

ABSTRACT

Coming to Terms:
Spiritual Autobiography, Constitutive Rhetoric, and Religious Identity
in the Composition Classroom

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Building on current scholarship indicating the need for students' spiritual identities to be welcomed in the academy, this argument proposes using the reading and writing of spiritual autobiography to prompt students' exploration of their spiritual commitments in the composition classroom. The emerging adult college student tends to be wary of religious labels, but through the constitutive function of spiritual autobiography, students can develop authorial ethos and construct religious language through the articulation of their spiritual experiences. The constitutive strategies of Kathleen Norris's "necessary other" authorial self in *The Cloister Walk* and Anne Lamott's language of generality in *Traveling Mercies* can provide students with writing strategies for their own compositions. A first-year writing course such as the one presented in this argument—Spiritual Journeys: Faith, Community, and Spiritual Autobiography—assist students in coming to terms with their spiritual experiences and the language used to articulate those experiences to a broader community.

Coming to Terms:
Spiritual Autobiography, Constitutive Rhetoric, and Religious Identity
in the Composition Classroom

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Talking about Religion in the Composition Classroom: An Introduction

In 2013, former mega-church pastor Rob Bell published a book called *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*. Already a controversial figure, his latest offering even caught the eye of America's favorite bookworm, Oprah, who selected it for her book club. The title of Bell's book begs many questions, especially for those who work in rhetorical studies: how *do* individuals talk about God? Do different generations talk about God differently? How does the academy talk about God? Is this different from how students talk about God? Do professors affect how students talk about God, and should they? The answers to these questions involve how the conversation is constructed. Bell's book, which is not a scholarly discussion but rather a mass-market Christian spirituality text, acknowledges the complexities and frustrations inherent in religious discourse:

I realize that when I use the word God, there's a good chance I'm stepping on all kinds of land mines. Is there a more volatile word loaded down with more history, assumptions and expectations than that tired, old, relevant, electrically charged, provocative, fresh, antiquated yet ubiquitous as ever, familiar/unfamiliar word *God*? (Bell 1)

Bell goes on to say the problem with the term God is “not just a problem of definition – what is it we're talking about when we talk about God? – and it's not just the increasing likelihood that two people discussing God are in fact talking about two extraordinarily different realities while using the exact same word” (2). The problem is bigger than that. Bell recognizes the impossibility of defining the ineffable, an impossibility which includes the difficulty of defining the practices and beliefs surrounding the ineffable.

The charge levied against most religiously committed individuals is that they rarely consider the language they use, often falling into cliché or divisive language. This can be especially problematic in the composition classroom, as discussed by researchers Chris Anderson, Shannon Carter, Elizabeth Vander Lei, and others. Equally problematic is a classroom devoid of religious commitments. Higher education and religion can often be at odds, with the academy tending to treat religion as a subject of inquiry (Brummet), a hobby (Daniell “Composing”), or a placeholder until students are converted to the ideals of the academy (Stenberg). Some professors assume that a student’s religious discourse will be unsophisticated (Downs), and the student will be unwilling to engage ideas critically (Goodburn). This representation of religiously-committed students is precisely what many young adults fear and seek to avoid by not associating themselves with traditional religious labels while often still quietly ascribing to the tenets of a particular religious tradition (Cope and Ringer).

General surveys have shown that many Millennials, or emerging adults, view faith commitments differently than generations before them. They tend to be hesitant of committing to particular faith communities and labels, and many consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.” Others may identify with a particular religious tradition and yet assert the validity of all religions, not wanting to appear intolerant. Many of these emerging adults are repelled by the perception of religious individuals in the larger culture, and so they reject religious language. Without this language and nothing to take its place, they struggle to articulate their own spiritual and religious commitments.¹ They

¹ Throughout this argument, I will use both “spiritual” and “religious” as terms to describe students. Generally, when I use “spiritual,” I mean a more general belief but still one held closely by the student. “Religious” refers to a student’s belief in a type of spirituality set forth by an organized religion, though the student may or may not feel comfortable with owning the label of that religion.

cannot see a way to contribute to the narrative of religious life. Then these students arrive in college, a place where explorations of identity and diversity should be encouraged, and they find some professors request that their religious commitments—however fragile or tenuous—be left at the classroom door.²

The publication of Chris Anderson’s 1989 article “The Description of an Embarrassment: When Students Write about Religion” heightened the conversation about religious students in the composition classroom. In particular, composition scholars have discussed strategies for responding to students who write poorly (in the academy’s eyes) about their religious commitments (Downs, Goodburn, Vander Lei). Others have been surprised by the ability of students to express their religious commitments in charitable ways, as was Rhonda Leathers Dively. Many researchers have identified the value of student religious discourse in an academic context, affirming it to be not only good for the student and his development but also good for the community (Berthoff, Bizzell, DePalma, Rand, Ringer, Vander Lei). Whether students do this writing well or not, many scholars agree that it is important that students to have the opportunity to do this writing.

If this is true, then space must be made within the academy for students to explore their faith commitments, learning the language to constitute and conceptualize their beliefs. Some students have not critically examined their faith commitments, while others have rejected the faith commitments of their past. Others have found that the commitments they hold as emerging adults are not discursively available within traditional religious language. Still others unknowingly engage in “casuistic stretching,” as they seek to reconcile their personal values with new academic ideas, as identified by

² This tension between academic and personal inquiry in the academy (particularly public universities but also some private) is identified in many texts exploring the spiritual commitments of this age group, i.e. Astin 6-7 and Freitas 224-226.

Jeffrey Ringer's article. How, then, can the academy assist these students in communicating their religious and spiritual commitments, while also complicating and expanding student discursive abilities?

Researchers such as T J Geiger, Mark Alan Williams, and Kirsch believe that the composition classroom can assist in this work, if it is constructed as an open space. Inside this space, students encounter new ways to use language. Geiger uses the free exercise of rhetoric to approach discussions of LGBTQ and religion, and Williams finds translanguaging as a helpful framework for helping students consider the ways that language changes due to friction between ideas and philosophies. Gesa Kirsch has discovered that contemplative practices can guide student inquiry, assisting them in composing more nuanced discussions of controversial issues. These pedagogical techniques can effectively complicate students' ideas of discursive stability and privilege, providing them with more options for religious language and identities than the ones provided to them by theorists, instructors, or the larger religious or secular culture.

Adding to these pedagogical techniques, I propose that the constitutive work of spiritual autobiography can assist students in developing and articulating their religious commitments. Spiritual autobiographies—particularly ones written by women who seek to create space within faith traditions not traditionally as accepting of women's voices—can empower students to create their own identities within spiritual traditions and learn to communicate their own faith journeys using nontraditional religious language. In particular, the spiritual autobiographies of Kathleen Norris and Anne Lamott aim to reconstitute religious identities by redefining the role of the self in religious writing and the possibilities for sacred language, as I examine in later chapters. Texts such as these

can prompt students to use spiritual autobiography for the explication of their own spiritual experiences and provide them with strategies that develop their general writing skills, as well as their understanding of audience and language construction. I will demonstrate how this can be done through a course called *Spiritual Journeys: Faith, Community, and Spiritual Autobiography* in the final chapter. In this course, students give their own ineffable spiritual experiences meaning and purpose beyond the personal to a broader community, a valuable skill for any writing in the academy and beyond.

The Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults

For many young adults, the religious landscape has changed. In May 2015, the U.S. Religious Landscape Study confirmed what many parents and religious leaders feared: “while many U.S. religious groups are aging, the unaffiliated are comparatively young—and getting younger on average, over time” (5). The report went on to say, “Fully 36% of young Millennials (those between the ages of 18 and 24) are religiously unaffiliated, as are 34% of older Millennials (ages 25-33)” (Pew Research Center 11). Christianity got more bad news; not only did the report—which surveyed over 35,000 American adults—find that the number of those who described themselves as Christians fell nearly eight percent in seven years,³ but in addition, the number of Millennials connected with any branch of Christianity is only six individuals in ten (11). Other faiths, such as Islam or Hinduism, gained a few percentage points, but the greatest growth was in the “unaffiliated” category, also known as the “religious ‘nones.’” This general category gained six percentage points overall, and the increase was even greater for

³ The number of self-described Christians fell from 78.4% in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014.

