvolved self passively contemplating the external world of things via representations that are held in the mind. This self *possesses* a body and, by extension, traits or attributes such as anxiety or self-esteem. The self is always seen as subject and the world or environment as object.”<sup>344</sup> This has implications for meaning making since meaning would then be grounded in the actions of subjects.<sup>345</sup> Heideggerian phenomenologists, like Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus, argue that traditional science constrains understanding of human agency, limits one’s imaginative ability to generate questions and limits answers to those questions.<sup>346</sup> The constraints around questioning were captured by the participants who pointed towards concerns around environmental and contextual conduciveness.

Much of the understanding of the self (or oneself) is rooted in relationship, specifically, the relation of person to world, which is complicated by the emergence of a new “tethered self, permanently connected”<sup>347</sup> to world. “World is the meaningful set of relationships, practices, and language that we have by virtue of being born into a culture;”<sup>348</sup> this, for Heidegger, makes world a priori. Heidegger describes that world

comes not afterword but beforehand, in the strict sense of the word. Before hand: that which is unveiled and understood already in advance in every existent Dasein before any

---

<sup>343</sup> Patricia Benner, *Interpretive Phenomenology: Embodiment, Caring, and Ethics in Health and Illness*, SAGE Publications, 1994, 44.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>347</sup> Tim Hutchings, *Review of Network Theology*, 9.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 46.

apprehending of this or that being. The world as already unveiled in advance is such that we do not in fact specifically occupy ourselves with it, or apprehend it, but instead it is so self-evident, so much a matter of course, that we are completely oblivious to it.<sup>349</sup>

Heidegger argues that the “detached, reflective mode of knowing the world exemplified by Descartes is dependent on a priori existence of world in which the meaning given in our language and culture is what makes a thing show up for us at all.”<sup>350</sup> Heidegger writes “the modes of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy all have the function of bringing to the fore the characteristics of presence-at-hand in what is ready-to-hand. But the ready-to-hand is not thereby *just observed* and stared at.”<sup>351</sup> Heidegger goes on to discuss making sense of things through either unready-to-hand (stepping back partially and reflecting) or present-at-hand (stepping back fully and reflecting). According to Karl E. Weick, Heidegger notes that in this stepping back fully or detaching fully from the world that overload can be experienced.<sup>352</sup> Arguably, these moments flow into data points of observing which flow into making sense, which becomes foundational for making meaning. Participants in the study, each and all, sought to make connections between events, experiences, and contexts through inquiry and reflection. For some, as with participant 1, that stepping back involved significant ponderings of “who to put your faith in” in the midst of an “examination of the self;” participant 1 spoke of this as their new “ego centric” orientation.

Technology and social media, as tools, are not neutral entities that are capable of shifting religious or societal behaviors on their own but instead are tools that humans use. This brings to

---

<sup>349</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1982), 165.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Martin Heidegger, Joan Stambaugh, and Dennis J. Schmidt, *Being and Time*, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 103.

<sup>352</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 73-74.

the fore the issue of technological determinism and technological instrumentalism. Broadly understood, the instrumentalist philosophy of technology holds that it is a spontaneous product of our civilization and roots itself in a mechanical, and not teleological, understanding. In other words, technology is there to be controlled and has no inner purpose. Technological determinism concerns itself with the influences that technological innovations impose on the development of societal culture and norms. This researcher believes that the current world climate, particularly with the current generation, pushing back against the phenomenon of globalization and the idea that people simply have to embrace what the global elite and their corporations impose on them. It occurs to this researcher that emerging adults, in particular, are asking how technological change can help us live better lives with one another. The position of this researcher, then, is that technology enables future choices and directions, but it does not determine them.

From a developmental standpoint, one wonders if the use of the internet in its various iterations now becomes a tool in an emerging adults' development to work through developmental issues. That said, in relation to faith, the philosophical foundations (particularly the work of Foucault) for this research allows for some initial observations. Emerging adults tend not to want to be perceived as being narrow-minded or exclusivist when speaking about their faith and, as such, soften their claims "[...]by acknowledging the limitations of what they know about other religions."<sup>353</sup> The majority of interview participants identified as Christian (10 participants), almost the same number were reluctant to be labelled as religious (9 participants) but entirely comfortable being labelled as spiritual (11 participants). Paul McClure writes that

Pluralistic societies require strategies that defend, dismiss, or attempt to reconcile potentially opposing truth claims. Thus, for some, this means religious exclusivism, or the idea that only one religion is true. For others, however, the awareness of so many different ways to perceive ultimate reality suggests that there is very little truth to any religion. For others, pluralism means that all religions have some truth to them and the major world

---

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.



religions each give partial expression to that divine truth. These responses – exclusivism, secularism, and pluralism – make up three of the dominant religious strategies in the modern world.<sup>354</sup>

A clear narrative emerged with three participants who voluntarily disclosed that they identified as gay or lesbian; sexual orientation was not part of the selection criteria. Five participants acknowledged the importance of spirituality in their lives but how they struggled reconciling their sexual orientation with the religious messaging and teaching from faith communities, including those of their childhoods. As noted above, participant 3 offered:

I only ever heard one sermon in my church where LGBTQ stuff came up. I don't remember exactly what was said but I still remember how it made me feel. And it's not good. [Interviewer asks "why's that?"] Because it just talked about how wrong it was and how bad it was according to the bible. I don't remember what the bible verses were but I do remember everyone nodding along.

Participant 11 said

It always bothered me that we seemed to always talk about people instead of with people. And the choir director at the church was gay. When people got angry about same sex marriage in my church, saying how it was wrong. But when the director's name would come up, people would say 'oh, that's different.' [...] Weird lines were being drawn.

Accordingly, the religions syncretism that was documented (as articulated by seven participants) involved picking and choosing combining beliefs and practices from various religions to form a personal belief system. Religious syncretism did involve some discernment from participants in selecting the various pieces, with the impetus for engaging that process typically being a faith based experience, often negative, such as hearing a sermon that did not align with the participants' lived experience or an exploration of their identity.

Participant 7 said "there is so much in the world that challenges self-worth. I didn't need my faith to do that too." What is particularly notable in this regard are two things: the study participants that identified as gay or lesbian were very engaged with their spirituality and had

---

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

rich spiritual lives and, as some turned away from religion as animated through their faith communities, social media acted as a bridge to explore their spirituality. While there were no participants in the study who did not use social media at all, it was clear that many of the study participants self-expression found animation through religious and spiritual syncretism; likely because the confines of doctrine or faith community praxis are not as present in the social media space. Arnett's noted developmental feature of feeling in between may exacerbate this push towards exploring other faith/spiritual/religious identities other than the one handed to you by your family of origin. Autonomy in decision making, also a feature identified by Arnett, can rise to the fore. This dovetails neatly with Fowler's stage four (individuated-reflective faith) where one takes responsibility for one's beliefs.

Syncretic behavior, as it relates to religious and spiritual belief, could be viewed negatively and self-serving in that people could engage in tailor making their own spirituality to suit their own (selfish) purposes (i.e. selecting only the parts of a belief system that suit you, or are not challenging). But this was clearly something more. This was about searching and finding a theological message about inherent self-worth, lived experience, and authenticity that was not coming from their varied denominations. This searching and finding was formative as the participants sought to locate themselves on an expansive, socio-cultural map.

### **Trust & Beliefs**

A recent article on group behaviour in social media stated that "social media users do not analyze, investigate, and/or validate sources of content they share with their network

members/peers.”<sup>355</sup> Despite that the article notes this is a prominent trait among social media peers, each of the participants in the current study emphatically and unequivocally stated that they always verify information before sharing it, regardless of the source, including trusted friend or network.<sup>356</sup> When probed, participants noted that this included even if the content originated or was being shared within their personal network of friends. Participants offered:

Participant 9: “I always cross reference content before sharing it”

Participant 6: “I know how harmful disinformation can be. I want to counter that.”

Paul Ricoeur coined the phrase *hermeneutic of suspicion* which, broadly stated, was a refusal to take words at face value. Pointing to Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche as the architects of this suspicion, the drive was rooted in a refusal to take words at face value. Further, this drive holds that texts are deceptive and that they shroud truths; Ricoeur argues that Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx unite in their commitment to “reduce the illusions and lies of consciousness.”<sup>357</sup> In her article *Suspicious Minds*, Rita Felski notes that

Ricoeur develops a key distinction between a hermeneutics of trust, which is driven by a sense of reverence and goes deeper into the text in search of revelation, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, which adopts an adversarial sensibility to probe for concealed, repressed, or disavowed meanings. The difference between these approaches, we might say, is the difference between unveiling and unmasking.<sup>358</sup>

This difference between unmasking and unveiling, particularly as it relates to trust, becomes particularly significant when examining identity and sexuality. When, for example, participant 8 said “I fundamentally believe that everyone has value. I don’t want to share antiquated messages

---

<sup>355</sup> Mahmud A. Shareef, Kawaljeet K. Kapoor, Bhasker Mukerji, Rohita Dwivedi, Yogesh K. Dwivedi, Group behavior in social media: Antecedents of initial trust formation, *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 105, 2020, accessed October 3, 2020.

<sup>356</sup> The researcher has heard the participants’ claim that they always validate information. While this diverges from other scholarship, for the purposes of this research is taken at face value.

<sup>357</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 32.

<sup>358</sup> Rita Felski, *Suspicious Minds*. *Poetics Today*, 1 June 2011; 32 (2): 215–234..

about things we know better about now...like being queer. It's not a disease," they pointed to something. They pointed to a reading of ancient texts in a way that exposed biases, they pointed towards a desire to go deeper – moving towards a hermeneutic of trust – wanting the text to say something that they fundamentally believed to be true (in this case that “everything has value”) and, further, a community that would allow them the space to engage in that exploration. Embodied in the phrase “it's not a disease” is a particular posture and the impetus counter that narrative.

The hermeneutic of suspicion is, by its nature, a posture of distrust of words to draw out meaning and meanings that were perhaps unintended. While the term is fitting to a degree within the context of this study, there was sense that this suspicion was a positive thing and, in some cases, almost a duty or obligation. Participant 2 said “How can you not verify something before passing it along. Even if you disagree with it. If you blindly pass something along, you're part of the problem” and participant 3 offered “We cannot blindly accept reality. How do you know what's real, anyway?”

The participants in this study consistently were looking for deeper meaning, in how they encountered things, such as texts and experiences, and not accepting information and traditions *carte-blanche*, including from their family of origin and contexts. Particularly around religious and spiritual beliefs, which this study primarily concerned itself with, participants looked for revelation, in a sense, as they sought to reconcile things such as their lived experienced and what they understood to be their truths with their religious and spiritual beliefs. In the words of Participant 9, “I wanted to know what the Bible said and what God thinks without all the judgement and baggage,” or of another participant “I am well-aware of what the doctrine says. I wondered if God thought I should be cast out too?” Participant 3 noted that the [faith]

community they were a part of “did not allow for any interpretation.” What emerged for said participants was a push to move beyond the tenets of their respective religions to deeper explorations of, in this case, theology, particularly as it relates to value, connection, and belonging. “I never felt like I could be my true self,” said participant 8. “It was only when I went to university that I was able to talk with people in a freer way. I felt a belonging that I’d never felt before.”

Just as philosophers and writers have contemplated signs, symbols, and things, Gottfried Leibniz contemplated language with a desire to improve communication between all of the peoples of the world when he created a new lexicon that he named “the universal characteristic.”<sup>359</sup> Leibniz had high hopes for this language. “He argued that a new set of symbols and expressions would lead science and philosophy to new truths, to a new age of reason, to a deeper appreciation of the universe’s elegance and harmony, to the divine. What he imagined was an alphabet of human thought.”<sup>360</sup> Leibniz envisioned that a group of scholars would create an encyclopedia of core concepts which he named “primitives” which would include things like earth, colours, and God - fundamental, incontestably true concepts from philosophy, physics, and geometry – and assign them each a numerical value.<sup>361</sup> These numerical values “formed the basis for a new calculus of thought, what he called the calculus ratiocinator.”<sup>362</sup> Leibniz essentially endeavoured to turn thought into mathematics which would allow for a method of adjudicating questions of truth.<sup>363</sup> Leibniz illustrated how this might work when he asked the question “What is a human?”

A rational animal, of course [...is] an insight that can be written like this:

---

<sup>359</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 65. Referenced in TH648Z and TH648X.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

rational x animal = man

[...] ‘Animal,’ he suggested, might be represented with the number two; ‘rational’ with the number three.

Therefore:  $2 \times 3 = 6$  [...]

Leibniz asked, for example, are all men monkeys? Well, he knew the number assigned to monkeys, ten. If ten can’t be divided by six, and six can’t be divided by ten, then we know: There’s no element of monkey in man – and no element of man in monkey.<sup>364</sup>

Leibniz’s goal was to facilitate knowledge; knowledge that could be derived from computation.<sup>365</sup> “It would be an effortless process, *cogitation caeca* or blind thought. Humans were no longer even needed to conceive new ideas.<sup>366</sup> Foer notes that Leibniz created this out of an altruistic desire for peace and harmony.

‘Once this has been done, if ever further controversies shall arise, there should be no more reason for dispute between two philosophers than between two calculators.’ Intellectual and moral argument could be settled with the disagreeing parties declaring ‘Let’s calculate!’ There would be no need for wars, let alone theological controversy, because truth would be placed on the terra firma of math.<sup>367</sup>

This, of course, is the birth of the algorithm. Study participants were keenly aware of the dangers of the algorithm. “I’m careful about tunnel vision and feedback loops,” said participant 7, another talking about being led down “rabbit holes” as a part of hyper-connectivity. While algorithms “...capture the process for solving a problem”<sup>368</sup> and is “...supposed to be devoid of bias, intuition, emotion, or forgiveness, [...] a system is a human artifact, not a mathematical truism.”<sup>369</sup> “They call it a search engine, after all – a nod to pistons, gears, and twentieth-century industry, with the machinery wiped clean of human fingerprints.”<sup>370</sup> Unfortunately, algorithms

---

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

have the potential to press us into conformity, laying waste to privacy, and lead to what Foer calls a hive mentality on more than one occasion, the by-product of which is intellectual incapacitation, the end of private contemplation, autonomous thought, and solitary introspection.<sup>371</sup> And when applied to a social media platform like Facebook, can generate a feedback loop where users get only what they want to hear. “We’ve just get driven further and further into our corners through tech that’s giving us what we want.”<sup>372</sup>

While an algorithm has the potential to shift the method of trial and error and remove a person – a human – from the process of inquiry,<sup>373</sup> for study participants this was not the case. “[Social Media] has influenced my beliefs through different views and exposure,” said Participant 10. “It’s really helped shape my beliefs by giving me access to informative content...like black lives matter,” said participant 3. “Sometimes you seek the information out. Sometimes it’s put before you.” Participant 7 offered “Yes. It has shaped [my] beliefs in ways I don’t even realize...like gay rights.” Study participants embrace being exposed to different cultures, values, perspectives, and belief systems. Sharing information through social media has influenced how participants see others, the world, and themselves by providing a space to explore ideas and to express themselves more freely. A combination of a keen awareness of the power of the algorithm, a hermeneutic of suspicion, and hermeneutic of trust, participants were able to leverage the power of social media for their inquiry and exploration into “underlying human social relationships that govern the balance of who and what we all care about.”<sup>374</sup>

---

<sup>371</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*.

<sup>372</sup> Business Radio, "A 'World Without Mind': Big Tech's Dangerous Influence," *Knowledge@Wharton*, accessed April 8, 2018, <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/world-without-mind/>, referenced in TH648Z and TH648Z.

<sup>373</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 69.

<sup>374</sup> Michael Rundle, "Zuckerberg: Telepathy Is the Future of Facebook," *WIRED*, October 04, 2017, accessed April 8, 2018, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/facebook-zuckerberg-qa-the-future>. Referenced in TH648X and TH648Z.

## Interaction and Worldview

People are complex, and intricate, and their interactions are unique; hence, different people can “experience and understand the same ‘objective reality’ in very different ways and have their own, often very different, reasons for acting in the world...”<sup>375</sup> While completely valid causal statements about the social world and, in particular, definitive identification of a causal relationship between social media and world-view in the participants cannot be made in the context of this study, the interpretation of elements can lead to empathetic understandings of the observed phenomena such as the effect of hyper-connectivity and world that is constantly present. All of the participants stated that they used social media to “connect with people” and to “stay in touch” and world-views were impacted by hyper-connectivity. I recognize that there are many ways of interpreting the world, that there can be multiple realities, and that no single point of view can ever describe the entire picture.<sup>376</sup>

“Semiotics is a discipline that studies images, symbols, signs and other similarly related objects in an effort to understand their use and meaning.”<sup>377</sup> Social semiotics would investigate the aforementioned semiotics more fully as it is a branch of the field of semiotics that “...investigates human signifying practices in specific social and cultural circumstances and which tries to explain meaning-making as social practice.”<sup>378</sup> And so it is imperative to recognize the bearing that the technology itself has on communication, interaction, and, by

---

<sup>375</sup>Zeynep Yad, "What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?" *Quora*, June 6, 2017, accessed June 17, 2018, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-positivism-and-interpretivism-in-social-research>. Previously referenced in TH761F, Martin Luther University College, Spring Term, 2018.