Millennials. The report states that “more than a third of adults in the Millennial generation (35%) now say they have no religion, up 10 points from 2007” (69).

While this report spawned numerous knee-jerk thinkpieces and blog posts—and likely a few prayer circles—the fine print is worth considering. This report was based on individual self-reports, given over the telephone to researchers. As the report clarifies, “Catholics, for instance, are defined as all respondents who say they are Catholic, regardless of their specific beliefs and whether or not they attend Mass regularly” (Pew Research Center 10). The religious “nones,” whose numbers are swelling, contains those who would identify as atheists and agnostics, as well as those who would “describe their religion as ‘nothing in particular’” (10). The report is careful to say the following: “Not all religious ‘nones’ are nonbelievers. In fact, many people who are unaffiliated with a religion believe in God, pray at least occasionally and think of themselves as spiritual people” (10). Given the diversity within the category of religious “nones,” it is hard to comprehend what the increased percentage even means. Are young people losing faith? Or losing faith in labels?

For at least a decade, researchers—such as Christian Smith, Donna Freitas, David Kinnaman, and UCLA’s Alexander Astin, Helen Astin, and Jennifer Lindholm—have indicated many “emerging adults” have a perspective on life and religious commitments that differs than earlier generations, a perspective which affects their experience in the university setting.⁴ Major cultural changes have made this generation of young people

⁴ Christian Smith uses psychologist Jeffrey Arnett’s term “emerging adults” to identify these students, citing their prevailing qualities of “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” (6). Smith also notes the darker side of this age group, which contains “large doses of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, disappointment, and sometimes emotional devastation” (6).

avoid committing to any particular way of life, including a religious designation.⁵ In order to help students engage with their spiritual commitments—or lack thereof—the university needs to be prepared for the spiritual baggage of individual students that will enter into the classroom, welcomed or not. Research shows that while this generation is open to spiritual discussions, young adults do not know how to start them, the words to use, or how to maintain a position without appearing intolerant. Learning about the religious tendencies of these young people will help university instructors teach them valuable tools of self-examination and communication that will help them express their diversity of religious commitments.

Emerging Adult Views of Morality, Religion and Spirituality

The difference in how many emerging adults approach spirituality—religious commitments, in particular—prompted two major studies that focused on these young adults and their cultural and religious differences from previous generations.⁶ The first was the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a 2008 national telephone survey of 2,532 18- to 23-year-olds. This was the third phase of research; phase one began with 13- to 17-year-olds in 2003, and a second phase occurred in 2005. Out of this research came Christian Smith's *Souls in Transition*, which distills the data into overall trends and conclusions based on this longitudinal data.⁷ The other study was UCLA's seven-year

⁵ Some shifts that Smith highlights are the growth of higher education, the delay of marriage, economic changes that undermine stable careers, and extended parental financial assistance (4-5).

⁶ There have been other studies on this topic since the NSYR and the UCLA study. One mentioned in this thesis is the Pew Report; another is a longitudinal study by the Fuller Youth Institute completed in 2010 that studied students' first three years of college.

⁷ Smith compiled the 2005 data into a book called *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, published that same year.

study of “how students change spiritually and religiously during the college years” (Astin, Astin and Lindholm 9). This study began in 2003 and culminated in the publication of the book *Cultivating the Spirit* by researchers Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm. Many of the publications written since then about this generation and their faith react to these two studies.

While this broad-based research cannot speak for every young adult within this age range, the NSYR found that many emerging adults view morality, religious, and spirituality in specific ways.⁸ Many of these young adults have difficulty seeing an objective reality beyond the individual self. Christian Smith calls these students “soft ontological antirealists and epistemological skeptics and perspectivalists” (45). To them, morality is guided by intuition, and the idea that “everybody is different” explains their approach to others’ morality. Everybody is different and individual, and thus everyone’s values and morals are valid. American culture is saturated with individualism, but the version to which these emerging adults ascribe is complex. Smith says, “It is individualism raised on heavy doses of multiculturalism and pumped up on the steroids of the postmodern insistence on disjuncture, *differance*, and differences ‘going all the way down’” (48). Practically and culturally, these young adults feel individuals decide what is right or wrong, and if one’s determination conflicts with what another believes, no judgment can be levied. These young adults believe that much of life is situational, including culture and religious belief. They consider themselves open-minded, and they are—some would argue, to their overall mental and emotional detriment. Smith says

⁸ There are always exceptions to general broad-based studies. An individual who fits within the “emerging adult” category may have only minute traces of these characteristics, or only a few of them while lacking others. This research is generalized from a general survey, and it should not be considered to speak for all emerging adults.

these young adults can be “paralyzed by their awareness of the relativity of their own cultural and social locations,” and this “tend[s] to undercut any confidence they might have in the possibility of holding true beliefs, rendering valid judgments, making worthy commitments” (287). Many emerging adults struggle to commit to any particular belief because of their understanding that much of one’s worldview is based on personal experience and culture.

In accordance with their perspectives on morality being subjective and situational, emerging adults often believe that religions are essentially all the same, sharing “the same basic beliefs and values. Therefore, anybody who follows any particular religion is ultimately just like any other religions person following any other religion” (Smith 145). Along with this, “religious particularities are peripheral” (146). Religious differences reflect particular culture and society, but main tenets are shared among all religions. Essentially, it is fine to simply believe basic ideas of different religions and ignore actual differing or conflicting practices. For this reason, many emerging adults tend to pick and choose different faith practices or beliefs that suit their particular view of the world. This “individualistic and pluralistic view of religion, thinking many religious may be true, that it is okay to pick and choose what one believes, that they do not need to be part of a religious congregation, and that people can practice more than one religion” marks emerging adults as different from the generations before them (136). They believe individuals should peruse what is available and use what they find helpful, what makes sense to them, and what fits their experience—and they can leave the rest. If two individuals decide to take different things from a religion, fine. Faith is supremely

individual, and it is difficult for these young adults to feel they can justifiably argue or oppose beliefs on any reasonable grounds.

From this perspective, organized religion exists in order to make good people (Smith 148). If it does so, then it succeeds. If not, then it is invalid and should be discontinued. Ultimately, though, faith is personal for many emerging adults—not social or institutional (162). It should be considered one’s own private decision. Consequently, there is no way to know what is true (163). There may not be anything that is objectively true, besides ambiguous moral guidelines that are both self-evident and instinctively felt. Once again, this perspective prioritizes the individual and downplays (or eliminates) the need for any organization or structure. In this way, faith commitments of many emerging adults are more what others would term spirituality: unorganized and ultimately unsupervised. I will explore this later in the chapter.

Implications for Religious Commitment and Practice

Cultural and ideological shifts particularly affect young adults’ views about organized religion. For one, constant life transitions means that routines are often disrupted, whereas religious practice is generally associated with a settled life (Smith 75). Establishing new routines for religious practice is generally at the lowest priority when a young adult transitions, a major transition being attending university. When moving onto campus, if a religious center is not convenient—both in terms of location and schedule—a student will likely place other priorities first.

Religion can also appear to be a distraction from the process of becoming independent, particularly for those who do not see religion as crucial to their ultimate goals. Avoiding religious commitments during this time can also have to do with the goal

of differentiating from family at home and the postponing of forming one's own family. In previous generations, many young adults were marrying, forming their own family units, and identifying the need for a cohesive morality to raise children within (Smith 78-79). Now many young adults are focusing on their careers, and the removal of religious practice can be a way to create needed distance between them and their parents as they attempt to strike out on their own.

Another key impact on a student's religious formation during these years is pluralism, a defining impact of the larger culture. Many students desire to seem inclusive and respectful of diversity, while also wanting to keep options open and believing that morality is self-evident (Smith 79-81). Understanding morality individually means an organized religious system is ultimately extraneous and potentially contradictory to one's personal understanding. Additionally, there is no need to commit to one particular system if all religions are essentially the same at their core, and if committing would seem to make one seem closed-minded.

Lastly, impacting these commitments are the conclusions many emerging adults have made about religious people as a whole. Smith found that more than two-thirds of emerging adults consider "too many religious people in the United States [to be] negative, angry, and judgmental" (134). This opinion does not simply come from those who are unaffiliated with a particular religion. Nearly every religious group agreed at remarkably similar levels.⁹ With this general outlook regarding people of faith, it is no wonder that students are not drawn to make religious commitments a priority during their young adulthood. Donna Freitas found in her study on sexuality and spirituality on

⁹ The Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) is the minor exception.

college campuses that “the dominant feelings toward organized religion were anger and apathy” among all students, not just those unaffiliated or simply spiritual (36).¹⁰

Smith also highlights student apathy. He identifies six major religious types of emerging adults, and of them, the Religiously Indifferent comprise 25% of all young adults (167). Smith says that while most emerging adults are fine with discussing issues of religion, most are “largely indifferent to it—religion is just not that important to most of them” (286). He provided numerous quotations from students who said that while they believe in a higher power and perhaps life after death, it just is not something they discuss. Freitas expounds on this notion of silence, though she avoids saying calling it apathy. She says that at secular or nonreligious universities, “religion remains resolutely private—something students typically don’t speak about personally or even debate philosophically with friends” (33). This is in opposition to conversations about sex, which many college students indicate they enjoy discussing. One’s personal beliefs about religion, if they exist (and many students say they do), are more intimate than beliefs about and experience with sex.

Conflicting Reports

So, if the above is true, if the statistics are accurate and over a third of young adults consider themselves religiously unaffiliated, why make spirituality a point in the classroom? If students really do think morals are subjective and thus pointless to discuss, why bring it up at all? And if students’ beliefs about religion are somewhere between anger and apathy, is it not better to just talk about something else all together? Few professors want to anger their students, and even fewer want their students to disconnect

¹⁰ Freitas looked at seven colleges and universities of four different types: Catholic, evangelical, nonreligious private, and public. See more on page 11 of her book *Sex and the Soul*.

from the topic at hand. From all that has been discussed so far, it seems that instructors should leave emerging adults to their apathy and try to engage them elsewhere.

Yet in a 2007 *New York Times* article, Professor Peter J. Gomes at Harvard stated, “There is probably more active religious life now [on campus] than there has been in 100 years” (Finder). In the same article, other professors at other secular universities said that “students are drawn to religion and spirituality with more fervor than at any time they can remember.” Both the UCLA study and the NYSR support these remarks, stating that affiliation with a religious belief was at an all-time high around that time, at approximately 82%. Have things changed so rapidly that professors should avoid issues of spirituality in the classroom? Those who read the Pew Report and panic may say yes, but remembering the fine print, a consideration must be made regarding the terminology that young adults use when discussing their spiritual beliefs. The religious “nones” who avoid ties with a religious institution but feel strongly that a spiritual world exists beyond this one: what to do with them? I argue that instead of leaving them to flounder with vague ideas, the composition classroom can challenge them to learn to communicate and articulate their questions and conclusions.

“Spiritual But Not Religious”

There is some debate over the religious “nones,” particularly the “spiritual but not religious” category. In *Souls in Transition*, Smith claims that “only a minority of emerging adults (15 percent, ranging between 11 and 20 percent across religious traditions) say that it is ‘very true’ that they are spiritual but not religious. Forty percent say it is not true at all” (136). In contrast, Freitas quotes the UCLA study as saying something completely different. She says “there are many more college students in the

‘spiritual but not religious’ group (35%)” (10). Regardless of the numbers, I believe both studies, and Freitas as well, would agree that “there is a general trend toward considerable disaffiliation from religious traditions and a significant growth in the proportion of American emerging adults who identify as not religious” (Smith 141)—but who may identify as spiritual. Emily Murphy Cope and Jeffrey Ringer consider this the “[M]illennial sense of entitlement to a label-free identity” (111).¹¹

It seems that many of those who choose to be defined as “spiritual” do so to distance themselves from the labels of a particular religious tradition. For example, a student who identifies as Baptist would also likely say that she was spiritual, but a student who self-identifies as spiritual may not go on to say what she means by spiritual is she is Baptist. Spiritual is general, noncommittal, and ambiguous, a “symbolic label adopted to free oneself from the moral obligations and rituals of tradition “ (Freitas 16). Many young adults distinguish between spiritual and religious as “the personal versus the institutional” (Freitas 39). Those who associate themselves with a religious tradition agree on this point with those who do not. Spiritual is private and personal, whereas religion is “‘organized,’ ‘institutional,’ having to do with following rules, doing ‘religious things’ such as going to church, and practicing faith in a community” (39). Freitas found that most students, even those who identify with a religious tradition, resist the organizations and requirements. They resist “religion.”

There is reason for this resistance. Research has shown that perceptions of organized religion, particularly Christianity, are marked by predominantly negative connotations, especially when juxtaposed with the general values of emerging adults.

¹¹ Cope and Ringer also discuss how many Millennials are willing to negotiate and discuss identity beyond these labels, in some ways more open than past generations and willing to stand with a particular perspective even while avoiding traditional labels.

Two books written by Christians for Christians highlight this. One, by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, say that Christians are considered “hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, antihomosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental” by the larger culture (29-30). Christians are largely perceived for what they oppose rather than the tenets they uphold. In a later book, Kinnaman expands this list, saying that young Christians themselves have negative perceptions of the church. Young adults who would identify as Christians criticize the religious institution for being “overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive, and doubtless” (Kinnaman 92-93). Many items on this litany of offenses go against the core of who emerging adults perceive themselves to be, and so these labels are not at all attractive to seeking students.

In contrast, spirituality is marked by a “lack of supervision,” according to Freitas (41). While this can feel like freedom to students, particularly if they are leaving a home marked by religious requirements, often their lack of commitment to a religious tradition can result in a kind of spiritual loneliness. Their personal spirituality does not always result in the meaning for which they are ultimately searching. Freitas concludes that “unsupervised spirituality pushes [students] to hide their faith interests from others, whereas a longing for meaning and a framework in which they can more skillfully make ethical decisions depends to a great extent on their ability to find a sympathetic community that subscribes to that same framework in practice” (42). A merely spiritual life can be sufficient, but it can also lack the necessary companionship and greater meaning that young adults have historically found within a religious community.

Articulation of Spiritual and Religious Commitments

Whether “religious and spiritual” or “spiritual but not religious,” many young adults are open to talking about issues of faith. The data Christian Smith collected and interpreted says that most young adults consider it “not a very threatening topic”—students are “generally happy to talk about it, if it comes up,” even if they have difficulty expressing themselves on the topic of their spiritual commitments (144). Smith and his colleagues noted this in another book, *Lost in Transition*, saying that “emerging adult thinking about morality (as with most of the rest of adult Americans) is not particularly consistent, coherent, or articulate” (20). Smith et al. blame this on emerging adults not having thought about the topic much before, pointing to “uncertain phrases, such as ‘I don’t know,’ ‘like,’ and ‘I guess’” as proof of this (20).