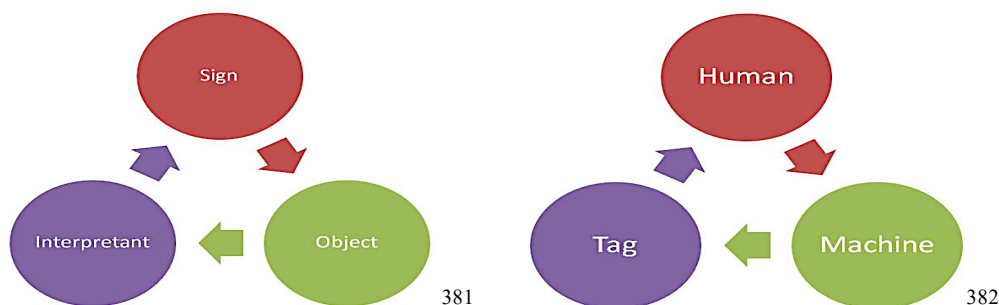
<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> LLC Revolv, "Semiotics of Social Networking," Revolv.com, Trivia Quizzes, accessed February 17, 2019, <http://www.revolv.com/page/Semiotics-of-social-networking>.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.



extension, on world-view. The triad of communication through which social semiotics functions as sign, object, interpretant<sup>379</sup> and “human, machine, tag”<sup>380</sup> is noteworthy.



With the above diagrams one can ponder how a device or a platform that functions as an interpretive lens can be used to manipulate or distort a reality, however constructed.

The things or the tools we use have significance. Shane Hipps, in his book *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* argues that Marshall McLuhan was correct, the medium is the message, and thus it is imperative that we learn to use technologies or we will be used by them.<sup>383</sup> In a language similar to Heidegger, Carl Mitchum begins to dichotomize technology as an activity and a way of being in the world. Can technology be both subject and an object? An agent of action or something more reflective in nature? Perhaps his exploration of these poles on a philosophical spectrum is best captured when he offers that technology should not be conceived as the relief of man’s [sic] estate but as something that is satisfying and

<sup>379</sup> Warwick Mules, "The Social Semiotics of Mass Communication," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 22, no. 1 (1997), doi:10.22230/cjc.1997v22n1a983.

<sup>380</sup> Social Tagging, Online Communication, and Peircean Semiotics. 2008. Internet on-line. Available from the website <http://www.slideshare.net/andreasinica/social-tagging-online-communication-and-peircean-semiotics-presentation>

<sup>381</sup> Mules, Warwick. 1997. The Social Semiotics of Mass Communication. *Journal of Communication* 47 p166(4).

<sup>382</sup> "Social Tagging, Online Communication, and Peircean Semiotics: A Conceptual Framework." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*. Accessed February 18, 2019. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0165551508099606>.

<sup>383</sup> Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.

creative.<sup>384</sup> His thinking that “maintenance inevitably tends to overwhelm construction”<sup>385</sup> (i.e. what is involved in constructing something – choices, time, money, effort – vs. what is involved in maintaining that which has been built; this can apply equally to virtual technologies and networks and to physical buildings).

If we go beyond Mitchum’s emphases on attitudes towards technology, which he articulates as suspicion, promotion, and ambivalence, we may find ourselves better able to engage in a critical analysis of the philosophy of technology. This would be helpful, for example, in Shane Hipps exploration of the positive and negative effects of connection over distance. Hipps labels this as an ambiguous gift of media, noting that the “anonymous intimacy of virtual communities and social network sites provides just enough connection to keep us from pursuing real intimacy, which entails risk, exclusiveness, permanence and proximity.”<sup>386</sup> In addition to examining the idea of permanence philosophically, one might examine the alienating effects of technology, for example, from a Marxist perspective given that, for Marxists, “a key part in the control of the Proletariat is the use of alienation in all aspects of society, including the family, the education system and the media.”<sup>387</sup> Or using the work of Foucault as a lens, one might examine the concept Jesse Rice labels as “spontaneous order” that posits that “crowds, machines and insects all tend to fall into sync, generating unexpected outcomes. Those affected must adapt their behaviour to fit the new order.”<sup>388</sup> Facebook, he maintains, is a primary example with millions of users joining and their new habits have unanticipated consequences. Through Facebook, we can control the representation of self by “creating and operating our own little

---

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 234-5.

<sup>386</sup> Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 114.

<sup>387</sup> CN Trueman, "Marxist Concepts," *History Learning Site*, May 25, 2015, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/sociology/theories-in-sociology/marxist-concepts/>.

<sup>388</sup> Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook*, 20-21.

world.”<sup>389</sup> Philosophically and pragmatically, one could then engage a critical analysis of the attitude of “relational consumerism.”<sup>390</sup> All study participants were keenly aware of the power and ability of social media to push them into individualized corners and feedback loops where they would only hear that which they wanted and affirm that which they already believed. Despite this, each of the participants was willing to navigate the complexities of the workings of social media, pushing through conforming towards authentic expression, and feedback loops towards genuine dialogue.

The philosopher Heidegger, in his contemplation of things, explores the question when is a thing just a thing and when is it something more? Jamie Brummett, in his commentary on Heidegger’s “The Thing” summarizes it thus

“The Thing” examines how a person can experience and know a thing. Humans do not recognize thingness in the making or producing of a thing. They experience a jug when they experience its pouring a gift. They experience a thing when it pours a gift because they experience the surrounding phenomena too—the sky, earth, other mortals, and divinities. Humans can’t experience unmediated things. They experience things in relation to other phenomena. This decentralizes the physical thing itself. The experience doesn’t come from experiencing the physical thing, but from what is between the observer and the thing, what is presenced.<sup>391</sup>

Just as with the jug, people do not think about social media platforms much until they experience its offerings. Much of the exploration of semiotics, namely the “discipline that studies images, symbols, signs and other similarly related objects in an effort to understand their use and meaning,”<sup>392</sup> in the context of social media, can be parsed into semiotic structuralism. Semiotic structuralism would endeavour to give thought to the meaning of objects within a social

---

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>391</sup> "Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing' (1950)," Jamie L. Brummitt, March 30, 2015, accessed April 2, 2018. <http://jamiebrummitt.com/martin-heidegger-the-thing-1950/>, referenced in TH648X.

<sup>392</sup> <https://www.revolvy.com/page/Semiotics-of-social-networking>

context,<sup>393</sup> and post-structuralist theories that “take tools from structuralist semiotics in combination with social interaction, creating social semiotics.”<sup>394</sup> The meaning that one makes from something effects its importance in personal and corporate life and how it is maintained. This was glimpsed especially as participants spoke of the differences between religion and spirituality. For many, religion was about the head, while spirituality was about the “heart” or the “gut.” Participant 7 said it is heart, this “living aspect,” awakened through a “series of events” that for them is now the “propellor and motivation for service.”

The philosopher Simon Blackburn summarizes structuralism as "the belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract structure."<sup>395</sup> Structuralism is a methodology that has, at its core, the idea that elements of human culture “[...]must be understood by way of their relationship to a broader, overarching system or structure [and] works to uncover the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel.”<sup>396</sup> This becomes particularly important because, as with other research methodologies,<sup>397</sup> methodology informs research and research informs policy or, at least, influences praxis. Structuralism appears in France and gives rise to a structuralist (philosophical/literary) movement which influences and informs the writings of writers that include psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and, controversially, Nicos Poulantzas’ structural

---

<sup>393</sup> LLC Revolvly, "Semiotics of Social Networking," Revolvly.com, Trivia Quizzes, accessed February 17, 2019, <http://www.revolvly.com/page/Semiotics-of-social-networking>.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>396</sup> LLC Revolvly, "Structuralism," Revolvly.com, Trivia Quizzes, accessed February 17, 2019, <https://www.revolvly.com/page/Structuralism>.

<sup>397</sup> An Indigenous research methodology, for example.

Marxism.<sup>398</sup> The movement begins in linguistics with Ferdinand de Saussure who put forth three concepts, namely:

1. Saussure argued for a distinction between *langue* (an idealized abstraction of language) and *parole* (language as actually used in daily life). He argued that the "sign" was composed of both a signified, an abstract concept or idea, and a "signifier", the perceived sound/visual image.
2. Because different languages have different words to describe the same objects or concepts, there is no intrinsic reason why a specific sign is used to express a given signifier. It is thus "arbitrary".
3. Signs thus gain their meaning from their relationships and contrasts with other signs. As he wrote, "in language, there are only differences 'without positive terms.'<sup>399</sup>

Together with the above, Gilles Deleuze notes that a particular domain of culture can be understood through its linguistic structure that is distinct from both the organization of reality and the imagination.<sup>400</sup> As noted earlier, people are complex, and intricate, and their interactions are unique. A constructivist, such as Jean Piaget who labels structuralism as a method and not a doctrine, offers that "there exists no structure without a construction, abstract or genetic."<sup>401</sup> As research and analysis begins to underscore various aspects of social media relating to well-being, for example, noting commonalities to the various forms of structuralism becomes significant. Structuralism is understood as an approach "that finds meaning in relation to things, rather than in isolation [...] and gives primacy to pattern over substance;"<sup>402</sup> additionally, it uses "culturally interconnected signs to reconstruct system [sic] of relationships rather than studying the

---

<sup>398</sup> LLC Revolvly, "Structuralism," Revolvly.com, Trivia Quizzes, accessed February 17, 2019, <https://www.revolvly.com/page/Structuralism>.

<sup>399</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique generale*, published by C. Bally and A. Sechehaye (Paris: Payot, 1916), English translation by Wade Baski, Course in General Linguistics (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p 120.

<sup>400</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "How Do We Recognise Structuralism?" in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, translated by David Lapoujade, edited by Michael Taormina, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents ser, Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004, p. 171–173.

<sup>401</sup> Jean Piaget, *Le Structuralisme*, Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1972.

<sup>402</sup> Avinash Singh, "STRUCTURALISM," Academia.edu - Share Research, 1, accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.academia.edu/34709638/STRUCTURALISM>.

isolated.”<sup>403</sup> Things cannot, then, be understood in isolation, but rather in the context of larger systems or structures which, in turn, also do not exist in isolation, but rather are formed through perceptions of the world.<sup>404</sup> Social systems, as noted by the sociologist Anthony Giddens, are more than merely mechanical outcomes.<sup>405</sup> Participant 11 said they were “very intentional about making sure to follow and converse with people whose views were different in a major way.” Feminist theorist, Alison Assiter posits that, among other things, structural laws deal with co-existence rather than change;<sup>406</sup> Assiter may well be amongst the legion of those critical of structuralism as ahistoric and “[...] favouring deterministic structural forces over the ability of people to act.”<sup>407</sup> In the arena of social media, this core idea of the structuralist movement rises to the fore in that social systems, as noted by the sociologist Anthony Giddens, are more than merely mechanical outcomes.<sup>408</sup> Indeed, structural method shifts the attention “from elements and their natural properties to the relationships among elements and to the relational, or system-acquired, properties that depend on such relationships.”<sup>409</sup> Further, one cannot understand something solely by looking at its appearance.

Post-structuralism seeks to explore how cultural concepts have changed over a given time period and notes that the study of underlying structures can be subject to biases and misinterpretations. As noted above, one participant said,

---

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Nasrullah Mambrol, "Structuralism," *Literary Theory and Criticism*, March 20, 2016, 3, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://literariness.org/2016/03/20/structuralism/>.

<sup>405</sup> Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method a Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*, London: Hutchinson, 1977, p. 121.

<sup>406</sup> Alison Assiter, "Althusser and Structuralism," *The British Journal of Sociology* 35, no. 2 (1984): 272. doi:10.2307/590235.

<sup>407</sup> LLC Revolvly, "Structuralism," Revolvly.com, Trivia Quizzes, accessed February 17, 2019, <https://www.revolvly.com/page/Structuralism>.

<sup>408</sup> Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method a Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*, London: Hutchinson, 1977, p. 121.

<sup>409</sup> Avinash Singh, "STRUCTURALISM," *Academia.edu - Share Research*, 1, accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.academia.edu/34709638/STRUCTURALISM>.

“I had some pretty...well...what I would now call cringeworthy views, especially about homeless people. I thought they were just lazy or something was wrong with them. But then some people in my dorm were making sandwiches for a soup kitchen and invited me to come along. [...] Over the course of that night, I began to see the broader personal and social issues that go into this.”

In a broader sense, “post-structuralism offers a way of studying how knowledge is produced [...] To understand an object, it is necessary to study both the object itself and the systems of knowledge that produced the object.”<sup>410</sup> Mark Poster offers that

When we make phone calls and use computers, electronic devices mediate how we communicate. In each instance, we exchange symbols and information just as we have since humans began speaking and writing. What, then “besides economy of space and time” differentiates electronic communications from ordinary speech and writing? The difference [...] is the profound effect electronic mediation exerts on the very way we perceive ourselves and reality.<sup>411</sup>

Social media can create a grey area that finds itself more congruent with post-structuralism than structuralism, but perhaps not fully belonging to either. A post-structuralist could challenge the notions from a post-Platonic prejudice that favors presence over absence and speech over writing.<sup>412</sup> The post-platonic prejudice emerges from a logo centrism. Philosopher Jacques Derrida, sees logocentrism, “as the dominant tradition in Western thought from Plato and Aristotle to the present. Logocentrism is the privileging of the logos, or spoken word, over the written word, and Derrida asserts that the Western tradition has always privileged the spoken word or oral language over the written.”<sup>413</sup>

We tend to trust speech over writing because of the immediacy of the speaker: he's right there, and we can grab him by the lapels and look into his face and figure out just exactly what one single thing he means. But the reason why poststructuralists are in the literary

---

<sup>410</sup> LLC Revolvly, "Post-structuralism," Revolvly.com, Trivia Quizzes, accessed February 17, 2019. <https://www.revolvly.com/page/Post-structuralism>.

<sup>411</sup> Robert Anchor and Mark Poster, "The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context," *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (1993): 829, doi:10.2307/2167558.

<sup>412</sup> LLC Revolvly, "Post-structuralism"

<sup>413</sup> Reed Way Dasenbrock, "Becoming Aware of the Myth of Presence," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 8, no. 1/2 (1988): 1-11, accessed March 26, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.wlu.ca/stable/20865636>

theory business at all is that they see writing, not speech, as more faithful to the metaphysics of true expression. For Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault, writing is a better animal than speech because it is iterable; it is iterable because it is abstract; and it is abstract because it is a function not of presence but of absence: the reader's absent when the writer's writing and the writer's absent when the reader's reading.<sup>414</sup>

The grey area can emerge when trying to determine the essence of being present with someone or a community. Is someone less present when playing an online game with several or hundreds of players, each potentially alone with their video game consoles, but together virtually or through social media, through which events and happenings come to people in real time such that they can participate virtually in real time?

For the study participants, there was no clear hierarchy or delineation of “in-person” versus “virtual” connections. The blogger Jesse Rice offers that they are simply different ways of relating to one another.

“Community” is not understood as a dichotomy between “real” or “online” relationships but as a composite of both. This growing reality forces us to adapt the way we think about community. It is no longer enough to define community in either good or bad terms, to debate whether one brand of relating (“real”) is better than another (“online”), though ... there is certainly a qualitative difference between the two. A more inclusive definition is needed, one that takes into account the fact that the always-on do not make traditional distinctions between real and online relationships.<sup>415</sup>

“The digital world, in all its possible social and cultural expressions, becomes the principle intersection of new anthropological spaces, reflections of a nomadic culture (the food-gatherer theorized by McLuhan), an environment of communication, an arena of connection which puts subjects in contact with one another.”<sup>416</sup> In this study, all participants connectedness through

---

<sup>414</sup> Biblioklept, "David Foster Wallace Describes Poststructuralism," *Biblioklept.org*, December 22, 2010, accessed February 16, 2019, <https://biblioklept.org/2010/12/22/david-foster-wallace-defines-poststructuralism/>.

<sup>415</sup> Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 170–71. Previously referenced in TH765A, June 9, 2017.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.



social media emboldened their healthy questioning and critical understandings which, in turn, impacted their worldview. Participant 4 said “I have discussed issues we’re facing here in Canada with people in Africa and they share the issues they’re facing and how they’re dealing with them.” Social media enabled participants’ exposure to ideas and cultures and beliefs that might not otherwise have been encountered. Participant 4 offered “being connected has helped me hone my critical thinking [...] which helps me determine action.” Participant 8 noted that “I never appreciated how Western my thinking is.”

The overall sense from no fewer than nine of the participants was an openness and willingness to question why they believe what they believe and, by extension, becoming aware of and challenging bias. What was clear was that this did not, and perhaps could not, happen in isolation but rather in relationship. Indeed, as with structuralism, the attention “from elements and their natural properties to the relationships among elements and to the relational, or system-acquired, properties that depend on such relationships.”<sup>417</sup> Time spent on social media, in the context of these participants, in addition to being used socially, was used as a vehicle to gain insight into wider society, the self, and the world with some participants’ motivation (i.e. participants 3 and 7, above) being self-care rooted in a (low) value judgement of self and others to have a broader perspective; intentionality was common in either case.