Kendra Creasy Dean came to a similar conclusion when conducting interviews with teenagers for the second round of the NSYR. She notes, “Remarkably articulate young people stammered and groped for words when the conversation turned to religion, as if no one had ever asked them these questions before, or as if we were asking questions in another language” (15-16). These teenagers emphasized the importance of religion in their lives, “though when pressed they generally could not say how; almost all of them thought religion was a good thing, though most could not describe the difference it made to them personally” (16). She continues, “For a striking number of teenagers, our interviews seemed to be the first time any adult had asked them what they believed, and why it mattered to them” (19). In speaking about this younger group, Christian Smith goes so far to say that teenagers are “*incredibly inarticulate* about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives” (as qtd. in Dean 18,

emphasis in original). He blames teenagers' communities of faith for not having taught them how to express their faith commitments.

Why does Smith make this shift from initially blaming the communities around the teenagers to later blaming the now emerging adults themselves for apparently not thinking through their faith commitments? Is it because they are older, and Smith believes they should have made this switch themselves? But as Smith and others have pointed out, emerging adulthood is a time when individuals are disconnected from communities of faith, often purposefully so since they associate these communities to the lives of their parents. So it follows that emerging adults would not get *more* eloquent regarding their faith commitments, as their communities and commitments themselves are often in flux. They also would not gain an articulate vocabulary for their faith, as institutions of higher education often avoid or disregard issues of religion.

Freitas found that religious faith remains private at most universities, even ones vaguely spiritual in mission or history. Religious faith is not something brought up in the classroom or even the dorm room. At least, verbally. She found that “for many [students], the only truly safe space for discussing matters of religion seemed to be in a journal; students who were shy or even uncomfortable discussing their faith histories in person suddenly flourished on the page” (Freitas 33). Freitas takes other researchers, specifically Smith, to task for simply gathering information through conversation. She suggests that Smith may have received “a more nuanced portrait of teen religion and spirituality” if he had asked young adults to also privately write about their experiences. She continues:

If young adults do not, as a rule, live in communities where they believe it is *normal*, *safe*, and *comfortable* to talk about a given topic—as was the case with religion among many of my participants at the spiritual colleges—then it makes sense that these students would hold back when

questioned about a subject their peers and even their professors largely view as private and personal. But this is a generation accustomed to pouring out its most intimate thoughts and experiences online on MySpace and Facebook and in blogs. It should not really be so surprising then that these same young people would flourish on the page in ways that they don't in personal conversation, and that Catholic youth that seem apathetic on the surface, deep down aren't that apathetic after all. (54)¹²

Perhaps students are not apathetic; instead, maybe they lack the vocabulary and the forum necessary for discussing and deciphering faith commitments. So they give up on the venture, instead pouring their energy into relationships, academics, or their journals.

Freitas's conclusion provides a rationale for creating a space within the academy for students to write about their faith commitments and to see how others—both peers and professional writers—do the same. If students are unwilling or unable to voice their personal tenets, even if those tenets are ambiguous or tenuous, then a safe space needs to be provided for students to explore how their faith commitments and/or confusion affect them as young adults, as budding professionals, and as participants in the larger world. If churches, mosques, or temples are not effectively teaching emerging adults the language—or at least a language outside of cliché that can be used to communicate to audiences in the real world—then perhaps the university can fill that gap. While the classroom should avoid teaching a specific spiritual ideology, it can and should teach the skills necessary for communicating individual experiences clearly and persuasively, including spiritual experiences.

The University Setting

In order for students to navigate these conversations, communities, and vocabularies, they need to find a place where these topics are both accepted and

¹² Freitas distinguishes between faith-based (primarily evangelical) institutions and “spiritual” institutions, which are generally “spiritual but not religious,” including secular and Catholic universities.

encouraged. While the common conception that going to college causes religious commitments to weaken or decline is not necessarily supported by research,¹³ at the same time, secular institutions of higher learning are not known for being particularly welcoming for those with religious commitments. Stereotypes are passed among many \ faculty members regarding the religious student (particularly evangelical) as incapable of intellect, unable to take criticism, and struggling to communicate effectively. The academy can also “treat [religious belief] as if it were a hobby rather than that which gives meaning and purpose to the lives of many people” or a subject worth studying, according to Beth Daniell (“Composing” 239). Other faculty members consider religious faith a phase that college students grow out of as they become converted to the ideals of the academy (Stenberg). Freitas notes that particularly at nonreligious institutions, students “experience a separation of church and college, an expulsion of religion from the public square that is so extreme that many of them are rendered mute on the subject” (35). She finds this odd, since so many intuitions pride themselves on being places where any question is welcome. Freitas considers this exclusion unfortunate, since “one might imagine colleges and universities as places that would rather rise to the occasion, preparing the next generation for a world fraught with religious conflict, teaching their students how to encounter and engage religious diversity on both a personal and a critical

¹³ The research on higher education decreasing students’ religious commitments is indefinite. Christian Smith’s examination of the data found that though there is an older body of sociological research that supports the fact that students tended to lose their faith when entering college, a more recent student shows that those who do *not* attend college are more at risk for decreased religious commitments than their university-attending peers. The Pew Research Center poll is similarly inconclusive. In looking at Christianity, they found that “the percentage of college graduates who identify with Christianity has declined by nine percentage points since 2007,” but the number of Christians among those with less than a college education declined by a similar amount (14). Similarly, “religious ‘nones’ now constitute 24% of all college graduates (up from 17%) and 22% of those with less than a college degree (up from 16%)” (14). This seems to indicate that college is no worse for religiously committed students than any other post-high school path; it is entering the ‘real world’ that takes a toll on young adults’ identification with religion.

level” (36). These are necessary lessons for emerging adults who are heading into a world of challenging rhetorical situations and emotionally-heightened conversations regarding religious issues. Universities are missing an opportunity to change public discourse, one person at a time.

In her research, Freitas did find a type of institution that she felt was doing this work effectively. She found at evangelical institutions, “students talked easily and richly about their religious upbringing and their attempts to live and grow in their faith—a sharp contrast to the reticence of students at the spiritual colleges” (62). Further, she says:

Contrary to popular stereotypes, the fact that evangelical colleges are faith-based does not necessarily restrict student learning and growth by forbidding certain topics of discussion. On the contrary, this core commitment provides students with a strong framework within which they can test their beliefs and values, discerning in the process where they fall in relation to what is presented to them as the Christian ideal. (64-65)

Freitas attributes this openness to the fact that at these intuitions, students can assume these conversations are encouraged. At some, a signed statement of faith is required for admission, but even that does not preclude a diversity of opinions and the chance for students to engage with each other on ethical and moral issues, within the scope of Christianity (and occasionally outside as well).

To improve at inviting religion into the classroom, Freitas says that institutions need to consider faith a “public value, not just a private one” (67). Her idea that “professors need to embrace the idea of themselves as ‘spiritual guides’ of a sort and their syllabi as ‘confessions of faith’” likely sounds controversial, but it is less so when taken at a secular level (67). All professors propose their own ideals, whether that is a belief in the power of critical thinking or the value of diversity. The syllabus is inherently a sort of “confession of faith,” a shared mission that the whole class needs to understand and

follow; otherwise the classroom community will be disjointed and individual students will be outside of the community of learning forged by the document. The extension then to issues of faith being valued in the classroom should be considered by faculty and students alike.

Additionally, Freitas notes that an institution should be drawn together by “a shared identity, mission, and values of its own” (67). Evangelical schools are often successful at this, with professors serving as examples of integrating faith, intellect, and reality, along with classes often explicitly discussing how religious commitments can aid in a particular career path. In Freitas’s research, the closest secular or merely spiritual schools get to “an operative mission statement” that works within the classroom is “the sky’s the limit” (68). This does not create a culture of reflection in terms of morality or ethics; students “may be brilliant in the classroom, but they leave this learning behind when they step onto the larger campus” (68). They become “perpetual wanderers,” without commitment, focus, or a guide to help them through the confusion that the college years often bring (69). Freitas finishes her assertions firmly: “As a longtime professor and teacher, and researcher of this study, I have watched too many students floundering and faltering without any sense of direction, or any idea where to go to get any, to regard this hands-off approach as advantageous any longer” (70). She is convinced of the need for a change, and she looks to the evangelical university for guidance.

These changes must happen both at the institutional level and the classroom level, with administration, staff, faculty, and students all understanding the necessity of these types of conversations. While the cultural milieu surrounding emerging adults is

immediately unchangeable, interacting with the relativistic tendencies of the generation can provide students a different outlook and a different way to engage morality, faith, and religion. Faculty have the opportunity to become mentors who can provide guidance and care, instead of bystanders who take a hands-off approach to the spiritual turmoil of their students. Understanding who students are, how they think, and why they think the way they do enlightens the classroom community and provides instructors with the ability to modify their teaching style and course content to challenge students in particular ways.

Emerging Adults and Religious Language

The challenges that the emerging adult population has aligning itself with labels that represent particular religious beliefs clearly impact how these young adults self-define and self-report in situations from studies to conversations. The pluralism and hesitancy to commit due to fear of judgment make it difficult for emerging adults to express their personal commitments. Researchers have attributed many young adults' inability to clearly articulate their own beliefs to a number of things: apathy, fear of commitment, or just not knowing the religious language well enough to fully express their religious beliefs. I believe all three of these causes are different shades of the same issue: many emerging adults struggle to find a place within the religious language of earlier generations due to the cultural shifts of the modern world. The representations of a religiously committed individual—particularly in the media—do not always represent who young adults believe themselves to be, and they do not know how to navigate seemingly rigid structures of traditional religious rhetoric to create new representations. Many students do not know that language is fluid, flexible, and often constituted by the community that it both represents and reflects. Instead, all they see are labels that do not

fit them, and so they cast them off, saying, “If that is what a (fill in the blank) looks like, I don’t want to be one.” They become one of the “religious ‘nones,’” even though they may believe in God, Jesus, or a higher power that structures the world.

If this is the case, many emerging adults are being misrepresented by statistics. Instead of apathy, they have a deep concern for not being mislabeled. Instead of fear of commitment, they have a desire to commit fully to the right thing. Their lack of knowledge is due to no one teaching them otherwise. As evidenced by research, being “hands-off” and “allowing” students to figure it out on their own does not help them. The academy is doing these emerging adults a disservice by not providing them with the opportunity to learn about themselves and the rhetoric of the world around them in regards to their personal spiritual commitments.

The challenge for educators and institutions is to show students how to hold onto personal commitments while encountering new and likely conflicting ideas, as well as how to craft language to reflect these commitments. These challenges are well-suited to the mission of the composition classroom. Most students must take a composition classroom at some point during their academic career, and so the course is an opportunity to allow students to engage with new ideas and consider them from a variety of angles. Writing is inherently personal, from topic selection to word choice, and thus, the composition classroom context is a natural place for students’ personal commitments and discourses to be examined and expressed. A composition instructor can provide an opportunity for students to begin to constitute their faith, particularly religious faith, into something that they feel they can fully embrace. Students need to learn that language is

always changing, even the language of spirituality and belief, and that holding one belief does not negate all others.

This work can be done through the genre of creative nonfiction, particularly spiritual autobiography. This genre fits well within the values of the emerging adult: it presents personal experiences that are unique and subjective, even while having resonance beyond the individual. Spiritual autobiography expresses beliefs grounded in individual lives, illuminating morals and aspects of the religious life closely tied to reality. Religion is personal in these texts, yet it is often tied to a church or a faith tradition without necessarily being dictated by it. It also speaks to—and often for—a wider community, constituting an identity and understanding among its readers. Through reading and writing these texts, emerging adults can see the possibility of creating space between unorganized spirituality and organized religion, a middle ground where an individual can dictate meaning from experience, while constituting a religious identity from her experience and her community.

One of Patricia Bizzell's closing questions in her article "Faith-Based World Views as a Challenge to the Believing Game" asks, "What if there is intellectual work to be done that can only be done by...the 'Christian mind'—or Jewish, Moselm, or Buddhist mind?" (35). If this intellectual work exists, as others and I think it does, these minds need to be nurtured by the university. I submit that this can be done in the composition classroom, and it can be done with personal spiritual autobiographies, allowing students to come to terms—literally—with their religious commitments through the texts' constitutive powers of speaker authority and language construction. I will demonstrate how to highlight those elements into a course outlined later in the argument.

Defining Myself and Moving Forward

In David L. Wallace's "Transcending Normativity: Difference Issues in *College English*," he argues that scholars must continually evaluate their own subjectivities and own them in their scholarly work. Because of Wallace's article, I am careful to identify my own perspective on these issues. I self-identify as a Christian, but I have been part of a variety of faith traditions within that religious designation. Specifically, I am an Episcopal Bapto-Quaker: Baptist through adolescence, Quaker due to my Christian university experience, and now Episcopal in the absence of a Friends meeting in my current setting. Additionally, I am female, Caucasian, heterosexual, and middle-class, and I have lived in various regions (Midwest, Pacific Northwest, Texas) in the United States that have informed my outlook on social, economic, political, and religious issues. I have rarely sensed a conflict between my personal beliefs and my academic pursuits, having been mentored by researchers who identify as both individuals of faith and individuals of the mind.

The universities of which I have been part have been faith-based to varying degrees, and these experiences inform my scholarly outlook. I am currently at Baylor University, the largest Christian university in the nation.¹⁴ While students do not sign a statement of faith to attend the institution, the majority of undergraduates are white, evangelical, and upper- to middle-class.¹⁵ My experiences and current institutional

¹⁴ Sic' em, Bears.

¹⁵ The statistics support this, with nearly 65% of the Baylor University population identifying as non-minority students, and 30% of the population identifying as Baptist. Nearly 90% of the population identifies with some Christian religion. This includes Catholic and mainline denominations, as well as evangelical. Included in the approximately 10% not affiliated with Christianity: Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, No Religion, and Religion Not Listed. Statistics were taken from 2014 data. Ninety percent of students receive financial aid, but given the cost of the university (in 2014-2015, \$36,360 per year for a full-time student), this does not necessarily speak to the class structure of the university.

context shape my view of religious rhetoric and the students I encounter. I feel freedom within my current context to explore religious rhetoric, and the administration and department are welcoming of these types of scholarly conversations emerging in the classroom. With this in mind, I do seek to broaden the conversation beyond just my own context to other universities and broaden my understanding of religiously-committed students beyond the evangelical student, though in many ways the evangelical student is at the front of my mind.

In the following chapters, I explore how the constitutive nature of spiritual autobiography can provide emerging adult students with strategies for exploring and articulating their own spiritual commitments. Approaching a composition class with this mindset will empower students to utilize language, ethos, and audience to become effective and charitable communicators of personal commitments in the classroom and outside the academy. Chapter One has explored the spiritual nature of this current generation of students, revealing the needs of this population for this type of work in the classroom as they are not gaining these skills elsewhere. Chapter Two will focus on spiritual autobiography and its constitutive power, particularly as used by marginalized female writers. Through encountering the constitutive relationship between writer and reader and the construction of language, students can use these strategies to express their own religious commitments. Chapters Three and Four focus on the constitutive function of contemporary spiritual autobiographies by Kathleen Norris and Anne Lamott. Norris's explication of the authorial self as an authoritative "necessary other" and Lamott's widening of religious discourse reflect significant values of emerging adults and broaden conceptions of religious discourse, demonstrating ways that emerging adults can also

constitute their own spiritual experience. The final chapter presents a first-year writing course called *Spiritual Journeys: Faith, Community, and Spiritual Autobiography* that provides students with the opportunity to complete different kinds of spiritual autobiographical writing with the aim of student writers constituting themselves in different ways for different contexts and purposes. The goal is that emerging students will emerge from the course knowing their own spiritual commitments, having the skills to articulate them, and using those skills to create communities of faith outside of the classroom.