### **On Defining the Terms *Religion* and *Spirituality***

It was important to not lay definitions of “religious” and “spiritual” before the study participants. This allowed for observation and learning as the terms were used, sometimes

---

<sup>417</sup> Avinash Singh, "STRUCTURALISM," *Academia.edu - Share Research*, 1, accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.academia.edu/34709638/STRUCTURALISM>.

interchangeably, in the participants' telling of stories. Societal and scholarly definitions of religion and spirituality are evolving and there seems to be little consensus. The terms are distinct but overlapping, and fairly polarized. Particularly as an ordained minister, I wanted to consider these terms as non-binary thus allowing me to consider the terms through a cultural lens rather than an exclusively theological lens. When participants described pieces associated with what they named as religion or religious, it was much less abstract than those associated with spiritual or spirituality.

Religion, for the most part was organized and traditional, had a communal component, and was significant in relation to identity. Identity pieces already decided as a child, for example, are often determined by one's parent(s). I grew up as a Canadian Lutheran because that is who I was told that I was. What emerged in the course of this study, however, was a clear sense that participants intentionally connected with groups that were congruent with their values and not simply adhering to what was (pre)determined by their parent(s). Developmentally speaking, the features of emerging adulthood identified by Arnett, particularly identity exploration, feeling in between, and instability are again noteworthy as are Fowler's stages three (synthetic-conventional faith) and four (individuating-reflective faith). Also noteworthy was how the participants tended to borrow language and terminology from their faith traditions to describe spirituality. A striking example of this was the participant who identified as atheist describing their spirituality using Roman Catholic terminology.

Spirituality was much more abstract and difficult for participants to describe. They articulated spirituality by talking about random acts of kindness, nature, connecting with others and the world around them, their values and ethics. Anything that jarred them out of their routine or the mundanity of life, stretched their imaginations, or evoked feelings of significant awe, like

in music or art or nature, were considered spiritual. Spirituality involved sensing that there was something bigger than the self and that one could be a part of that. This of course opened the doors to then recognize spirituality as potentially whatever each participant wanted it to mean.

I remain resolute in my not offering my own definitions of religion and spirituality, particularly in the context of this study. The goal was to glimpse how the participants described these terms and listen to the language that they used, and reflect on where that language came from. By maintaining an open posture and not using traditional definitions, or my own, I was able to hear an Atheist talk about their spirituality, something I had not considered, and others exchange the terms religious and spiritual beliefs with meaning-making, or seeking and dwelling. What this underscored for me was how the cultural, religious, psychological, and theological factors influence each of the terms religious and spiritual, that there is significant overlap between the two, and that our categories need to be redrawn.

## **Conclusion**

As the belief systems of emerging adults continues to shift, appreciation of their world views is integral as faith communities create multiple and varied access points. Participants discussed their religious and spiritual beliefs, the formation of these beliefs, and what resources meet their spiritual and religious needs. Participants articulated how they understood religion and spirituality, spoke of the importance of meaning making and connectedness, and how experience shapes belief systems. The work of Martin Heidegger is particularly helpful when examining faith and spirituality, which some participants defined as a question of being. Several themes emerged from the research data. The common theme was the shift in belief systems with sub themes of syncretic behaviour, interaction and world view, trust, identity, living with integrity,

faith community as resource, silence and silencing, and meaning making. There was no hierarchy of in-person versus virtual connections, “real” versus online. Instead they were simply different ways of relating to one another. Further, articulated through a Christian lens, this was all about participants’ contemplating understandings of who they are, their value in the eyes of the Divine, and what is important in life.

## Conclusion

It is ten o'clock on a Sunday morning and I find myself in an alleyway by Kitchener's downtown bus terminal. With graffiti serving as an stirring backdrop, I walk with a man who is talking to me about faith and life and Jesus. The man walks on after which I am warmly welcomed by two parishioners opening the doors to a massive, cathedral-like place. After entering the doors, I find myself by the baptismal font, having moved effortlessly up the aisle to what seems like the middle of the gathered community. I then move seamlessly eastward past the grand piano and wooden seating for the choir to my left and the impressive ambo and even more massive pipe organ on my right, to the altar. The last supper, carved in marble, so eloquently framed by colourful paraments and even more pronounced as I gaze up at the massive, vibrantly coloured, dossal hanging that presides over the space with the words "Feed My Sheep" looming large. The interior of this church is awe inspiring and stunning. The ceiling seems to extend to the heavens thanks to cleaver architecture. Light pours into the space through modern stained-glass windows into which glass figures from the church buildings of the church's past have been grafted to form an impressive narrative. I notice the blond pews, filled with grey haired worshippers, the stunning music and singing. And all in a two-minute video. At the end, there is a link and I click it.

Like so many who no longer want to make a physical journey to the sites of their own faith communities, I make this excursion to St. Peter's, a faith community in Kitchener, Ontario through social media, sitting in my family room with my mug of coffee, ready to tweet my questions and comments with the appropriate hashtag. This is a strange phenomenon and one that happens repeatedly for this faith community and in households all across Canada. Some in

the community muse that it is not the same as being there on a Sunday morning, surely, but it is as close as some are willing or able to get.

What is the effect of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults? Several themes emerged from the research data. The common theme was the shifting of belief systems divided into sub-themes of living with integrity, faith community as resource, silence and silencing, meaning making, identity and syncretic behaviour, trust and beliefs, and interaction and worldview. Broadly understood by the participants, intrinsic to religious and spiritual beliefs was engaging large questions about life, moving towards greater self-awareness, and connecting with others. As participants looked for meaning, investigations of life, death, and purpose loomed large. Participants approached religion and spirituality differently. Approaches and understandings were influenced by faith community connections and messaging, childhood household beliefs, and motivations that included identity exploration, validation, activism, and curiosity. Although participants articulated a continued openness to organized religion and a “high hunger” for spirituality, social media filled a gap for a number of participants when they felt organized religion was either “out of its depth,” constrained by too many boundaries, or posturally incongruent with their lived experiences, specifically in their spiritual quests.

One of the goals of the study was to contribute to the field of pastoral leadership by adding to the developing conversation about our changing contexts and how faith communities might engage a particular and vital demographic amidst rapid social and technological change. To that end it was observed that study participants who were “more hungry” for spirituality were also more receptive to organized religion while no participants were more receptive to organized religion without a shift towards an increase in hunger for spirituality. One interpretation of the observed data could be that as their hunger for spirituality increased, participants were more

receptive to organized religion as a means to further explore and/or give expression to their spirituality. Like participant 4 noted “Spirituality comes first. And spirituality can be filtered through the lens of Christianity as a traditional structure.”

Drawing from a literature review and study participants, it is clear that the traditional institution of the church is no longer functioning with the authority it has enjoyed in past generations. Further, many interview participants rejected the church defined boundary markers of religious identity while still believing in God and practicing that belief outside of church gatherings. Seven participants articulated how they felt that the intense curiosity to explore and engage their surroundings, or the world, had not been nurtured in the faith communities of their childhoods (participant 4 noted this stopped “around Grade 5”) and that, according to participant 2, the “church was out of its depth.” Social media, for ten of the participants, has filled this gap and invited a curiosity for further exploration and examination. This leads me to contemplate shifting a commonly encountered narrative about the quantity of time spent on social media to how that time is spent on social media. Study participants who used social media typically engaged deep spiritual and theological questions, purpose, and service through that medium. Some of that exploration involved engaging with others, leaving participants with increased empathy and connection to others and their surroundings. This exploration was congruent with the words participants used to describe spirituality that included “sensory” and “connecting” and “understanding within and how I fit into the world” and “choosing to live life as committed to something greater than self and to the earth,” and juxtaposed with the descriptors that participants used for religion that included “rules,” “doctrine,” “adherence,” and “prescriptive.”

Faith communities might do well, then, to allow space virtually for the mysteriousness of the divine and the sacred. Participants were not longing for answers they wanted to hear,

necessarily, but to be heard and allowed space to explore questions. “I believe in a higher power,” said one participant, “but the [faith] community I was a part of did not allow for any interpretation. It was about rules.” Authenticity was significant for participants. And while the majority of participants expressed an openness to organized religion, five participants experienced a lesser welcome into Christian community for what they perceived as a failure to meet certain predetermined criteria. Participant 6 captured this when they said “With all of my flaws, religion told me I didn’t belong.” Participant 9 said

“Before I came out, when I was exploring my sexuality, I found strength through social media that I didn’t find in the church. I wanted to know what the Bible said and what God thinks without all the judgement and baggage.”

Whether perceived or real, there was simply no room in their institutions for the participants belief systems to shift or evolve forcing participants to explore them through other means and vehicles.

Social media, religious and spiritual beliefs, and faith communities intersect in the struggle to negotiate faith and belief in a digital culture. From a Christian perspective, we can interpret that struggle through the traditional lenses of theology, history, Scripture, doctrine, and tradition, several sublime dimensions emerge. C.S. Lewis wrote “our imitation of God in this life...must be an imitation of God incarnate; our model is the Jesus, not only of Calvary, but of the workshop, the roads, the crowds, the clamorous demands and surly oppositions, the lack of all peace and privacy, the interruptions.”<sup>418</sup> At stake here is how the church, the body of Christ, views itself and how it moves in the world. Paul’s image of the church as a body continues, quite

---

<sup>418</sup>C.S.Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harper One, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2017), 6.



rightly, to animate Christian identity. “Christians believe that God became a very particular body in a very particular time and place and demonstrated radical care and concern for the bodies he encountered, especially the most marginalized.<sup>419</sup> C.S. Lewis is reported to have also insisted that “...those who follow Jesus are called to follow the lead of the incarnate God into the messy, varied places bodies are found, attending to them as Jesus did.”<sup>420</sup> In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes:

In the passage where the New Testament says that everyone must work, it gives a reason ‘in order that he may have something to give to those in need’. Charity - giving to the poor - is an essential part of Christian morality: in the frightening parable of the sheep and the goats it seems to be a point on which everything turns. Some people nowadays say that charity ought to be unnecessary and that instead of giving to the poor we ought to be producing a society in which there is no poor to give to. They may be quite right in saying that we ought to produce this kind of society. But if anyone thinks that, as a consequence, you can stop giving in the meantime, then he has parted company with all Christian morality.<sup>421</sup>

Tradition calls faith communities to that same messy place and to the same task, as Thompson articulates above. However, faith communities now face a reality that they did not face previously, namely, when the body becomes also virtual. How does a faith community live incarnationally in a virtual space – as a body that it cannot entirely see and one that stretches around the globe? Quite rightly, communities that have typically emphasized close connections through relationships, a time that appears to foster disconnection and, as Deanna Thompson notes, disembodiment, is particularly threatening.<sup>422</sup> “For a religion where presence and place matter deeply, the distractions and rootlessness purportedly fostered by digitized living pose serious obstacles to being present in a particular time and place as Jesus was and as Christians

---

<sup>419</sup>Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 53.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>421</sup> Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 86.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

are called to be.”<sup>423</sup> Anecdotally, this was expressed quite vividly in 2016 when a fall Social Media Sunday took place for many faith communities, particularly Anglican and Lutheran. Some churches dove in head first saying the church needs to be connected while others hunkered down and said that the church should encourage people to disconnect. With the digital devices that are now, arguably, an integral part of our everyday existence we can no longer hold that a physical encounter is always superior to those that take place in virtual spaces.<sup>424</sup>

Whether through a general understanding of the internet and, by extension social media, as a third place where genuine conversation can take place<sup>425</sup> or through the development of a digital identity that is fundamentally polyphonic, meaning multiple, diverse, flexible, and pseudo-anonymous,<sup>426</sup> social media can have significant impact on identity formation and relational consciousness.

Rebecca Catto stated that young people are very likely to engage in online resources to learn more about their faith and, as a result, feel some tension between their commitments and engagement with society.<sup>427</sup> What emerges for faith communities is the challenge of what religion is and where it can be found and that we need to be sensitive to the religious identities (and how they develop) of the people in and outside of the body and not make assumptions. While there is much lip service paid to the idea of meaning making, if it is true that when the heart is restless and unfulfilled if it finds no meaning<sup>428</sup> then it would stand to reason that those who are alienated from institutional religion, or the body as we understand it in its traditional

---

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>425</sup> Karen-Marie Yust, “Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children’s Spirituality,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 134, doi:10.1080/1364426x.2014.924908.

<sup>426</sup> Milad Doueichi (*Digital Cultures*, 2011) as referenced in Karen-Marie Yust, 138.

<sup>427</sup> Rebecca Catto, “What can we say about today’s British religious young person? Findings from the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme,” *Religion* 44, no. 1 (2013): 1, doi:10.1080/0048721x.2013.844740.

<sup>428</sup> Attributed to St. Augustine.

form, must therefore be looking for sources of meaning elsewhere.<sup>429</sup> The frameworks for meaning and, accordingly, frameworks that guide behaviour, are constructed through a complex process that blend social contexts and relationships such that religious and spiritual beliefs may, in fact, play less of a prominent role in people's daily lives.

Perhaps it is imperative that we understand why participation in (physical) church is on the decline. Richard Flory notes that while *Gen Xers* do want to live out religious commitments, they resist aligning themselves with old ideologies and follow the social implications of different religious teachings.<sup>430</sup> Further, there is "a move for Gen Xers away from rationalistic, propositional truth claims reliant on the proper exegesis of written text to truth validated by experience in the religious community."<sup>431</sup> Study participants were increasingly less likely to affiliate with religious organizations because "such institutions provide little explanatory value or social capital outside of what self-sufficient individuals can obtain on their own."<sup>432</sup> As participant 8 expressed: "all the information I need to make my own...informed...choices is right at my fingertips. 24/7. There's an app for everything." Hess notes "that the struggle to embrace the deeply contradictory reality of religious institutions is often too much for people, who flee either into fundamentalist religious spaces, or flee religious spaces all together."<sup>433</sup> This phenomenon was observed in this study in that many participants moved from the *physical* faith community environment to the *virtual* in a search for an environment that allowed for question and critique, reflection and contemplation.

---

<sup>429</sup> Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, *Religion and Youth* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010), 37.

<sup>430</sup> Richard W. Flory and Donald Earl Miller, *Gen X Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 247.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>432</sup> Paul McClure, "Modding My Religion: Exploring the Effects of Digital Technology on Religion and Spirituality," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018, 82.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*

Dialogue questions here harken back to our understandings of who we are, whose we are, our value in God's eyes, and what is important in life.

The right to know and be known is a basic human need. [...] even those who are expressing mundane thoughts reveal a hunger for the ties of relationship. And more important, they expose the undeniable longing for the bigger sacred something that lies beyond the semiotic of "somethingness." All of this bears more than a passing resemblance to honest biblical faith. An organic and vital faith gives us the ability to make imagined into real, virtuality into actuality. And what else is revival if not the willingness to see what God wants to do and then heading off in that direction?<sup>434</sup>

Accordingly, this has implications for religious and spiritual beliefs and, in particular, the understanding of what it is and how it finds expression. Whether we understand religious and spiritual beliefs as guideposts for learning, life journey, or response and openness, they are not static. It is remarkable, that when a number of the study participants had questions, many of them did not go to the faith communities they were a part of, nor did they see the institution as a resource. Further, ten of the participants identified as being "cradle" Christians, meaning that they had been brought up in the context of a faith community, with seven noting their active participation – at their parents' behest – of attending Sunday School. Still, at significant junctures, as beliefs are questioned and reflected upon, participants found organized religion a vehicle that did not allow for that fuller exploration and/or expression either because of constraints, perceived constraints, or beliefs and practices that were incongruent with their lived experiences, specifically an often experienced judgmentalism, creating a gap, that pushed participants towards exploring their spirituality through other vehicles. More specifically, as participants began reflecting on larger questions of purpose and what they wanted to contribute

---

<sup>434</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival*, The Crown Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2012, 181-182, referenced in TH761E.

to society, social media exposed study participants in a more formal way to worldviews different from their own, particularly around issues of social justice.

Given that ten of the eleven study participants identified as Christian, and one as a former Roman Catholic, now agnostic, it is appropriate to speak of the search for renewed theological conversation. Specifically, as participants offered comments and sentiments that included

- faith communities participants were familiar with cared about different things than they did.
- “It becomes about drilling down into stuff that I don’t really care about.”
- “My church gets caught up in talking about things that mean little to me.”

there may be opportunity for faith communities to engage people in that place where faith and belief meet life. If that is to happen, this theological conversation must not only include faith community practices but also those in day to day living.

The concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on what people do rather than on ‘official’ religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies, is known as ‘the practical turn’: the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people.<sup>435</sup>

“Social media has really shaped my faith. There were times in my life where it provided a forum for reading and questioning” said participant 10. Participants were looking for more than prescribed answers – they were looking to engage, to contemplate, and to go deeper, and they were looking for space and forum and, at times, companions, through and with which to do this and the majority of participants felt that their faith communities would not be open to their

---

<sup>435</sup> R. Ganzevoort, & Johan Roeland, “Lived religion: the praxis of Practical Theology”, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 18 (2014), 93.

questions. Further, as Leonard Sweet and Philip Clayton note, there has been a change in the theological audience, theology is no longer centralized but rather generated in a co-operative way where context, actuality, and relevance are definitive, and theology is no longer authoritative but personal.<sup>436</sup> What all of this can lead to, rather organically but intentionally, is space to explore religious and spiritual beliefs in a forum that allows for context, life experience, and a variety of perspectives – perhaps descriptive rather than prescriptive. When speaking about Twitter, Leonard Sweet said “We need both surface and depth, not the surface replacing the depths. When I look for something to tweet about, I find myself paying attention to life in heightened ways. With Twitter, every day is an awakening to things that never would have registered before. Twitter gives me openings through which I can dive into newly discovered depths.”<sup>437</sup>

Nine participants spoke about being connected with friends, people, and groups – in various places around the world - relating to social justice and democracy and actively taking part in discussions and the sharing of opinions. In the context of this study, all participants connectedness through social media emboldened their healthy questioning and critical understandings. Sweet thinks of Twitter like a medieval village green, which is just one of the platforms through which the power described by Foucault is shifted.