CHAPTER TWO

A Common Language and a Common Story: The Constitutive Power of Women's Spiritual Autobiography

William H. Gass is no great fan of autobiography, as evidenced by his 1994 article in *Harper's Magazine* "The Art of Self: Autobiography in an Age of Narcissism." Lynn Bloom summarizes his "surly diatribe" as asserting "autobiographers, from St. Augustine to Willie Morris to Holocaust narrators, are a self-indulgent, self-serving gaggle of 'monsters,' revisionist liars absorbed with trivial personal details" (281). Gass's view on autobiography is by no means a modern one. In 1798, German literary critic Friedrich Schlegel wrote:

Pure autobiographies are written either by neurotics who are fascinated by their own ego, as in Rousseau's case; or by authors of a robust artistic or adventuresome self-love, such as Benvenuto Cellini; or by born historians who regard themselves only as material for historic art; or by women who also coquette with posterity; or by pedantic minds who want to bring even the most minute things in order before they die and cannot let themselves leave the world without commentaries. (as qtd. in Folkenflik 3)

Yet for hundreds of years, individuals have been writing autobiographies to express their unique experiences, and readers have found that those experiences transcend the merely personal and become representative of a broader community's identity and narrative.

Creative nonfiction, specifically autobiography,¹ has had its detractors even while being popular among readers. While the term itself is hotly debated, Robert L. Root, Jr.

¹ By many in the field, creative nonfiction is largely considered a genre, whereas autobiography is a sub-genre of creative nonfiction. The terminology is, as ever, constantly being reevaluated. I will use both terms, with spiritual autobiography being my primary term and focus. Also in this paper, spiritual memoir will be considered a synonym with spiritual autobiography. The distinctions between the two are negligible as they pertain to my argument.

defines creative nonfiction as a genre that includes “the personal essay, the memoir, narrative reportage (a.k.a., literary journalism), and expressive critical writing (a.k.a., personal academic discourse, personal cultural criticism) and whose borders with other genres and forms (i.e., journalism, criticism, history, etc.) are fluid and malleable” (255). More expressively, a definition given by Philip Gerard states that creative nonfiction is composed of “the stories you find out (as opposed to the stories you ‘make up’), captured with a clear eye and an alert imagination, filtered through a mind passionate to know and tell, told accurately and with compelling grace” (12). Given Gerard’s definition, autobiography, then, is the story a writer finds in her own life, as she seeks meaning through her experiences.

Spiritual autobiography is an even narrower subgenre, one that goes back to Augustine’s *Confessions*. Elizabeth Petroff, a medieval scholar who teaches a general education course on the subject, defines spiritual autobiography as: “autobiography that explores the deepest parts of the self, the inner force that can keep us alive in the direst and most traumatic of circumstances, and at the same time reveals our place in the universe, our connections with other beings and other forms of consciousness” (“Reading” 23). By this definition, the text or the beliefs therein do not need to align with any particular religious organization or institution, but rather explore both the self and its relation to the divine, however construed. A spiritual autobiography must contain “an autobiographical impulse,” or what Petroff describes as “a desire to put into words the search for what we could call a self—to express not just a formed and discovered self but to put into language the process of discovering and locating that self in relation to God, to the world, to others” (“Introduction” 22). Petroff uses this framework to argue for the

visionary literature of the Middle Ages to be considered autobiographical, but this impulse can also be located in commonly accepted spiritual autobiographical works such as Augustine, *The Conversion of Herman the Jew*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Petroff identifies that “the writers of spiritual autobiography seem to look for a demonstrable truth, repeatable truth, that they can carry with them into the future” versus just an explication of meaning discovered in past experiences (“Reading” 28). Spiritual autobiographies are life-changing narratives, ones that impact the individual profoundly and provide some sort of ultimate meaning for her existence. This meaning can also be extrapolated into a larger meaning for a larger audience, as the writer’s story is larger than just herself. This central function of spiritual autobiography is precisely the benefit that it can provide the emerging adult student seeking a new way of conceptualizing her spiritual experiences within a larger religious culture. As texts that represent the larger religious culture on a personal level, spiritual autobiographies have the opportunity to demonstrate to students how to constitute new communities and understandings of religious life through the ways their writers construct their authorial selves and the language they use to discuss their experiences.

Because of autobiography’s roots in the personal, it has been embraced by all manner of reader and writer. Robert Folkenflik says the traditionally “weak canonical status” of autobiography, particularly in academic disciplines, means that minorities can compose in the genre and be heard, making it attractive to those populations.² Julia Swindells similarly says that autobiography “now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the

² This accessibility comes at a cost, often the devaluing of the literary nature of the form, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

individual,” before going on to say that autobiography’s “distance from the tradition allows autobiographers to redefine the genre in relation to more fluid concepts” (as qtd. in Lynch 216). Autobiography provides the opportunity for voices to be heard in many different ways that may counteract the traditional literary tradition. While emerging adult students are not necessarily all part of marginalized populations, many feel like outsiders within traditional religious institutions. They can learn ways to constitute space for themselves within these religious traditions from autobiographical writers on the margins.

These spiritual autobiographies are stories of lives lived in a cultural and social milieu that affects both author and reader. Leigh Gilmore has identified “the paradox that the autobiographer be both unique and representative” (as qtd. in Lynch 215). The autobiography is representative of the author’s own self, as well as the author’s context: the people, the society, and the geographical location. The author is never just speaking about her own existence, for that existence always involves others. Amy Kass says that autobiography “points one beyond oneself; thinking about one’s life story requires making explicit the formative relations one has had with the outer world, and especially with those institutions and beliefs, customs, and cultural expectations that have tacitly yet powerfully shaped one’s life” (93). These are important considerations for emerging adult students, especially as they approach adulthood and independence with the tendency to be hyper focused on personal individuality. Autobiography, instead of simply focusing the attention on the self, also puts experiences—particularly religious experiences—inside of a larger community, fusing the personal with the communal.

For this reason, spiritual autobiographies have significant constitutive power. Viewing these texts through constitutive rhetoric, a rhetorical theory developed by

Maurice Charland and James Boyd White, can cause students to encounter how autobiographers define themselves according to or against current religious rhetoric in a particular political or social sphere. Not often applied to creative nonfiction or spiritual autobiography, constitutive rhetoric is most often used to analyze government documents, in which a speaker works to create a sense of unity and purpose among an audience. Constitutive rhetoric can be applied to any text with any readership, even those called to a less obvious route of action. Through constitutive rhetoric, students can discover that religious language is not preexistent and preeminent, but rather constructed in a cultural, social, economic, and political context by people within that context.

Constituting an Audience

Considering autobiography in the context of the changing spiritual lives of emerging adults gives the genre an unexpected power. Eakin talks of this power in this way:

When we write or tell about our own lives, our stories establish our identities both as content—I am the person who did these things—and as act—I am someone with a story to tell. And we do something even more fundamental—establish ourselves as persons: I am someone, someone who has lived a valuable life, a value affirmed precisely by any life story’s implicit claim that it is worth telling and hearing. (5)

Reading and writing spiritual nonfiction provide students with the chance to consider themselves as people who live valuable lives worth sharing. They begin to reconsider the power of their own stories and the language used to tell those stories. Students can learn that their perceptions of a particular community—perhaps one affiliated with a particular set of beliefs, like a religious community—may be too limited. They can discover their own agency in modifying the discourse of a community, as well as identifying how they

themselves constitute audiences with their own writing. The use of constitutive rhetoric can be a way to approach this intellectual and conceptual work.

Constitutive rhetoric has most frequently been applied to legal and political rhetoric. Developed by James Boyd White and Maurice Charland, this framework builds on ideas first presented by Kenneth Burke and Michael McGee. It is a reaction to the traditional and unquestioned assertion, from the time of Aristotle, that audiences are a given, always just present as a collective body ready to listen. McGee finds that assumption problematic in his 1975 article “In Search of ‘The People.’” He says that the tendency to consider “people” and “audience” just plural versions of “person” or “individual” is incorrect, for “[‘the people’s’] only concrete significance is their existence, for not even their *identity* is agreed upon by those who appeal to them” (McGee 238, emphasis in original). In this way, “the people” are “both real and a fiction;” their collective identity is at best temporary and at worst an illusion (240). In truth, as folklorist Stephen Olbrys says, “Any ‘folk’ is an embodiment of aggregative individuals diverse, disparate, and often dissenting from one another” (177). “The people” as a homogenous group are an illusion, and yet the writer must conceptualize an audience to be persuaded.

According to Burke, this persuasion depends on the rhetor producing identification, or consubstantiation, with his audience. Burke emphasizes, “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (55, emphasis in original). According to Charland, Burke’s audience members do not “exist prior to and apart from the speech to be judged” but rather “participate in the very discourse by which they would be

‘persuaded’” (133). Burke gives the audience agency and priority in the rhetorical situation. They are not simply bystanders; nor are they upon a pedestal, only allowed down after the message has been received. The audience changes the message, even as the speaker hopes to change the audience *with* his message. A speaker needs to understand his audience and take on the qualities that the audience values or embodies. Particularly in the realm of spiritual autobiography, the audience must understand the language provided. As spiritual experiences are ineffable, the writer must produce the experience using available words. Some redefinitions may be in order in order to effectively communicate the incommunicable, particularly if the available discourse does not allow for an individual’s experience.

To this identification, Charland adds Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation, or hailing (138). This concept “occurs at the very moment one enters into a rhetorical situation, that is, as soon as an individual recognizes and acknowledges being addressed” (138). The audience must know they are being hailed in order to be persuaded; they need to consider themselves part of the intended audience. This requires some sort of identity before the text is even acknowledged. Therein lies the tension: in order to be persuaded, the audience—the subject—is already constituted as one who would listen and be persuaded to act. This ideal audience both does not exist and yet already exists, as the language creates this new community that already has a shared identity. Yet this identity is very fluid, both being constituted by the actual audience and by the speaker’s conception of his audience. It is also closely tied to social constructs of a particular culture; one must already assume oneself to be an “interpellated subject and exist as a discursive position” (138). Althusser called this quality “always already:” “one must

already be a subject in order to be addressed or speak” (Charland 141). In the case of spiritual autobiographies used in the classroom, students must feel like they are being spoken to by these texts. They must consider themselves as part of the audience being addressed. They need to be convinced that there is space for them within the community, even without fully understanding the boundaries of the community itself. A strong spiritual autobiography shifts those boundaries, constituting an identity for the community that is either wider or narrower than initially considered by the audience.

Charland says three things need to happen in order for this constitution of the audience to work. One, the process of constituting a collective subject must occur. The group must have a collective identity with shared values and discourse, even if that identity has merely been created by the speaker. Second, the subject must be posited as being transhistorical, having a historical impact. The constitution of this group is purposeful, perhaps existing long before this particular moment and hopefully making an impact that lasts beyond the final word. Lastly, the subject must have the illusion of freedom to act on the message being received. The audience must feel empowered to make a change, according to their new group identity; they should feel they are acting as a member of a larger body, not just individually, which is in contrast to the emerging adult student’s individualistic tendencies. When constitution is successful, the power of a collective identity can be mighty. If students can feel empowered by constitutive rhetoric to own and create their spiritual identities, coming to terms with the available religious labels even while redefining them according to their own experiences, then the constitutive function of the spiritual autobiography has done its job. Students will become part of a larger literary community of faith that has shared language and experiences.

James Boyd White emphasizes this communal aspect in his legal and literary approach to constitutive rhetoric. For White, the major benefit of constitutive rhetoric is the community formed within the rhetorical world of the text as speaker and the audience find a way to talk about the situation using shared terms upon which both parties agree (*Heracles* 6). White asserts, “Such a common language, such a common story, is in fact what we mean by a community” (6). This common story is created by both the speaker and the audience as they continually define the rhetorical world within which they exist. White emphasizes that the law, in its constitutive nature, is “culture-specific, that is, that it always takes place in a cultural context into which it is always an intervention. It is in a similar way socially specific: it always takes place in a particular social context, into which it is always an intervention” (35). The speaker always intervenes on behalf, but also to the disruption, of the reader. If the speaker is successful, the reader’s world is reconstituted, and his identity has been fundamentally shifted—even if only for a brief time. This is risky business; even when appealing to a constituted audience, the lawyer and rhetorician must work “to face and to accept the condition of radical uncertainty in which we live: uncertainty as to the meaning of words, uncertainty as to their effect on others, uncertainty even as to our own motivations” (40). Even with the attempt of definition, words are fluid and always changing. The audience may also be changing, as the ideal audience is often unclear.

A question prompted by the final aspect of the lawyer’s rhetorical situation is, “What place is there for me, and for others, in the universe defined by this discourse, in the community created by this text? What world does it assume, what world does it create?” (White, *Heracles* 46). This question is key in constitutive rhetoric: does the

audience see a place for itself within the text? Without an affirmative answer, the power of the text is greatly lessened. The speaker or writer crafts the text so that the audience will be moved to action. The narrative is constructed so that the audience will want to join the constituted community present in the text. The writer presents himself as an expert, worthy to be trusted. In essence, he's asking the audience to join him. White is clear that unless the reader has already been persuaded by earlier texts, he will be tentative: "while responding to the text he is always asking how he is responding, who he is becoming, and checking that against the other things he is" (17). The community the audience is being asked to join must align with who the audience member thinks he is, and if the community conflicts with this identity, then something has to go: either the reader's view of himself or the community. Thus, it is a complicated dance as the community is constituted and reconstituted with each sentence.

Scholars have used constitutive rhetoric to discuss groups and speakers from the past and present: from Martin Luther King Jr.'s constitutive rhetoric in "Letter From Birmingham Jail" (Leff and Utley) to Canadian suffragists (Thieme), breast cancer prevention rhetoric (Kopelson) to white lesbian feminism in the 1960s and 1970s (Tate). Additionally, a thesis by Robert Tousley examines the constructions of secular identities as individuals write about abandoning spiritual identities, and Tousley ultimately concludes that the texts he considers fail to constitute communities. Beth Daniell also uses Charland's concepts of identification and interpellation in looking at Christian identities constituted by two Christian books explicating biblical and theological issues, which successfully result in an expanded definition of religious identity ("More").

Some creative nonfiction scholars use the language of constitution when discussing the larger impact of creative nonfiction in representing a particular community or discourse. Both Gilmore and Spellmeyer talk about representation and socially-constituted rhetoric in their discussions of creative nonfiction. Yet few researchers actually examine spiritual autobiography with the concepts of constitutive rhetoric in mind. Jerome Bruner comes close in his chapter on the autobiographical process. He states that “a life is created or constructed by the act of autobiography,” and further, “how we construe our lives is subject to our intentions, to the interpretive conventions available to us, and to the meanings imposed upon us by the usages of our culture and language” (38). He explains White’s version of constitutive rhetoric in this way:

What Sophocles (or White) is arguing is that one cannot reflect upon self (radically or otherwise) without an accompanying reflection on the nature of the world in which one exists. And one’s reflections on both one’s self and one’s world cannot be one’s own alone: you and your version of your world must be public, recognizable enough to be negotiable in the “conversation of lives.” (Bruner 43)

Bruner focuses on the autobiographer’s public persona, which involves time, place, culture, and society. Ultimately, “the task of autobiographical composition consists, of course, in combining witness, interpretation, and stance to create an account that has both verisimilitude and negotiability” (Bruner 46). If this verisimilitude and negotiability is done well, the creative nonfiction writer can constitute a community based on her ethos and her experience, redefining labels that are likely shared by her audience. I will take the application a step further in the following chapters, looking at two contemporary Christian memoirs that reconstitute Christian identity in distinct ways that may be appealing to emerging adults.