If we were living a millennium ago, our lives would revolve around a village commons. In the course of a day, we would physically pass each other many times and exchange greetings: “How was your lunch?” “Who you working for now?” “What are you carrying?” Wireless technology enables the same multiplicity of personal exchanges to take place today, except now it’s with people from around the world. Twitter is the new global commons. Twitter connects me both to others and to what’s hot, what’s current, what’re

---

<sup>436</sup> Philip Clayton, 2010, ‘Theology and the church after Google’, *The Prince-ton Theological Review*, 15(2):7-20, and Leonard Sweet, 2014, Twitter theology: 5 Ways Twitter has changed my life and helped me be a better disciple of Jesus, [https://www.leonardsweet.com/article\\_details.php?id=55](https://www.leonardsweet.com/article_details.php?id=55), accessed October 5, 2020.

<sup>437</sup> Leonard Sweet, 2012, “In the Beginning was the Tweet,” <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/faith/beginning-was-tweet/>, accessed December 3, 2020.

the reigning gossip and styles of this new global village. With Twitter I can keep one ear perpetually pinned to the ground.<sup>438</sup>

In this study, it became clear that there now exists a tension for many faith communities. On the one hand, Sweet's idea of a medieval village green, an environment where theology is generated in a co-operative way and on the other, Foucault's ideas around pastoral power that can manifest itself in a disempowering of the flock.

In churches, the shepherds have a tendency to exercise epistemological power over the sheep. Church leaders are regarded as bearers or guardians of knowledge who have been divinely authorized as shepherds, for shepherds speak to the sheep on behalf of *the* good shepherd. This means that the church community—that is, both the church leaders and the congregants—has a tendency to interpret leaders' interpretations as *true* and to develop a culture of obedience. Moreover, a church leader's divinely authorized epistemic authority and oversight of a church's formal and informal conversations (i.e., its discursive practices) are further reinforced by rituals and practices, like commissioning, ordination, and enthronement, that increase the sense of authority for these leaders. These rituals and the elevated language we use to describe almost all actions and relationships in the church serve to obscure power relations, as the complex relations between leaders and followers are colored by a piety that is inflected by words like *sacrifice* and *obedience*.<sup>439</sup>

In the context of this research, and with the work of Sweet in mind, some inferences can be made between a pre-social media and social media thinking around religious and spiritual beliefs.<sup>440</sup>

<b>Pre-social media</b>	<b>Social media</b>
It is necessary to be right	It is necessary to be in relationship
God is in charge	God chose to be among us
Capital campaign	Homeless campaign
Statement of faith	Life of faith

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Steven G. Ogden, *Ekklesia As Open Space: Responding to the Church's Power Problem*, January 28, 2019, <https://theotherjournal.com/2019/01/28/ekklesia-as-open-space-responding-to-church-power-problem/#easy-footnote-bottom-4-11792>, accessed January 3, 2021.

<sup>440</sup> This chart is a slight adaptation of some of the dichotomies found in Leonard Sweet's *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival*.

Build something	Meet someone
-----------------	--------------

There are many indicators that this research is about more than technology and social media platforms themselves but rather a broader conversation about religion and culture, or perhaps even a right-brain and left-brain scenario. The left-brained environment concerns itself with words that include those referenced earlier in the context of pastoral power and then some; words such as debate, divide, truth, obedience, sacrifice. The right-brained environment, by contrast, would concern itself more with how Jesus lived, for example; telling stories, using metaphors and imagery, accepting mystery and paradox, and pursuing relationships.<sup>441</sup>

“A TGIF [Twitter, Google, Internet, Facebook] revival is not a revival of an institution or a tradition, but a revival of the body of Christ as it reconstitutes itself and breathes virality into an already present organism.”<sup>442</sup> For faith communities, this may mean a transition from regulator to resourcer and embrace a truly participatory model. “Before Google, success belonged to those who controlled content. The rest of us had to get it from the controllers. After Google, success belongs to those who give away content: we’ll give you what you need to succeed.”<sup>443</sup> Some anecdotal commentary posits that it is because of social media’s inherently participatory nature that there will be a generation missing from the pews of many faith communities. Leonard Sweet defines this nature as “someone’s participation [having] the ability to shape the content of the experience itself. Googlers function with a twofold test of participation: (1) Am I learning something? (2) Am I contributing something? If the answer to either question is no, they get out of there quick.”<sup>444</sup> Simply knowing this can shape a possible

---

<sup>441</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Viral*.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>443</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Viral*, 195.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.



direction for faith communities if it is looking to engage with a diverse demographic through social media. If anything, it brings to light the multiplicity of ways that faith communities can tell stories of faith and life from the lips of avatars or characters in second life to tweets and posts.

The majority of interview participants were reluctant to be labelled as religious (9 participants) but entirely comfortable being labelled as spiritual (11 participants). Further, emerging adults tend not to want to be perceived as being narrow-minded or exclusivist when speaking about their faith and, as such, soften their claims “[...]by acknowledging the limitations of what they know about other religions.”<sup>445</sup> To borrow a term, this may be a part of making the *village green* an environment of mutual learning, exploration, and relationship. And part of relationship is the telling of story.

Experiences that involve being unable to tell one’s story or authentically explore questions relating to the intersection of life and religious and spiritual beliefs are particularly distressing. Stories are important – for meaning making, for exploration, for life. Stories are that which can lift us up and empower, or can form the prison which confines us, but not being able to tell engage in the telling of our story, the extension of which is being heard, for the participants always choked and injured. The participants who spoke about being silenced interpreted the silencing as a metric of their value; in other words, they felt they had no value in their faith communities and that they were “less than.” “They hate me before they know me” offered one participant. And so, as participants articulated an unwillingness to accept things at face value but wanting to go deeper, and as they were restless with beliefs that did not dovetail with a lived experience:

---

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

- social media acted as a bridge to explore their spirituality
- the confines of doctrine or faith community praxis were experienced as not as present in the social media space
- this searching and finding was formative as the participants sought to locate themselves on an extensive socio-cultural map.

Where this was particularly evident and raw in the study occurred as some participants articulated their struggles in reconciling their sexual orientation with the religious messaging and teaching from faith communities, including those of their childhoods. “I fundamentally believe that everyone has value. I don’t want to share antiquated messages about things we know better about now...like being queer. It’s not a disease,” offered one participant. The participants in this study consistently were looking for deeper meaning, in how they encountered things, such as texts and experiences, and not accepting information and traditions *carte-blanche*, including from their family of origin and contexts. In so doing they pointed to a reading of ancient texts, for example, in a way that exposed biases, they pointed towards a desire to go deeper – moving towards a hermeneutic of trust – wanting the text to say something that they fundamentally believed to be true (in this case that “everything has value”) and, further, a community that would allow them the space to engage in that exploration. Sharing information through social media has influenced how participants see others, the world, and themselves by providing that space to explore ideas and to express themselves more freely. A combination of a keen awareness of the power of the algorithm, a hermeneutic of suspicion, and hermeneutic of trust, participants were able to leverage the power of social media for their inquiry and exploration into

“underlying human social relationships that govern the balance of who and what we all care about.”<sup>446</sup>

The author Simon Sinek offers that “we offer a view of ourselves to the outside world based on what we think they want from us, not based on who we really are. We do the things that we hope will gain us acceptance all in search of that comfort, that feeling like we belong.”<sup>447</sup>

Participants in this study in various ways were seeking inclusion and recognition, within an environment that values diversity. If theology becomes a more organic, collaborative process, a variety of voices is intrinsic. Those who *have* historically and typically been dominant, and at times exclusive, voices in the context of this study include people and ideals alike: pastors, faith communities, capitol “C” church, ecclesial traditions, homophobia, stereotypes, praxis, doctrine, and various hermeneutics. Each of the participants was willing to navigate the complexities of the workings of social media, pushing through conforming, towards authentic expression, and feedback loops towards genuine dialogue. This was important for meaning making which can serve as a way forward that can navigate tensions in formation, namely validation, authority, empathy, constraints, contradiction, and digital spaces can be experienced as deeply relational.<sup>448</sup>

Many faith communities are vacillating in their response to technology, namely with optimism, pessimism, and with what Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner call technological ambiguity.<sup>449</sup> But ultimately, it is useful for the worlds of faith and spirituality, which some

---

<sup>446</sup> Michael Rundle, "Zuckerberg: Telepathy Is the Future of Facebook," *WIRED*, October 04, 2017, accessed April 8, 2018, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/facebook-zuckerberg-qa-the-future>. Referenced in TH648X and TH648Z.

<sup>447</sup> <https://blog.startwithwhy.com/refocus/2010/12/have-you-ever-gone-to-a-sporting-event-and-seen-someone-on-the-subway-wearing-the-same-jersey-as-you-and-said-hey-wh.html>

<sup>448</sup> Mary E. Hess, *A New Culture of Learning*, 17.

<sup>449</sup> Heidi Campbell, and Steven Garner. *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016).

define as a question of being,<sup>450</sup> and science and technology to seek each other out and enter into conversation.<sup>451</sup> What is perhaps most interesting is the call to faith communities for a new paradigm to address the influence of new technologies on meanings, values, social and religious frameworks and the derived norms.<sup>452</sup> “In interaction with random objects, the post human will construct a new reality totally based on available networks and the information within them.”<sup>453</sup>

Faith communities, participants and leaders, now find themselves in a new religious landscape, “one where the mainline church has lost the central and privileged place it once held...”<sup>454</sup> Keith Anderson notes a moving away from dividing itself into its “...constituent parts, gauging success by how many and which committees and groups there are, and how official lines of communication and authority are functioning”<sup>455</sup> and towards “...mapping the new and deepening, unexpected and surprising connections taking place between people and groups.”<sup>456</sup> This does not mean abandoning all traditional beliefs or to abandon faith communities altogether. The take away for faith communities from these study participants is a longing for faith communities to enter in good conscience into honest and open dialogue and exploration; a dialogue in which participants are not committed in advance to landing where past theologians or faith communities have landed.<sup>457</sup>

## Limitations and Future Direction

---

<sup>450</sup> Ben Van Lier et al., “Technology Encounters Spirituality.” *Studies in Spirituality* 24 (2014): 341, doi:10.2143/SIS.24.0.3053502.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>454</sup> Keith Anderson, *The Digital Cathedral: Networked Ministry in a Wireless World* (New York: Morehouse Pub., 2015), 39.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> P. Clayton, 2010, ‘Theology and the church after Google’, *The Prince-ton Theological Review*, 15(2):7-20, 20.

As with any research project, there are limitations to the gathered data that require further consideration. This study focused on adults aged 18 – 35 in a Canadian context. While not intentional, all but one of the participants were Christian, all were white, and all had religious backgrounds. It would be useful for future research to include, with greater specificity, those who hold New Age beliefs, or those of Eastern religions, or other contemporary Canadian religious movements. There are other social media users, surely, born in those same years, who have different religious and ethnic backgrounds than those used for this study. Further, the study did not include participants who do not use social media at all.

The study did not explore in fine detail exactly what participants were doing on social media in the hours that it was utilized. Some depend on social media for their work, others use it voluntarily and of their own accord, and some surely move back and forth between the two. Is social media use uniform in its effects on religious and spiritual beliefs regardless of purpose? Many participants considered themselves to be spiritual but not religious. All indications are that this is a fast growing demographic. Does the rise of network technology contribute to a lack of religious affiliation, or are cultural and contextual factors unrelated to social media dominant? Further, why is it that despite the relative newness of internet technology in general, with its various platforms, still considered a culprit by many in main-line Christian faith communities in a hundreds year old debate on the secularization of society? Future researchers may wish to consider some of these areas of inquiry and McLuhan's notion that "the medium is the message" may prove a valuable starting point given that the way in which anything is delivered has a significant influence on how the content is interpreted.

## Theological Reflection

I made my way to my dad's grave. In the cold, wind-swept fields there were markers and markers and markers. Varied in size and style and age. Name after name. Some barely legible. Who they were, only God knows that now. Here they all lie...patriarchs, matriarchs, children. I ran my fingers across the text carved into the stone...*Meine Seele ist stille zu Gott*. And as I touched the carving of his favourite flower, as I gazed across the field and across the universe, I began to think of how these stones, unattached to the memories of living people, are essentially meaningless curiosities. Tweets and posts are much the same in my mind – meaningless without attachment to people. As I gazed at the names on markers as far as I could see, it occurs to me these were not giants of the past. Not heroes. But likely frazzled, regular, un-curated, real, people. Jesus calls these people blessed.

How easy it can be to view the beatitudes - this list of blessed are's – as a command for us to try harder. Be meeker. Be poorer. Be hungrier. And if you are, then you will be blessed. My pretext, and the pretext of so many that I sit with, is an intense feeling of unworthiness. "I am not worthy of love or belonging." If the plethora of books in the self-help section in the bookstore is any indication, if my doctoral research is any indication, if the correspondence that I get is any indication, this is a significant leitmotif in society. But then I wonder, where that comes from? Why is that so real? I remember that the philosopher Michel Foucault talked a lot about the idea of reality as a social construct. What is real? How do you know what you know? How do you see things? How is that shaped? And then I thought about the people in my life who have shown me Jesus. Who have reminded me of what the sacred is. Who have embraced me when no one else would.

In his book, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, it is notable that Jerome Neyrey translates the Greek word *makarios*, a word that the New Revised Standard Version translates as ‘blessed,’ as ‘honored.’ Sarah Dylan Breuer says that the Beatitudes, then, “don’t show Jesus as pop psychologist, telling people how to be happy; they show Jesus giving honor to those pushed out to the margins of their culture.”<sup>458</sup> This resonates thematically with my study that encountered stories of people feeling marginalized, particularly by the church. Neyrey goes on to suggest that the last Beatitude become the starting point: "Honored are you when people revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account." Being pushed out, or not belonging, because of wealth, status, connection, family, illness, ability, or any number of reasons, can create genuine hardship. This hardship could include, as the Beatitudes say, hunger, thirst, and mourning.

Sarah Dylan Breuer writes:

Jesus gathers in all of these people who have are completely bereft and without honor in their culture's eyes, and he gives them two gifts which more than compensate for their very real losses. Jesus gives them honor. In front of all the crowds, Jesus ascribes honor to them, declaring that these are the people whom the God of Israel honors. Their human fathers may have disowned them, but they are children of the God who created the universe, to whom all honor belongs. And that brings up the second gift that Jesus gives them: He makes them family. They are children of one Father, and that makes them brothers and sisters. They will never be bereft in a community that sees themselves as family, and that cares for one another in ways that show that they take that family relationship with utmost seriousness. What a challenge to the church!<sup>459</sup>

I once heard a sermon years ago, from a preacher whose name I do not remember, whether you hear the Gospel as good news or bad, depends on where you’re standing when you hear it.

Dovetailing on Dylan Breuer’s words, one could also say who you are makes a difference in

---

<sup>458</sup> Sarah Dylan Breuer, *Lectionary notes for Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A*, [www.sarahlaughed.net](http://www.sarahlaughed.net), accessed June 1, 2021.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*

what you hear. The congregation that gathered around Jesus that day – with all of their woes, ailments, pain, possessions, and suffering – surely must have felt that God was not pleased with them. Burt Burleson notes

and in the midst of their suffering, not only is human instinct telling them the gods must not be pleased with them, their religious culture teaches them ‘If you are ill, there must be a skeleton in your spiritual closet.’ So Jesus’ congregation “on the mountain” is suffering not only from every sort of disease, but also from the deep suspicion that God does not like them and is making that apparent in their twisted bodies and disordered thoughts. Whoever has God’s blessing, it is not them.<sup>460</sup>

Matthew, mindful of the Jewish audience, has Jesus go up the mount, just as Moses did.

Imagine what it would have been like to hear this teacher who is come from God say, “You are blessed.” Those are the first words out of Jesus’ mouth. “You are blessed if you are spiritually poor, if you do not have it together spiritually. You are blessed of God.” Over and over again, imagines Burleson, there is Jesus seeing the crowd, perhaps modeling a way of seeing for us, and looking people in the eyes, and saying over and over and over “you are blessed.”<sup>461</sup> “You have God’s blessing—what you need most, what is essential to live. It is not because of anything you are or have done or will do. It is simply yours.”<sup>462</sup>

In her classic children’s book *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Margery Williams gives a definition of “real” in a conversation between two toys: the young Velveteen Rabbit and the older, wiser Skin Horse:

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit... “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

---

<sup>460</sup> Burt Burleson, *You Are Blessed*, Centre for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2008, via <https://docplayer.net/21604018-You-are-blessed-matthew-5-1-11.html>

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.



“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

[Williams, Margery; Nicholson, William (2013-07-16). *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Kindle Locations 40-50). HarperCollins Canada. Kindle Edition.)]

Jesus embodies a love that makes us real and where we find ourselves on a spectrum of virtues is not what makes them or us considered blessed by Jesus. In other words, these are not conditions that we should try to meet to be blessed. “What if these are not virtues we should aspire to but what if Jesus saying blessed are the meek is not instructive –what if it’s performative? ...meaning the pronouncement of blessing is actually what confers the blessing itself.”<sup>463</sup>

Robert H. Smith offers that

---

<sup>463</sup> Nadia Bolz Weber, *Some Modern Beatitudes – A Sermon For All Saints Sunday*, November 6, 2014. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/11/some-modern-beatitudes-a-sermon-for-all-saints-sunday/>, accessed January 31, 2021.

Matthew reveals a Christian movement of deep diversity struggling inwardly for its own soul. Matthew wrestles with the question, 'What is the form of life and discipleship to which the resurrected Jesus is calling us?' Matthew answers the question by re-issuing the story of Jesus. The gospel reveals that Matthew (and Matthew's Jesus) values righteousness and agape above charismatic display in exorcism, miracle, and ecstatic utterance. And, what has been asserted [is that], Matthew (and Matthew's Jesus) values justice, mercy, and faith or fidelity above sacrifice (9:13; 12:7), above tithe (23:23-24), above the entire web of obligations characteristic of the time of 'old rules.' I hope it is neither silly nor superficial to remark that the Christian movement today, as a whole and even within my own ecclesial body, continues to struggle as did Matthew's community. What do we owe to God, to church bodies with their rules, to our scriptures and our tradition, to one another, especially to the wayward and the broken, to the non-conforming, and to the strong in our midst who conscientiously disagree with us?<sup>464</sup>

In *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, Erik Kolbell, commenting on the social implications of the Beatitudes, speaks of Jesus as Rabbi. For Kolbell, this is not about creating a new religion but about reviving an old one.<sup>465</sup> Perhaps the Beatitudes could revive present day religion as well. So, in the spirit of this research

Supposing that Jesus lived on earth as a human being in this day and age, would he have tweeted? This question recently came to my mind while I was reading yet another tweet from a theologian. I had realised that an ongoing theological discussion is being conducted in the Twitter world. Something within me immediately wanted to say 'No.' After all, one cannot cram great theological truths into the characters that are allotted to one on Twitter. But then I remembered that Jesus himself did not preach lengthy and ponderous sermons. After all, did he not tell people stories? Was he not, precisely, a master of the aphorism, the short, powerful maxim? Maybe this is one of the things that went wrong with the church over the centuries. We have subjected the gospel to long and weighty arguments, whereas Jesus uttered truths that were briefly stated and easily understood. It seems to me that Jesus is already at home in the Twitter world.<sup>466</sup>

The Beatitudes have something to say to us in a time that includes rapidly evolving technology and platforms. More specifically, people have referred to the modern day economy

---

<sup>464</sup> Robert H. Smith, "Blessed Are the Poor in (Holy) Spirit"?: (Matthew 5:3)", *Word & World* 18, no. 4 (1998): 389-396.

<sup>465</sup> Erik Kolbell, *What Jesus Meant: the Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

<sup>466</sup> Neels Jackson, *Would Jesus also have tweeted? Beeld*, 6 Junie, [translation from the original Afrikaans]

as a “knowledge based economy.” Knowledge, disseminated through various means and, notably, quickly via social media, underpins technology and technological advancement. The Beatitudes are a form of wisdom: wisdom about our relationship with God and how that relationship is linked to our relationships with others. This is all then linked together with the concept of justice. Technology and social media can help us work for justice, in our own lives, and in society.

Reflecting on the Beatitudes, Jesus might tweet:<sup>467</sup>

### Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones who are alone. Or feel alone.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones who have to keep it together for others. Blessed are the ones who don't have the space to be vulnerable.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones who know the loss that comes with having loved.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones for whom death and grief and mourning and crying and pain are not abstract.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K

### Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are those who are more than subjects in your research, Mark.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)


Blessed are those who have left organized religion. Blessed are those who still think it has something to offer.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K

<sup>467</sup> Photo of Jesus statue (adapted), Joshua Gresham, www.unplash.com, accessed February 24, 2021.




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones who identify.  
Blessed are the ones who don't.  
Blessed are the ones who don't know.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)

Blessed are those who can't fathom anything new.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K

**Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.**




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones who like a Waldo on the page are desperate to be seen.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones no one hangs out with at school. Blessed are the ones who sit alone.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)

Blessed are those who haven't found their group yet. Blessed are those who feel they don't fit in anywhere.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)

Blessed are those who know pandemic fatigue.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)

Blessed are those who need an elastic to bring them back to the present moment.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)

Blessed are the closeted.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)

Blessed are those who have no champion.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realDonaldTrump [Follow](#)


Blessed are the transitioning.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K

**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones of whom the world knows only false narratives.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are they who do the hard work of truth and reconciliation. Blessed are the ones who lean honestly into systemic issues and work for change.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones who have made mistakes.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are they who are overwhelmed.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K

### **Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.**



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are those in the helping professions who are burned out.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K




**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are those who step in.  
Blessed are those step in it,  
for the sake of others.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K



**Jesus of Nazareth** @realJesus [Follow](#)

Blessed are the ones who have forgiven, or been forgiven, even when it was undeserved.

Retweets Likes  
**4,231** **18,236**

7:45 AM - 15 Nov 2019

83 4K 18K

As I think about this, a striking dimension of Jesus blessings is the fact that the Kingdom of heaven is seen in all of this – in the suffering, in the actions, and in the being. They are not blessed because misery is good or actions are praiseworthy. Jesus is blessing because that's who Jesus is. Jesus sees misery and knows through his own suffering that he belongs with them.

There is relating and relationship. Jesus meets people where they are, sees them, hears them, and journeys with them. There is a meeting in the *village green*.

Jesus shows up in an exceptionally vulnerable way and God is near in messy places. After all, Jesus' manger was filled with dirty straw and fleas and animal droppings. This Jesus shows up in places of weakness and vulnerability, places that by all accounts are counter-cultural and often counter-intuitive. This Jesus who turned the other cheek, who spoke truth to power, who forgave, who fed, who embraced, who wept, who inspired, who challenged, and ultimately, who loved.

Jesus embodies the love that makes us real. How did it go in the Velveteen Rabbit: "Over time, most of our hair may have been loved off, and our eyes may drop out, and we may get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things won't matter at all, because once we are Real we can't be ugly."<sup>468</sup>

Blessed says the Lord. Blessed.

---

<sup>468</sup> Margery Williams; William Nicholson, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (HarperCollins Canada: Kindle Edition), Kindle Locations 40-50.

## Appendix # 1

**Initial Questionnaire****Introduction screen/prompt:**

Welcome to a survey that will begin to explore the impact of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults. Today we will be gaining your thoughts and opinions in order to gain insight into particular aspects of the lives of emerging adults amidst rapid social and technological change. This questionnaire should take less than 20 minutes to complete. Be assured that all the answers you provide will be kept in confidence and only non-identifiable data will be presented. Please click 'Next' to begin.

**Questionnaire**<sup>469</sup>

1. I am
  - 18 – 24 years old
  - 25 – 35 years old
  
2. With what religious faith/denomination, if any, do you most closely identify?
  - Christian
    - Roman Catholic
    - Orthodox
    - Protestant
      1. Denomination \_\_\_\_\_
  - Jewish
  - Muslim
  - Sikh
  - Hindu
  - Buddhist
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Do not identify

[If no identification in Q2, skip Q9]

3. How long have you identified yourself with this faith/denomination?
  - Less than 1 year

---

<sup>469</sup> Some questions are drawn from or inspired by the University of Notre Dames "National Study of Youth and Religion," accessed February 14, 2017, <http://youthandreligion.nd.edu/> or Abdulwahaab Alsaif, "Investigate The Impact of Social Media on Students," BSc thesis, Cardiff Metropolitan University, 2016. [https://repository.cardiffmet.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10369/8338/10303\\_Abdulwahaab\\_Saif\\_S\\_Alsaif\\_Investigate\\_The\\_Impact\\_of\\_Social\\_Media\\_on\\_Students\\_108005\\_1416924025.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://repository.cardiffmet.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10369/8338/10303_Abdulwahaab_Saif_S_Alsaif_Investigate_The_Impact_of_Social_Media_on_Students_108005_1416924025.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

- 2-4 years  
 5-9 years  
 10 years or longer
4. Are you currently connected to a faith community YES/NO
- a. If YES, are you connected through (check all that apply)
- Membership  
 Attendance at religious services  
 Attendance at faith community's groups and/or events
5. Do you attend worship at the place where you are a member?
- YES  
 NO
- a. If NO do you attend worship within the same faith/denomination?
- YES  
 NO
- b. Do you attend worship somewhere else?
- YES  
 NO
6. On a scale of 1 – 5 where 1 = not religious and 5 = very religious,
- Do you consider yourself to be religious?                      1 2 3 4 5
7. On a scale of 1 – 5 where 1 = not spiritual and 5 = very spiritual,
- Do you consider yourself to be spiritual?                      1 2 3 4 5
8. Consider, for a moment, how often you directly have the experiences below and then circle the corresponding number, where 1 is many times a day, 2 is every day, 3 is most days, 4 is some days, 5 is once in a while, and 6 is never or almost never.<sup>470</sup>
- I feel the presence of a higher power in my life                      1 2 3 4 5 6
- I experience a connection to all life                      1 2 3 4 5 6
- I find strength in my religion                      1 2 3 4 5 6
- I find strength in my spirituality                      1 2 3 4 5 6
- I find comfort in my religion                      1 2 3 4 5 6

---

<sup>470</sup> Adapted from L.G. Underwood and J. Teresi, "The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Development, theoretical description, reliability, exploratory factor analysis, and preliminary construct validity using health related data" *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 24, 22-33.



I find comfort in my spirituality	1	2	3	4	5	6
I feel the love of a higher power for me directly	1	2	3	4	5	6
I feel the love of a higher power for me through others	1	2	3	4	5	6
I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation	1	2	3	4	5	6
I pray, meditate, reflect on a higher power	1	2	3	4	5	6

9. Indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.<sup>471</sup>

I was not very interested in religion until I began to ask questions about the meaning and purpose of my life.	1	2	3	4	5
My religious questions come out of tensions in my life and in my relation to the world.	1	2	3	4	5
My religious questions come out of the condition of the world.	1	2	3	4	5
I value my religious doubts and uncertainties.	1	2	3	4	5
Doubting is an important part of what it means to be religious.	1	2	3	4	5
Questions are far more central to my religious experience than are answers.	1	2	3	4	5
As I grow and change, I expect my religion also to grow and change.	1	2	3	4	5
There are many religious issues on which my views are still changing.	1	2	3	4	5

10. Indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.<sup>472</sup>

---

<sup>471</sup> Adapted from C.D. Batson and P.A. Schoenrade, "Measuring Religion as a Quest," *Journal of Scientific Study of Religion*, 30, 430-447.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

When I am ill, I pray for healing	1	2	3	4	5
I often read religious books, magazines, or pamphlets	1	2	3	4	5
I often watch or listen to religious programs	1	2	3	4	5
I believe there is only one true faith	1	2	3	4	5
It is important that I follow the religious beliefs of my parents	1	2	3	4	5
Obedience to religious doctrine is the most important aspect of my faith	1	2	3	4	5
It's important for me to make meaning in my life	1	2	3	4	5
I am spiritually hungry	1	2	3	4	5
I am open to organized religion	1	2	3	4	5
I value organized religion	1	2	3	4	5

11. Please answer the following, if 1 = not at all important and 5 = very important

How important is attending worship? 1 2 3 4 5

12. How frequently do you attend worship?

- Not at all
- A few times per year
- A few times per month
- Once per week
- More than once per week

13. Besides attending services, how frequently do you take part in other religious activities like bible study, choir rehearsal, or committee or ministry meetings?

- Not at all
- A few times per year
- A few times per month
- Once per week
- More than once per week

14. Do you use social media?

- No
- If yes, what platforms? (check all that apply)
  - Snapchat
  - Instagram
  - Twitter

- Facebook
- Tumblr
- Pintrest
- Linkedin
- WhatsApp
- Reddit
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

15. How long have you been using social media? If less than 1 year, enter 0.

- 0 years
- 1-2 years
- 3-4 years
- 5-9 years
- 10 or more years

16. What do you use social media for: (check all that apply)

- Connect with friends
- Purchase things
- Sell things
- Share news
- Post News
- Share pictures
- Post pictures
- School
- Work
- Job search
- Create content
- Get news headlines/stories
- Get information
- Dating
- Connect with special interest group(s)
- Religious content
- Spiritual content
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

17. In a typical week, how many hours do you estimate that you use social media per week?  
(Check one)

- 0 hours
- 1-4 hours
- 5-9 hours
- 10-19 hours
- 20-29 hours
- 30 or more hours

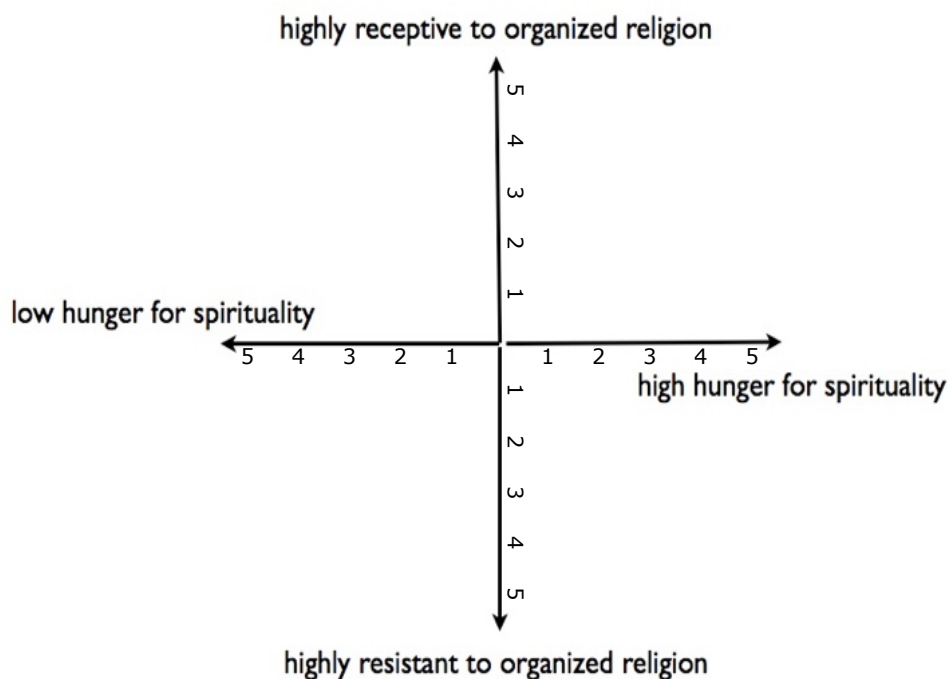
## Discussion Guide<sup>473</sup>

### Introduction

- Thank you for taking the initial questionnaire, agreeing to do this interview, and taking the time to speak with me.
  - In the next hour or so, I would like to have a conversation with you about your life, experiences, opinions, beliefs, feelings, hopes, problems, and social media use.
  - This interview is to hear from your perspective and in your own words
  - Some of what we may talk about today is personal
  - Please feel at ease to speak freely and honestly. There are no right or wrong answers.
  - I am not here to evaluate you, or your social media activities, but only to understand some pieces of your life as whatever it is. I am a researcher. You can tell me anything and it will not bother me or make me think better or worse of you. I truly only want to explore the phenomenon of social media and beliefs. So thank you for your candor.
  - [MUST READ] Everything you say is confidential – unless you tell me that you’re going to seriously harm someone else or yourself, or that someone is seriously harming you - otherwise, everything that you say is confidential. I will only present non-identifiable data in my work.
  - [MUST READ] You can decline to answer any question you wish – just let me know. You can also terminate this conversation at any time.
  - I may take notes during our conversation to remind myself of something to ask you later or to help me with the research further along. I may periodically check to make sure the recorder is still working but I will still be listening so please keep talking.
  - Are we okay to begin?
1. Ask participants to locate themselves on John Roberto’s grid? Then ask participant to share why they’ve located themselves there. Would you always have located yourself there?

---

<sup>473</sup> Some questions are drawn from or inspired by the University of Notre Dame’s “National Study of Youth and Religion,” accessed February 14, 2017, <http://youthandreligion.nd.edu/> or Abdulwahaab Alsaif, “Investigate The Impact of Social Media on Students,” BSc thesis, Cardiff Metropolitan University, 2016. [https://repository.cardiffmet.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10369/8338/10303\\_Abdulwahaab\\_Saif\\_S\\_Alsaif\\_Investigate\\_The\\_Impact\\_of\\_Social\\_Media\\_on\\_Students\\_108005\\_1416924025.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://repository.cardiffmet.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10369/8338/10303_Abdulwahaab_Saif_S_Alsaif_Investigate_The_Impact_of_Social_Media_on_Students_108005_1416924025.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)



2. [Informed by initial questionnaire] You've indicated that you're connected with a faith community?
  - a. how long have you been connected with [your] faith community?
  - b. is this your family's faith community?
  - c. how are you connected with [your] faith community?
  - d. did you attend [there] as a child?
  - e. how would you describe your faith community?
  
3. [Informed by Q19] Do you consider yourself to be religious? Tell me about that.
  - a. Describe what being religious means to you.
  - b. Where does that description come from?
  - c. Would someone know that you're religious? How? OR How do you express your religion?
    - i. PROMPT– Is attending worship important to you? Tell me about that.
  - d. What are some of the things you believe in terms of your religion?
    - i. PROMPT - Do you think that all religions are equally true or untrue? Why is that? How would you evaluate religious beliefs?
  
4. [Informed by Q18] Do you consider yourself to be spiritual? Tell me about that.
  - a. Describe what being spiritual means to you
  - b. Where does that description come from?
  - c. How does that spirituality get expressed?

5. What has most influenced your religion or spirituality?
6. Have you noticed changes in your belief system since becoming an adult?
  - a. PROMPT - What are they?
  - b. PROMPT - Why do you think they changed/what do you think accounts for the change?
7. Do you think it's ok to have doubts about your beliefs?
  - a. PROMPT – tell me more about why that is.
8. Do you think it's ok to explore other beliefs/belief systems/religions/spiritualities? Why is that?
9. You've indicated that you use social media. Tell about what you do on social media?
  - a. PROMPT – do you read content? What content do you read? What on social media affirms/does not affirm your beliefs?
  - b. PROMPT – do you share content? What content do you share? Do you check content before responding or sharing/reposting? Why or why not? If someone asked for prayers on social media, what do you do with that request?
  - c. PROMPT – do you create content? What content do you create? Have you/would you/do you create religious content?
10. What is the best thing about social media?
11. What is the worst thing about social media?
12. Has social media influenced your beliefs?
  - a. If no, how has it not?
  - b. If yes, how has it?
13. Is there a faith/denomination that you follow on social media?
  - a. PROMPT - What do you do with that content?
  - b. PROMPT - Do you follow them/check their posts?
  - c. PROMPT - What kind of things do they post/share?
  - d. PROMPT - Do you find this helpful? Why or why not?
  - e. PROMPT - Does this impact your beliefs?
14. That's it for my questions. Is there anything that we have not talked about that you feel is important for me to better understand your faith or religious beliefs or spirituality or about social media? Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Thank you for speaking with me today. I really enjoyed hearing about your experiences and opinions. Again, I will only use non-identifying data when presenting this research. Do you have any other questions?

# Social Media & Belief

A research study on the impact of social media on the religious & spiritual beliefs of emerging adults

## JOIN THE STUDY

Send an email to  
ehle1428@mylaurier.ca  
declaring your interest  
and Mark will reply with  
the details

## PROCESS

Fill out an initial  
questionnaire which may  
lead to a follow-up  
interview where you can  
share your thoughts and  
claim your thank you  
gift card

## PARTICIPATION

You must be between  
the ages of 18 - 35

**ARE YOU ON SOCIAL MEDIA?  
ARE YOU NOT ON SOCIAL MEDIA?**

**ARE YOU BETWEEN THE AGES OF 18 & 35?**

**MARK WANTS TO HEAR FROM YOU!**

This study will explore the impact of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults in Canada. The study will examine how social media potentially disrupts, promotes, or interacts with religious beliefs and spirituality and will attempt to offer insights for faith communities on how they might engage emerging adults amidst rapid social and technological change; study outcomes are anticipated to make a significant contribution to the context field of pastoral leadership.

To learn more or to sign up, contact Mark Ehlebracht, PhD Candidate & Principal Investigator,  
Martin Luther University College, Waterloo, ON  
ehle1428@mylaurier.ca or (519) 745-4705 ext 25



## Appendix #4



April 27, 2020

Dear Mark Ehlebracht

REB # 6465

Project, "Exploring the Impact of Social Media on the Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of Emerging Adults"

REB Clearance Issued: April 27, 2020

**REB Expiry / End Date: April 30, 2021**

The Research Ethics Board of Wilfrid Laurier University has reviewed the above proposal and determined that the proposal is ethically sound. If the research plan and methods should change in a way that may bring into question the project's adherence to acceptable ethical norms, please submit a "Request for Ethics Clearance of a Revision or Modification" form for approval before the changes are put into place. This form can also be used to extend protocols past their expiry date, except in cases where the project is more than four years old. Those projects require a new REB application.

**Notes:**

1. REB approvals do not supersede any current university guidelines or measures in place to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) including restrictions on university laboratory, field, or in-person research activities. If laboratory, field, or in-person research activities are described in this application, please do not undertake these portions of the project until the university approves these activities to go forward.
2. Changes made to approved protocols to eliminate risks related to the COVID-19 outbreak can be implemented immediately, without prior notice to or approval from the REB. In such cases, researchers will need to ensure that they are not increasing the level of risk to participants and may need to ask participants to sign revised informed consent forms. Such changes must be reported to the REB as soon as possible (no more than 10 business days from occurrence). To report these changes, please submit the "Reporting Changes Made to Approved Projects to Eliminate an Immediate Risk to Participants" event form now available on Romeo (see [Connect](#) or the [Students](#) website for instructions).

Please note that you are responsible for obtaining any further approvals that might be required to complete your project.

Laurier REB approval will automatically expire when one's employment ends at Laurier.

If any participants in your research project have a negative experience (either physical, psychological or emotional) you are required to submit an "Adverse Events Form" within 24 hours of the event.

You must complete the online "Annual/Final Progress Report on Human Research Projects" form annually and upon completion of the project. ROMEO will automatically keep track of these annual reports for you. When you have a report due within 30 days (and/or an overdue report) it will be listed under the 'My Reminders' quick link on your ROMEO home screen; the number in brackets next to



'My Reminders' will tell you how many reports need to be submitted. Protocols with overdue annual reports will be marked as expired. Further the REB has been requested to notify Research Finance when an REB protocol, tied to a funding account has been marked as expired. In such cases Research Finance will immediately freeze funding tied to this account.

All the best for the successful completion of your project.

(Useful links: [ROMEO Login Screen](#) ; [REB Students Webpage](#); [REB Connect Webpage](#))

Yours sincerely,



**Sybil Geldart, PhD**  
**Vice-Chair, University Research Ethics Board**  
**Wilfrid Laurier University**

## Appendix #5



May 29, 2020

Dear Mark,

REB # 6465

Project, "Exploring the Impact of Social Media on the Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of Emerging Adults"

REB Clearance Issued: April 27, 2020

**Expiry / End Date: April 30, 2021**

I have reviewed the changes ( Expanding recruitment outside of Waterloo Region and Southwestern Ontario; moving interviews to an online platform; revised consent document reflecting these changes) to the above proposal and determined that they are ethically sound.

**Note:** REB approvals do not supersede any current university guidelines or measures in place to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) including restrictions on university laboratory, field, or in-person research activities. If laboratory, field, or in-person research activities are described in this application, please do not undertake these portions of the project until the university approves these activities to go forward.

Any changes to the research protocol should be submitted to the REB via submission of a modification request for review and clearance prior to commencement.

Please note that you are responsible for obtaining any further approvals that might be required to complete your project.

(This letter has been issued on behalf of Dr. J. Kalmar, by Courtney Lunt, Research Compliance Officer.)

(Useful links: [ROMEO Login Screen](#) ; [REB Students Webpage](#); [REB Connect Webpage](#))

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "JK", is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Jayne Kalmar, PhD  
Chair, University Research Ethics Board  
Wilfrid Laurier University

## Appendix #6

**Initial Questionnaire Consent****WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

The Impact of Social Media on Religious and Spiritual Beliefs in Emerging Adults  
 Principal Investigator: Mark Ehlebracht (PhD Student, Martin Luther University College)  
 Faculty Advisor(s)/supervisor(s): Dr. Kristine Lund (Professor; Assistant Principal; Director of  
 Spiritual Care and Psychotherapy Programs, Martin Luther University College)

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults, in a Canadian context. The researcher is a Laurier graduate student in the PhD program at Martin Luther University College working under the supervision of Dr. Kristine Lund.

**Information**

Participants will be asked to complete an initial, online questionnaire which may lead to a follow-up interview. The initial questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes to complete and the follow-up interview will be between 60 and 75 minutes in length. Participants to be interviewed will be randomly selected according to the following criterion: frequency of social media use, receptivity to organized religion, and “hunger” for spirituality. Information from participants, who are male or female or gender neutral, emerging adults (aged 18-35 years old) will be collected for this study. All participants will be residents of the Kitchener-Waterloo area.

- The goal of this study is to better understand the phenomenon of the impact of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults in Canada.

**Risks**

While there is no emotional discomfort or stress anticipated for participants completing the initial, online, questionnaire, the following safeguards will be used to minimize any discomforts: initial questionnaires can be completed in the location of the participant’s choice by connecting to a secure, on-line portal; confidentiality will be assured to all participants. You are free to discontinue the questionnaire at any time and to choose not to respond to any question.

**Benefits**

The research will contribute to the body of literature/knowledge of pastoral leadership by exploring the effects of social media on the religious beliefs of emerging adults in Canada. The study will explore how social media potentially disrupts, promotes, or interacts with their

religious and spiritual beliefs and will attempt to offer insights for faith communities on how they might engage emerging adults. Participants may develop different insights about their own religious and/or spiritual beliefs. These benefits outweigh the above noted risks because participants have the opportunity to withdraw at any point in the questionnaire, interviewing, and data analysis process.

### **Confidentiality**

The confidentiality/anonymity of your data will be ensured by: The names of those participating in this research will not be shared. I will use code-names in naming the participants in any written material. When the project is finished, all data, with identifying information removed, will be moved to a USB flash drive, which will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home. This raw data will be retained for 5 years after which it will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and the erasure of all files on computers and other electronic storage devices.

- The de-identified information will be kept for 5 years and will then be destroyed by the principal investigator.
- Identifying information will be stored separately from the data and will be kept for 5 years and will then be destroyed by the principal investigator.
- While in transmission on the internet, the confidentiality of data from the online questionnaire cannot be guaranteed.

### **Contact**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study you may contact the researcher, Mark Ehlebracht, at [ehle1428@mylaurier.ca](mailto:ehle1428@mylaurier.ca) or 519-745-4705, ext 25.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB#6465), which receives funding from the Research Support Fund. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131 or [REBChair@wlu.ca](mailto:REBChair@wlu.ca).

### **Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer any question or participate in any activity you choose.

If you withdraw from the study, you can request to have your data destroyed immediately.

**Feedback and Publication**

The results of this research will be published/presented in a dissertation, course project report, book, journal article, conference presentation, class presentation.

- The results of this research may be made available through Open Access resources.
- An executive summary of the findings from this study will be available by March 2021.
  
- You can request the executive summary by e-mailing ehle1428@mylaurier.ca. OR If you choose to provide your e-mail address for this purpose at the end of the study, the executive summary will be e-mailed to you by March 31, 2021

**Consent**

By clicking “submit”, you consent to participate in the research study as described above.

## **Follow-up Interview Consent**

### **WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

The Impact of Social Media on Religious and Spiritual Beliefs in Emerging Adults  
Principal Investigator: Mark Ehlebracht (PhD Student, Martin Luther University College)  
Faculty Advisor(s)/supervisor(s): Dr. Kristine Lund (Professor; Assistant Principal; Director of  
Spiritual Care and Psychotherapy Programs, Martin Luther University College)

Thank you for completing the initial questionnaire. You have been randomly selected to participate in an interview. The overall purpose of this study is to explore the effects of social media on the religious and spiritual beliefs of emerging adults, in a Canadian context.

#### **Information**

- Information from approximately 20 interview participants, who are male or female or gender neutral emerging adults (aged 18-35 years old) will be collected for this study. All participants will be residents of Canada.
- The audio from your interview will be digitally recorded. You have the right to refuse being recorded. Only I will have access to the recordings and information will be kept confidential. You will not be able to preview the recording. The recording will be transcribed by August 2020.
- The recording will be deleted following transcription.
- Interview participants will receive a \$10 gift card to a local coffee shop as a thank-you for their time. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will still receive this amount.

#### **Risks**

Interview participants may experience discomforts from questions regarding religious and spiritual beliefs, your faith community, social media use, and social life. The following safeguards will be used to minimize any discomforts: confidentiality will be assured to all participants (with limitations of internet data transmission clearly explained); interviews will be conducted via video conferencing using the Zoom platform and will be between 60 and 75 minutes in length. While confidentiality of data cannot be guaranteed while in transmission on the internet, interviews will be conducted via a reasonably secure online platform; participants will access the platform for the interview through a secure, personal link, that will not be shared with anyone other than the participant and emailed to only the participant in advance; the interviewer will not use a public or open Wi-Fi connection for the interview and will encourage the participant to do the same. You are free to discontinue the interview at any time

and to choose not to respond to any question. Should you become distressed, the following counselling agencies may be able to offer support:

Delton Glebe Counselling Centre  
177 Albert St., Waterloo, ON  
(519) 884-3305

KW Counselling Services Inc.  
480 Charles St. East, Kitchener, ON  
(519) 884-0000

### **Benefits**

The research will contribute to the body of literature/knowledge of pastoral leadership by exploring the effects of social media on the religious beliefs of emerging adults in Canada. The study will explore how social media potentially disrupts, promotes, or interacts with their religious and spiritual beliefs and will attempt to offer insights for faith communities on how they might engage emerging adults. Participants may develop different insights about their own religious and/or spiritual beliefs. These benefits outweigh the above noted risks because participants have the opportunity to withdraw at any point in the interviewing and data analysis process.

### **Confidentiality**

The confidentiality/anonymity of your data will be ensured by: The names of those participating in this research will not be shared. I will use code-names in naming the participants in any written material. Participant's personal information will be kept separately from the interview data, which will be labeled only with a code name. I will keep the data on an encrypted and password-protected computer. Any handwritten notes will be de-identified and stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. Only my supervisor, Dr. Kristine Lund, and I will have access to data collected from participants. My supervisor will only have access to the transcripts with all identifying information removed. The audiotapes will be erased after transcription – by approximately September 1, 2020. When the project is finished, all other data, with identifying information removed, will be moved to a USB flash drive, which will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home. This raw data will be retained for 5 years after which it will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and the erasure of all files on computers and other electronic storage devices.

- The de-identified data will be kept for 5 years and will then be destroyed by the principal investigator.
- Identifying information will be stored separately from the data and will be kept for 5 years and will then be destroyed by the principal investigator.
- If you consent, quotations will be used in write ups/presentations/publications/teaching and will not contain information that allows you to be identified. Direct quotations attributed to you will only be used with your review and approval; should this need arise, you will be contacted by the researcher.

### **Compensation**

Interview participants will receive a \$10 gift card to a local coffee shop as a thank-you for their time. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion you will still receive this amount.

### **Contact**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study you may contact the researcher, Mark Ehlebracht, at [ehle1428@mylaurier.ca](mailto:ehle1428@mylaurier.ca) or 519-745-4705, ext 25. This project has been reviewed

and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB#6465), which receives funding from the Research Support Fund. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131 or [REBChair@wlu.ca](mailto:REBChair@wlu.ca).

### **Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer any question or participate in any activity you choose. If you withdraw from the study, you can request to have your data destroyed immediately.

### **Feedback and Publication**

The results of this research will be published/presented in a dissertation, course project report, book, journal article, conference presentation, class presentation.

- The results of this research may be made available through Open Access resources.
- An executive summary of the findings from this study will be available by March 2021.
- You can request the executive summary by e-mailing [ehle1428@mylaurier.ca](mailto:ehle1428@mylaurier.ca). OR If you choose to provide your e-mail address for this purpose at the end of the study, the executive summary will be e-mailed to you by March 31, 2021

### **Consent**

Verbal, recorded consent at the beginning of the interview will be obtained for the following:

- I agree to my interview being audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.
- I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes from this research.



I agree to the use of direct quotations attributed to me only with my review and approval.

I have reviewed and understand the above information. I received a copy of this information via email. I agree to participate in this study.

I have reviewed this consent form with the participant before receiving the participant's verbal consent and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Bibliography

- Ahrens, C.E. "Being Silenced: The Impact of Negative Social Reactions on the Disclosure of Rape." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 38 (2006): 31-34.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-006-9069-9>.
- Allport, Gordon. *The Individual and His Religion: A Psychological Interpretation*. New York: MacMillan, 1950.
- Alsaif, Abdulwahaab. "Investigate The Impact of Social Media on Students." (BSc thesis, Cardiff Metropolitan University, 2016),  
[https://repository.cardiffmet.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10369/8338/10303\\_Abdulwahaab\\_Saif\\_S\\_Alsaif\\_Investigate\\_The\\_Impact\\_of\\_Social\\_Media\\_on\\_Students\\_108005\\_1416924025.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://repository.cardiffmet.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10369/8338/10303_Abdulwahaab_Saif_S_Alsaif_Investigate_The_Impact_of_Social_Media_on_Students_108005_1416924025.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Aladwani, Adel, and Yogesh Dwivedi. "Towards a theory of SocioCitizenry: Quality anticipation, trust configuration, and approved adaptation of governmental social media." *International Journal of Information Management*. 43. (2018): 261-272.  
 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.08.009.
- Anchor, Robert, and Mark Poster. "The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context." *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (1993): 829-830.  
 doi:10.2307/2167558.
- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. Are college students adults? Their conceptions of the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Adult Development*, 1, no. 4 (1994): 213– 224. <https://doi-org.libproxy.wlu.ca/10.1007/BF02277582>
- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. Young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood. *Youth & Society*, 29, no. 1 (1997): 3– 23.
- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties." *The American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (2000): 469–80.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>.
- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. *Adolescence and emerging adulthood: A cultural approach*, 2nd ed.. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, 2010.
- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199929382.001.0001>.
- ArXiv. "How the Internet Is Taking Away America's Religion." *MIT Technology Review*, September 19, 2014, accessed March 14, 2019,

<https://www.technologyreview.com/s/526111/how-the-internet-is-taking-away-americas-religion/>.

Assiter, Alison. "Althusser and Structuralism." *The British Journal of Sociology* 35, no. 2 (1984): 272–296. doi:10.2307/590235.

Augsburg Confession. *The Book of Concord*. Trans. By Theodore Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959.

Aupers, Stef, and Dick Houtman. "Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 21. (2006): 201-222. 10.1080/13537900600655894.

Bargh, John, and Katelyn McKenna, Katelyn. "The Internet and Social Life." *Annual Review of Psychology*. 55. (2004):573-90. 10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141922.

Batson, C.D. and P.A. Schoenrade. "Measuring Religion as a Quest." *Journal of Scientific Study of Religion*, 30 (1991): 430-447.

Beaudoin, C.E. "Explaining the relationship between internet use and interpersonal trust: Taking into account motivation and information overload." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, no. 3 (2008): 550-568.

Beaudoin, Tom. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. John Wiley & Sons, 2000.

Benner, Patricia. *Interpretive Phenomenology: Embodiment, Caring, and Ethics in Health and Illness*. SAGE Publications, 1994.

Berger, Peter. *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralistic Age*. Boston, MA: DeGruyter Mouton, 2014.

Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, 1(2), 99–112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1975.tb00258.x>

Biblioklept. "David Foster Wallace Describes Poststructuralism." *Biblioklept*, December 22, 2010, accessed February 16, 2019, <https://biblioklept.org/2010/12/22/david-foster-wallace-defines-poststructuralism/>.

Birks, Melanie, and Jane Mills. *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage Publications, 2011.

Blackburn, Simon. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Boase, Jeffrey. "Personal Networks and the Personal Communication System." *Information, Communication and Society*. 11. (2008):490-508. 10.1080/13691180801999001.

- Bolz Weber, Nadia. "Comparing Ourselves to Others; A Sermon on Pride, Despair and Scapegoats," October 26, 2016, accessed November 6, 2017, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2016/10/comparing-ourselves-to-others-a-sermon-on-pride-despair-and-scapegoats>.
- Bolz Weber, Nadia. "Some Modern Beatitudes – A Sermon For All Saints Sunday," November 6, 2014, accessed January 31, 2021, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/11/some-modern-beatitudes-a-sermon-for-all-saints-sunday/>.
- Bowen, A. M., and M.J. Bourgeois. "Attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students: the contribution of pluralistic ignorance, dynamic social impact, and contact theories." *Journal of American College Health* 50(2), (2001):91–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448480109596012>
- boyd, dannah. *It's Complicated the Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.
- Boyd, D., and N. Ellison. "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13. (2008):210-230. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x>
- Bredle, Jason & John Salsman, Scott Debb, Benjamin Arnold, and David Cella. (2011). "Spiritual Well-Being as a Component of Health-Related Quality of Life: The Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy—Spiritual Well-Being Scale." *Religions* 2 (2011). 10.3390/rel2010077.
- Bucher, Taina, and Anne Helmond. 2017. "The Affordances of Social Media Platforms." In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, edited by Jean Burgess, Thomas Poell, and Alice Marwick, 233-253. London and New York: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Burleson, Burt. *You Are Blessed*, Centre for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2008, <https://docplayer.net/21604018-You-are-blessed-matthew-5-1-11.html>
- Business Radio. "A 'World Without Mind': Big Tech's Dangerous Influence," *Knowledge@Wharton*, accessed November 15, 2018, <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/world-without-mind/>.
- Campbell, Colin. *The Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era*. Routledge, 2007.
- Campbell, Heidi, and Stephen Garner. *Networked Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.
- Campbell, Heidi. *When Religion Meets New Media*. London: Routledge, 2010.

- Cao, X., and L. Yu. (2019). "Exploring the influence of excessive social media use at work: a three-dimension usage perspective." *Int. J. Inf. Manage* 46 (2019):83–92. doi: 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.11.019
- Carpenter, DR. Phenomenology as Method, in J Helen, S Speziale, DR Carpenter, eds. *Qualitative Research in Nursing: Advancing the Humanistic Imperative*. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2007.
- Carr, Carolyn, Garth Benson, and Donald Tetreault. "Book Reviews." *Interchange* 26, no. 3 (1995): 329-337. doi:10.1007/BF01435517. [http://resolver.scholarsportal.info/resolve/08264805/v26i0003/329\\_br](http://resolver.scholarsportal.info/resolve/08264805/v26i0003/329_br)
- Catto, Rebecca. "What Can We Say About Today's British Religious Young Person? Findings from the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme." *Religion* 44, no. 1 (2013): 1-27. doi:10.1080/0048721X.2013.844740
- Cavavero, Adriana in Emilie Whitaker, "Social Media—Narrating and Othering Our Selves." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 7 (2014): 55-61.
- Cayley, David, and Charles Taylor. *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005.
- Chen, Angela. "Franklin Foer on How Silicon Valley Is Threatening Our Humanity," *The Verge*, September 10, 2017, accessed August 25, 2018, <http://www.theverge.com/2017/9/10/16263366/franklin-foer-book-world-without-mind-silicon-valley-technology-publishing-journalism>.
- Clairmont, Nicholas. "The Singularity Of Ray Kurzweil." *Big Think*, August 12, 2013, accessed October 30, 2018, <http://bigthink.com/100-biggest-ideas/the-singularity-of-ray-kurzweil>.
- Clayton, P. "Theology and the church after Google." *The Princeton Theological Review* 15, no. 2 (2010): 7-20.
- Collins-Mayo, Sylvia and Pink Dandelion. *Religion and Youth*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010.
- Cranton, P. *Becoming an authentic teacher in higher education*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Co, 2001.
- Creswell, John, and Cheryl Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Methods*, 4th ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2018.
- Damodaran, Leela & John Nicholls, Alan Henney, Frank Land, and Barbara Farbey. (2005). "The contribution of sociotechnical systems thinking to the effective adoption of e-government and the enhancement of democracy." *The Electronic Journal of E-Government* 3 (2005).

- Dasenbrock, Reed Way. "Becoming Aware of the Myth of Presence." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 8, no. 1/2 (1988): 1-11. <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.wlu.ca/stable/20865636>
- de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Cours de linguistique generale*. Published by C. Bally and A. Sechehaye (Paris: Payot, 1916). English translation by Wade Baski. *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).
- DeGraff, Jeff. "Digital Natives vs. Digital Immigrants." *Digital Natives vs. Digital Immigrants*, September 7, 2014, accessed June 1, 2018, <https://jeffdegraff.com/blog/2014/06/digital-natives-vs-digital-immigrants/>.
- Deleuze, Gilles. "How Do We Recognise Structuralism?" In *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*. Trans. David Lapoujade. Ed. Michael Taormina. *Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents ser.* Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004.
- "Department of Philosophy." *Philosophy of Human Nature | Department of Philosophy*, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://departments2.shc.edu/philosophy/philosophy-human-nature>.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method*. Broadview Press, 2017.
- "Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's Most-trusted Online Dictionary." *Merriam-Webster*, accessed April 05, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.
- Dittmar, Jeremiah, and Skipper Seabold. "Media, Markets and Institutional Change: Evidence from the Protestant." *The Industrial Revolution as an Energy Revolution | VOX, CEPR's Policy Portal*. August 19, 2015. Accessed June 17, 2018. <https://voxeu.org/article/media-markets-and-institutional-change-evidence-protestant-reformation>.
- Douglass, Carrie B. "From Duty to Desire: Emerging Adulthood in Europe and Its Consequences." *Child Development Perspectives* 1, no. 2 (2007): 101–8. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2007.00023.x>.
- Downey, Allen B. "Religious Affiliation, Education and Internet Use." arXiv:1403.5534 [stat]. Retrieved February 15, 2017. <https://arxiv.org/abs/1403.5534>.
- Dudovskiy, John. "Interpretivism (interpretivist) Research Philosophy." *Research-Methodology*, accessed June 16, 2018, <https://research-methodology.net/research-philosophy/interpretivism/>.
- Dylan Breuer, Sarah. *Lectionary notes for Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A*, [www.sarahlaughed.net](http://www.sarahlaughed.net), accessed June 1, 2021.
- Edgar, Brian. "The Theology of Theological Education." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29, no. 3 (2005): pp. 208-217. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a385/2ce9a6181f0a07978c54ae004a93e25f7b74.pdf>.

- Ehlebracht, Mark. "Social Media and Othering: Philosophy, Algorithms, and the Essence of Being Human," *Consensus* 40, no. 1 (2019): Article 3.
- N.B. Ellison, and J. Vitak. "Social network site affordances and their relationship to social capital processes." in *The handbook of the psychology of communication technology*, 205–227. Wiley Blackwell, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118426456.ch9>
- English, Leona M. Foucauldian pastoral power and feminist organizations: a research direction for adult education, St Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada. Paper presented at SCUTREA 34th Annual Conference, University of Sheffield, 6-8 July 2004, accessed January 3, 2021, <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003587.htm>.
- Erlander, Daniel. *Baptized, We Live*. Holden Village, 1981.
- FACIT-Sp-12, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.facit.org/measures/FACIT-Sp-12>.
- Fearon, James. *What is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?*. Unpublished Manuscript. November 3, 1999. Stanford University, Department of Political Science. <https://web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf>
- Felski, Rita. Suspicious Minds. *Poetics Today* 32 no. 2 (2011): 215–234. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-1261208>.
- Flory, Richard W., and Donald Earl Miller. *Gen X Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Foer, Franklin. *World without Mind the Existential Threat of Big Tech*. New York: Penguin Press, 2017.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1978.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Translated by Richard Howard. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.
- Fox, J., and J.J. Moreland. "The dark side of social networking sites: An exploration of the relational and psychological stressors associated with Facebook use and affordances." *Computers in Human Behavior* 45, (2015):168-176. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.083>
- Ganzevoort, R., and Johan Roeland. "Lived religion: the praxis of Practical Theology." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18 (2014): 1-11. 10.1515/ijpt-2014-0007.

- Gertner, Jon. "Are Tech Giants Robbing Us of Our Decision-making and Our Individuality?" *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2017, accessed April 8, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/are-tech-giants-robbing-us-of-our-decision-making-and-our-individuality/2017/10/06/a96e05e0-9fb0-11e7-9c8d-cf053ff30921\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.2a59e274e27f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/are-tech-giants-robbing-us-of-our-decision-making-and-our-individuality/2017/10/06/a96e05e0-9fb0-11e7-9c8d-cf053ff30921_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.2a59e274e27f).
- Gibson, J. J. *The Ecological Approach To Visual Perception*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- Giddens, Anthony. *New Rules of Sociological Method a Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*. London: Hutchinson, 1977.
- Given, Lisa M. *100 Questions (and Answers) About Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2016.
- Gonzales, Amy & Jeffrey Hancock. "Mirror, Mirror on My Facebook Wall: Effects of Exposure to Facebook on Self-Esteem." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 14 (2010):79-83. 10.1089/cyber.2009.0411.
- Granata, Paolo. "Creating Worlds: Notes On Hermeneutics of Communication." *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies* 3, no. 3 (2013): 19-32. [https://www.academia.edu/4643098/Creating\\_Worlds\\_Notes\\_On\\_Hermeneutics\\_of\\_Communication](https://www.academia.edu/4643098/Creating_Worlds_Notes_On_Hermeneutics_of_Communication).
- Gresham, Joshua. Jesus statue. Photo (adapted). Accessed February 24, 2021. [www.unplash.com](http://www.unplash.com).
- Hall, M. Elizabeth Lewis, and Peter Hill. "Meaning-making, suffering, and religion: a worldview conception." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 22:5 (2019): 467-479. doi:10.1080/13674676.2019.1625037
- Harris, Michael. "Review: Franklin Foer's World Without Mind Explores the Dangers of Tech Monopolies," *The Globe and Mail*, September 22, 2017, accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-franklin-foers-world-without-mind-explores-the-dangers-of-tech-monopolies/article36363670/>.
- Haskell, David Millard, Kevin N. Flatt, and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy." *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 4 (2016): 515-541. doi:10.1007/s13644-016-0255-4.
- Heelas, Paul. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Basil Blackwell, 1996.
- Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, Benjamin Seel, Karin Tusting and Bronislaw Szerszynski. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2005.



- Heidegger, Martin. *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1982.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translations and Introduction by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Heidegger, Martin, Joan Stambaugh, and Dennis J. Schmidt. *Being and Time*. SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010.
- Macy, Joanna. *World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal*. Berkeley, Calif: Parallax Press, 2007.
- Habibi, Mohammad Reza, Michel Laroche, and Marie-Odile Richard. *Brand communities based in social media: How unique are they? Evidence from two exemplary brand communities*. *International Journal of Information Management* 34 (2014):123–132. 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2013.11.010.
- "Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing' (1950)," Jamie L. Brummitt, March 30, 2015, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://jamiebrummitt.com/martin-heidegger-the-thing-1950/>, referenced in TH648X.
- Heidegger, Martin. *What Is Philosophy?* Translated by William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde. Twayne Publishers, 1958.
- Helles, Rasmus. "Mobile Communication and Intermediality." *Mobile Media & Communication* 1 no. 1 (January 2013):14–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157912459496>.
- Henry, Sara Kathleen. "On Social Connection in University Life." *About Campus* 16 no. 6 (January 2012):18–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.20083>.
- Hess, Mary. "A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation." *Dialog* 53, no. 1 (March 2014): pp. 12-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12084>.
- Hess, Mary. "A new culture of learning: implications of digital culture for communities of faith." *Communication Research Trends* 32, no. 3 (2013): 13+, Gale Academic OneFile. Accessed March 3, 2021. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A344496896/AONE?u=wate18005&sid=AONE&xid=9be28f93>.
- Hipps, Shane. *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.
- Hockridge, Diane. "What's the Problem? Spiritual Formation in Distance and Online Theological Education." *Journal of Christian Education* 54, no. 1 (May 2011): pp. 25-38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002196571105400104>.

- Horrigan-kelly (sic), Marcella & Millar, Michelle & Dowling, Maura. Understanding the Key Tenets of Heidegger's Philosophy for Interpretive Phenomenological Research. *The International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 15, no. 1 (2016): 1-8.
- Hoy, D. *Proceedings of Approaches to Interpretation Conference*. California State University, Hayward, May 1986.
- Huang, Andrea & Tyng-Ruey, Chuang. "Social Tagging, Online Communication, and Peircean Semiotics: A Conceptual Framework." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 35, no. 3 (2009): 340-357. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0165551508099606>.
- Hutchby, Ian & Simone Barnett. "Aspects of the sequential organization of mobile phone conversation." *Discourse Studies* 7 (2005):147-171. 10.1177/1461445605050364.
- Hutchings, Tim. "Network Theology: Christian Understandings of New Media." Review of Dwight J Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009, Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009, Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community*, Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 1 (January 2012): 1-14. [https://www.academia.edu/12882072/Christianity\\_and\\_Digital\\_Media](https://www.academia.edu/12882072/Christianity_and_Digital_Media).
- Jackson, Neels. Would Jesus also have tweeted? Beeld, 6 Junie, translation from the original Afrikaans.
- Jacobsen, Wade & Renata Forste. "The Wired Generation: Academic and Social Outcomes of Electronic Media Use Among University Students." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 14 (2010):275-80. 10.1089/cyber.2010.0135.),
- Jorgenson, Allan. *TH664X: The Art and Science of Interpretation*. Martin Luther University College, Winter Term, 2018.
- Kay, Rebecca. "Identity and Marginality," *eSharp* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 2005): 1-6. [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_41175\\_en.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_41175_en.pdf)
- Kearney, Richard. *Carnal Hermeneutics*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015.
- Keen, Andrew. "Franklin Foer on the Existential Threat of Big Tech." *Literary Hub*, November 6, 2017, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://lithub.com/franklin-foer-on-the-existential-threat-of-big-tech/>.
- Khan, Ameer. "Ethical Issues in Social Networking" (October 2015):1-10. doi: 10.13140/RG.2.1.4289.6080. Accessed January 18, 2018.

- Kizgin, Hatice, Bidit Dey, Yogesh Dwivedi, Laurie Hughes, Ahmad Jamal, Paul Jones, Bianca Kronemann, Michel Laroche, Lisa Peñaloza, Marie-Odile Richard, Nripendra Rana, Rene Romer, Kuttimani Tamilmani, and Michael Williams. "The impact of social media on consumer acculturation: Current challenges, opportunities, and an agenda for research and practice," *International Journal of Information Management* 51 (2019). 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.10.011.
- Kolbell, Erik. *What Jesus Meant: the Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- Korfmacher, Carsten. "Personal Identity," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002. Accessed March 24, 2019. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/person-i/>
- Kreber, Carolin & Klampfleitner, Monika & Mccune, Velda & Bayne, Sian & Knottenbelt, Miesbeth. "What Do You Mean By "Authentic"? A Comparative Review of the Literature On Conceptions of Authenticity in Teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly* 58 (2007): 22-43.
- Lee, R.M., and S.B. Robbins. "Measuring belongingness: The Social Connectedness and the Social Assurance scales." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 42 (2) (1995):232–241. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.42.2.232>
- Legard, Robin, Jill Keegan, Kit Ward. "In-depth interviews." In *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, J Ritchie, J Lewis, eds. London: Sage, 2003.
- Lemon, Laura, and Jameson Hayes. Enhancing trustworthiness of qualitative findings: Using Leximancer for qualitative data analysis triangulation. *The Qualitative Report*, 25, no. 3 (2020): 604-614.
- Lewis, Bex. "Social Media, Peer Surveillance, Spiritual Formation, and Mission: Practising Christian Faith in a Surveilled Public Space." *Surveillance & Society* 16, no. 4 (2018): 517–532. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v16i4.7650>.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*. New York: Harper One, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2017.
- Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Egon G. Guba. *Naturalist inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985.
- Livingstone, Sonia. *Children and the Internet: Great Expectations and Challenging Realities*. Polity Press: Cambridge, UK, 2009.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by R. S. Woolhouse. London: New York, 2004.
- Lundby, K. "Patterns of Belonging in online/offline interfaces of religion." *Information, Communication, and Society*, 14 (2011): 1219-1235.

- Luther, Martin. "On Translating: An Open Letter, 1530." Pages 181-202 in *Word and Sacrament*. Edited by E.Theodore Bachmann and Helmut T. Lehmann. Translated by Charles M. Jacobs. Vol. 35 of *Luther's Works*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960.
- Matravers, David. "Philosophy: The Nature of Persons." *Open Learn*. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/philosophy/philosophy-the-nature-persons/content-section-1>.
- McClure, P. K. "Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age: The Effects of Social Networking Sites on the Religious Beliefs of Emerging Adults." *Sociological Perspectives* 59, no. 4 (2016): 818-34. doi:10.1177/0731121416647361.
- McClure, Paul. "Modding My Religion: Exploring the Effects of Digital Technology on Religion and Spirituality" (PhD diss, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- McClure, Paul. "Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior, and Belonging." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56 (2017), 10.1111/jssr.12365.
- McLuhan Eric, and Frank Zingrone, eds. *Essential McLuhan*. Basic Books, 1995.
- Majchrzak, A. et. al., "The Contradictory Influence of Social Media Affordances on Online Communal Knowledge Sharing," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19 no. 1 (2013): 330-345.
- Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Structuralism." *Literary Theory and Criticism*. March 20, 2016. Accessed March 20, 2019. <https://literariness.org/2016/03/20/structuralism/>.
- "Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing' (1950)." Jamie L. Brummitt. March 30, 2015, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://jamiebrummitt.com/martin-heidegger-the-thing-1950/>.
- Matravers, David. "Philosophy: The Nature of Persons." *OpenLearn*, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/philosophy/philosophy-the-nature-persons/content-section-1>.
- Melendez, Michael P., and Michael C. LaSala. "Who's Oppressing Whom? Homosexuality, Christianity, and Social Work." *Social Work* 51, 4 (2006): 371-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23721221>
- Mitcham, Carl. *Thinking through Technology: The Path between Engineering and Philosophy*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

- Mohipp, C., and M.M. Morry. The Relationship of Symbolic Beliefs and Prior Contact to Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbian Women. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, 36 (1) (2004):36–44. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087214>
- Mules, Warwick. "The Social Semiotics of Mass Communication." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 22, no. 1 (1997). doi:10.22230/cjc.1997v22n1a983.
- Murphy, Kerri A, David L Blustein, Amanda J Bohlig, and Melissa G Platt. "The College-to-Career Transition: An Exploration of Emerging Adulthood." *Journal of Counseling and Development* 88, no. 2 (2010): 174–81. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2010.tb00006.x>.
- Musters, Claire. *Taking Off the Mask: Daring to Be the Person God Created You to Be*. Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2017.
- "National Study of Youth and Religion." *University of Notre Dame*. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://youthandreligion.nd.edu/>
- Nelson, L. J., & Luster, S. S. "Adulthood" by Whose Definition? ( J. J. Arnett Ed.) Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. <https://doi-org.libproxy.wlu.ca/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199795574.013.24>
- NewsHour, PBS. "Are Big Tech Companies Trying to Control Our Lives?" *PBS*, September 15, 2017, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/big-tech-companies-trying-control-lives>. Interview conducted by Paul Solman.
- Neyrey, Jerome H. *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*. 1st ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.
- Nouwen, Henri. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. In *Ministry and Spirituality*, Henri Nouwen, ed. 170-286. New York: Continuum, 1998.
- Noy, Chaim. "Mediation Materialized: The Semiotics of a Visitor Book at an Israeli Commemoration Site." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 2 (2008): 175-95. doi:10.1080/15295030802032283.
- O'Connor, Thomas St. James, and Elizabeth Meakes. *Spiritual and Theological Reflection: A Canadian Qualitative Study on Spiritual Care and Psychotherapy*. Kitchener, Ontario: Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, 2013.
- Ogden, Steven G. "Ekklesia As Open Space: Responding to the Church's Power Problem," January 28, 2019, accessed January 3, 2021, <https://theotherjournal.com/2019/01/28/ekklesia-as-open-space-responding-to-church-power-problem/#easy-footnote-bottom-4-11792>.

- Olanrewaju, A.-S. T., N. Whiteside, M.A. Hossain, and P. Mercieca. "The influence of social media on entrepreneur motivation and marketing strategies in a developing Country." Paper Presented at the conference on e-business, e-services and e-society, 2018.
- Olson, Eric T. "Personal Identity." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, July 09, 2015, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>
- Palmer, Parker. *The Courage to Teach*, 10th ed. Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Park, Namsu & Kerk Kee, and Sebastián Valenzuela. "Being Immersed in Social Networking Environment: Facebook Groups, Uses and Gratifications, and Social Outcomes." *Cyberpsychology & Behavior : the impact of the Internet, multimedia and virtual reality on behavior and society* 12 (August 2009):729-33. 10.1089/cpb.2009.0003.
- Pempek, Tiffany, Yevdokiya Yermolayeva, and Sandra Calvert. "College students' social networking experiences on Facebook." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 30 (2009):227-238. 10.1016/j.appdev.2008.12.010.
- Philip, Mary. TH648Z: Other Ways of Reading, Interpreting, and Being. Martin Luther University College. Fall Term, 2018.
- Philosophy of Research: Do All Social Scientists Use the Same Methodology?* London: Sage Publications Inc., 2017. Accessed May 24, 2019. <http://methods.sagepub.com/base/download/StageSection/605>.
- Piaget, Jean. *Le Structuralisme*. Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1972.
- "Podcast #372: World Without Mind — The Existential Threat of Big Tech." Podcast, January 18, 2018. <https://www.artofmanliness.com/2018/01/18/world-without-mind-franklin-foer-interview/>.
- Postigo, Hector. "The Socio-Technical Architecture of Digital Labor: Converting Play into YouTube Money." *New Media & Society* 18 no. 2 (February 2016):332–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541527>.
- Qi, Jiayin, Emmanuel Monod, Binxing Fang, and Shichang Deng. "Theories of Social Media: Philosophical Foundations." *Engineering* 4, no. 1 (2018): 94-102. doi:10.1016/j.eng.2018.02.009.
- Rabinow, Paul, editor. *The Foucault Reader: An introduction to Foucault's thought*. London: Penguin, 1991.
- Rahner, Karl. *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*. New York: Crossroads, 1982.

- Reifman, Alan, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, and Malinda J. Colwell. "Emerging Adulthood: Theory, Assessment and Application." *Journal of Youth Development* 2, no. 1 (2007): 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2007.359>.
- Revolvy, LLC. "Post-structuralism." *Revolvy.com. Trivia Quizzes*. Accessed February 17, 2019. <https://www.revolvy.com/page/Post-structuralism>.
- Revolvy, LLC. "Semiotics of Social Networking." *Revolvy.com. Trivia Quizzes*. Accessed February 17, 2019. <http://www.revolvy.com/page/Semiotics-of-social-networking>.
- Revolvy, LLC. "Structuralism." *Revolvy.com. Trivia Quizzes*. Accessed February 17, 2019. <https://www.revolvy.com/page/Structuralism>.
- Rice, Jesse. "How Christians can really connect." Interview by Mary Faulds, *American Family Association Journal*, August 2010, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://afajournal.org/past-issues/2010/august/how-christians-can-really-connect/>
- Rice, Jesse. *The church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected are Redefining Community*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970.
- Ritruetchai, Sudkhanoung, Wilaiporn Kwumwong, Rachel Rossiter, Mike Hazelton. "Thematic Analysis guided by Max van Manen: Hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological approach." *Journal of Health Science Research*, 12, no. 2 (July – December 2018): 40-48.
- Ross, Jameson. *Making Meaning*, April 2, 2020, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.pastortheologians.com/articles/2020/4/2/making-meaning>.
- Rundle, Michael. "Zuckerberg: Telepathy Is the Future of Facebook." *WIRED*, October 4, 2017. <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/facebook-zuckerberg-qa-the-future>.
- Schwartz, Seth J., James E. Côté, and Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. "Identity and Agency in Emerging Adulthood." *Youth & Society* 37, no. 2 (2005): 201–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x05275965>.
- Schwartz, Seth J., Byron L. Zamboanga, Koen Luyckx, Alan Meca, and Rachel A. Ritchie. "Identity in Emerging Adulthood." *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 2 (2013): 96–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696813479781>.
- Shareef, Mahmud A., Kawaljeet K. Kapoor, Bhasker Mukerji, Rohita Dwivedi, Yogesh K. Dwivedi, "Group behavior in social media: Antecedents of initial trust formation," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 105 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106225>.
- Sinek, Simon. "Fitting In: Simon Sinek." *AskMen*, October 12, 2010, accessed January 18, 2018, [http://www.askmen.com/money/career\\_400/409\\_fitting-in-simon-sinek.html](http://www.askmen.com/money/career_400/409_fitting-in-simon-sinek.html).

- Sinek, Simon. "Start with Why." Blog post, accessed January 3, 2021, <https://blog.startwithwhy.com/refocus/2010/12/have-you-ever-gone-to-a-sporting-event-and-seen-someone-on-the-subway-wearing-the-same-jersey-as-you-and-said-hey-wh.html>
- Singh, Avinash. "STRUCTURALISM." *Academia.edu - Share Research*, accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.academia.edu/34709638/STRUCTURALISM>.
- Smith, Kit. "121 Amazing Social Media Statistics and Facts" *BrandWatch.com*, October 2, 2018, accessed December 7, 2018. <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/amazing-social-media-statistics-and-facts/>
- Smith, Kit. "Marketing: 96 Amazing Social Media Statistics and Facts for 2016." *BrandWatch.com*, March 7, 2016, accessed September 3, 2016, <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/96-amazing-social-media-statistics-and-facts-for-2016/>
- Smith, Christian, and P. Snell. *Souls in Transition*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Smith, Robert H. "Blessed Are the Poor in (Holy) Spirit"?: (Matthew 5:3)". *Word & World* 18, no. 4 (1998): 389-396.
- Social Media, Social Life: How Teens View Their Digital Lives: A Common Sense Research Study, June 26, 2012, accessed January 30, 2017, <https://www.common sense media.org/research/social-media-social-life-how-teens-view-their-digital-lives>
- Statistics Canada. "The Internet and Digital Technology." *Government of Canada, Statistics Canada*, November 14, 2017, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017032-eng.htm>.
- Steensland, Brian, Xiaoyun Wang, and Lauren Schmidt. "Spirituality: What Does it Mean and to Whom?." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57 (2018). 10.1111/jssr.12534.
- Stokes, Philip. *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*. Kettering: Index Books, 2004.
- Stolow, Jeremy, ed. "Deus In Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between." Fordham University Press, 2013.
- Swallow Prior, Karen. "Identity and Story: A Case Study in Jane Eyre and Charles Taylor," May 17, 2017, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://www.liberty.edu/ace/index.cfm?pid=33057&author=Dr.+Karen+Swallow+Prior>.
- Sweet, Leonard. "In the Beginning was the Tweet," *RELEVANT*, July 12, 2012, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/faith/beginning-was-tweet/>.
- Sweet, Leonard. *Twitter theology: 5 Ways Twitter has changed my life and helped me be a better disciple of Jesus*, 2014, accessed October 5, 2020. [https://www.leonardsweet.com/article\\_details.php?id=55](https://www.leonardsweet.com/article_details.php?id=55).



- Sweet, Leonard. *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival*. The Crown Publishing Group: Kindle Edition, 2012.
- Tarnoff, Ben. "World Without Mind by Franklin Foer Review – the Turn against Big Tech." *The Guardian*, October 25, 2017, accessed April 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/25/world-without-mind-by-franklin-foer-review>.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Thompson, Deanna A. *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016.
- Thompson, Karl. "Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research," [www.revisesociology.com](http://www.revisesociology.com), May 18, 2015, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://revisesociology.com/2015/05/18/positivism-interpretivism-sociology/>.
- Tillich, Paul. *The Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper One, 1957.
- Tisdell, Elizabeth. "Poststructural Feminist Pedagogies: The Possibilities and Limitations of Feminist Emancipatory Adult Learning Theory and Practice." *Adult Education Quarterly* 48 (1998):139-156. 10.1177/074171369804800302.
- Trueman, CN. "Marxist Concepts." *History Learning Site*, May 25, 2015, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/sociology/theories-in-sociology/marxist-concepts/>.
- Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.
- Twenge, J. M., and W.K. Campbell. *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of Entitlement*. Atria Books, 2009.
- Underwood, L.G., and J. Teresi. "The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Development, theoretical description, reliability, exploratory factor analysis, and preliminary construct validity using health related data." *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 24 no. 1 (2002): 22-33. doi: 10.1207/S15324796ABM2401\_04. PMID: 12008791.
- Urquhart, Cathy. *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013.
- Valde, Gregory A. "Identity Closure: A Fifth Identity Status." *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 157, no. 3 (1996): 245–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.1996.9914862>.

- Valkenburg, Patti M. and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski. *Plugged In: How Media Attract and Affect Youth*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017.
- Van Lier, Ben, et al. "Technology Encounters Spirituality." *Studies in Spirituality* 24 (2014): 341-379. doi:10.2143/SIS.24.0.3053502.
- Van Manen, Max. *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. SUNY Series in the Philosophy of Education: State University of New York Press, 1990.
- Vincent, Elizabeth A. "Social Media as an Avenue to Achieving Sense of Belonging Among College Students," *VISTAS Online*, accessed January 4, 2021, [https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/social-media-as-an-avenue.pdf?sfvrsn=f684492c\\_8](https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/social-media-as-an-avenue.pdf?sfvrsn=f684492c_8).
- Warschauer, Mark, and Douglas Grimes. "Audience, Authorship, And Artifact: The Emergent Semiotics Of Web 2.0." *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 27 (2007): 1-23. doi:10.1017/s0267190508070013.
- Weick, Karl E. *Making Sense of the Organization*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011.
- Whitaker, Emilie. "Social Media—Narrating and Othering Our Selves." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 7 (2014): 55-61.
- Whitlock, Matt. "Heidegger On Philosophy Itself," *A Rigid Designator*, November 12, 2011, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://arigiddesignator.wordpress.com/2011/11/12/heidegger-on-philosophy-itself/>.
- Williams, Margery; Nicholson, William. *The Velveteen Rabbit*. HarperCollins Canada: Kindle Edition.
- Williams, Myron. "Community, Discipleship, and Social Media." *Christian Education Journal* 12 no. 2 (November 2015):375–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131501200209>.
- Writing Center, Ashford University, San Diego California, accessed September 5, 2020, [https://writingcenter.ashford.edu/sites/default/files/inlinefiles/Dissertation%20Chapter%203%20Annotated%20Sample\\_0.pdf](https://writingcenter.ashford.edu/sites/default/files/inlinefiles/Dissertation%20Chapter%203%20Annotated%20Sample_0.pdf)
- Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. New ed. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

- Wuthnow, Robert. *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to Be a Better Nation Fall Short*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Yad, Zeynep. "What Is the Meaning of Positivism and Interpretivism in Social Research?" *Quora*, June 6, 2017, accessed June 17, 2018, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-positivism-and-interpretivism-in-social-research>.
- Yust, Karen-Marie. "Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children's Spirituality." *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 133-43. doi:10.1080/1364436x.2014.924908.
- Zimmerman, M. *The development of Heidegger's concept of authenticity*. Eclipse of the self (Rev. ed.). Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986.