The Power of Spiritual Narrative

Both the reading and the writing of spiritual autobiography can provide students with ways of understanding their experiences with spirituality and religion that other types of writing cannot. Much of that is due to the narrative function of this type of nonfiction. In White's explication of the power of narrative, he uses the story of Odysseus' and Neoptolemus' attempts to persuade Philoctetes. The moment of success within the myth is significant, for "what ultimately persuades Philoctetes is a new narrative, a version of his life that recognizes what is at the moment most real to him about his experience—his injury—but also places it in a context consisting of what else is real to him, and about him" (White, *Heracles* 22). Narrative in this sense means the explication of a sequence of true events that provide meaning and ultimately an identity. As evident in this story, a new life narrative can be a powerful tool of persuasion and self-constitution.

Both Elbaz and Charland note the importance of narrative to understanding a subject, in that it "make[s] real' coherent subjects" (Charland 138). They make the abstract concrete; they "dramatize the temporal and historical qualities of human experience" (Elbaz 38). Charland continues, "Narratives lead us to construct and fill in coherent unified subjects [...] Consequently, narratives offer a world in which human agency is possible and acts can be meaningful" (139). Autobiographical narrative provide a reflective opportunity, wherein individuals can create meaning from isolated incidents. Not only does narrative require a cohesive whole (which may need to be fabricated from the isolated events), it requires a purpose. The narrative function of spiritual autobiography can assist emerging adults for whom narratives are fractured and isolated,

putting words to the impact of events. As Dean and Kinnaman found, students need assistance with the language to articulate their religious and spiritual experiences. Narratives will help students understand the importance of creating a cohesive narrative structure for their own experiences, as well as specific language with which to articulate that cohesion.

The narrative of spiritual autobiography also has the added element of the true lived experience. Mills calls this the “crucial possibility of witness” that autobiography has, as opposed to fiction that lacks “memoir’s accountability, its public declaration that it offers at least an attempt at the truth” (116). Given their value of the subjective, truth as portrayed in individual experience has value for many emerging adults, and they can approach it less defensively due to its individual truth. Yet it represents or indicates values of a larger community. Additionally, “it is not only a matter of truth-telling as opposed to falsity, or even truthfulness rather than self-deception, but a matter of finding the right metaphors and figures to express essential character” (Elbaz 41). Finding the right metaphors requires the author to have an understanding of his community—as well as himself and the appropriate language—so he can describe his experience to them, and they can understand their own experiences in light of the author’s understanding. This is how White describes a community: it has a common language and a common story. In this way, spiritual autobiography can do a particular work that other literature can do only partially. It creates a living community with lived experiences that share metaphors and language that constitute those experiences.

This constitutive function can be plainly seen in the writing of marginalized individuals, such as female spiritual autobiographers. Lacking the power of their male

counterparts within both faith traditions and the broader culture, women have historically found an outlet in personal writing and spiritual expression, as women wrote some of the first autobiographies in existence. These writers carved out space for themselves using their places of authority—morality and domesticity—and in doing so, they created new communities of faith where marginalized voices could be heard. This work is still being done, and it empowers readers, especially students, to either find themselves within the communities constituted by these writers or to constitute communities of faith that reflect their own experiences. Students who may feel as if their lived experiences are not represented in traditional religious narratives and language can see the possibility of creating new spiritual narratives and language.

Women as Spiritual Autobiographers

Women have been writing in the area of spiritual autobiography for hundreds of years. Mary Mason asserts that the *Book of Margery Kempe* (1432) is “the first full autobiography in English by anyone male or female,” and Julian of Norwich was the first English woman to “speak out about herself” in her book *A Shewing of God’s Love* (1300) (as qtd. in Stanton 6). Stephanie Pausell claims that this heritage of writing goes back even earlier, as “Christian women have been writing autobiographically at least since the early Christian martyr, Perpetua, wrote an account of her experience in prison in the early third century” (293). This style of writing gave women the opportunity to express their own experiences with God for the betterment of their communities, ministering silently as they were not welcome to minister publicly.

The influence of the Protestant Reformation gave increased power to the individual. Christians emphasized the “universality of the general direction of the soul’s

struggle”—any and every life was of potential interest to other Christians, no matter how mundane (S. Smith 22). This applied to women, too, though many still struggled with justifying their speaking up and out about their life experiences. This struggle can be seen in Quaker spiritual autobiographies of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when spiritual autobiography was at its peak. The Society of Friends was the largest sectarian group in England, and women were two or three times more likely to join the group than men (Nussbaum 156, 157). Though the religious movement is now known for welcoming women into the ministry, in that time, women were not accorded equality with their male counterparts. Quaker women used their writing as mild resistance to the patriarchal system of ministry that kept them subservient.

One of these writers was Margaret Fell, a proponent of allowing women to speak publically on spiritual matters. In her writing, she argues that the difference between the sexes is man-made, not God-ordained.³ She does this skillfully, using biblical authority and real life situations. Nussbaum says, “When Fell asks what authority guides a woman if she has no husband, she sows the seeds for further disruption of patriarchal authority” (164). Fell also interprets the Pauline epistles and the creation story as evidence that God gave gifts to all of his followers, not just men. While not a spiritual autobiography proper, her texts speak to the spiritual community she sought to constitute, one of equality for all Christians. Fell widened the gospel to include women as part of God’s children and provide them a new place within the biblical narrative.

Contemporary women writers have continued to benefit from this spiritual heritage, and the draw of the form has not lessened. In connecting “the current chaotic state of institutional religion and the rise of creative nonfiction,” Ann McCutchan sees

³ Fell does allow men to be authorities over their wives in all matters except faith.

spiritual autobiography as “functioning to fill the void left by the collapse of cultural consensus” (53). As they seek to fill the void, these writings produce redefinitions and reconstitutions of familiar faith traditions. While spiritual autobiography is not only a feminine genre,⁴ contemporary women’s autobiographies are places where spirituality is constantly being reexamined and reevaluated, as women seek a larger meaning within their spiritual experiences and constitute themselves as part of a spiritual tradition.

Sidonie Smith asks the question, “What precisely would it signify for a woman’s life and her narrative to be ‘representative’ of a period?” (8). She states that women are not powerful or eminent, and they are more often thought of as exceptional instead of representational. Perhaps the power of these women’s spiritual autobiographies is that they are not leaders in a particular denomination or religious group, but are rather normal people, trying to articulate aspects of themselves within the context of religious discourse and trying to find a place for themselves within the culture. This is a role that many young adults can relate to, particularly in a world that is changing quickly without a definite moral center. Students can see how these writers navigate this tension, discovering their own ability to define themselves and their language in such a way that they are able to articulate their spiritual experiences and commitments to a community of their own composition.

⁴ See contemporary male writers such as Donald Miller, Ian Morgan Crohn, Bob Goff, Preston Yancey, and Tony Kriz.

Finding a Role

Female writers have struggled to formulate the cohesive self that traditional autobiographical scholars have seen as key to writing successful autobiographies.⁵ Stanton notes the “conflicts between the private and the public, the personal and the professional” for women, particularly the “systematic tension between the conventional role of wife, mother, or daughter and another, unconventional self that had ambition or a vocation” (13). Wagner-Martin also articulates these same “conflicting and mutually constricting roles (wife, mother, daughter, sister, lover)” (21). In Sidonie Smith’s examination of female autobiographies in the medieval and Renaissance periods, she identifies “four predominant life scripts: the nun, the queen, the wife, and the witch” (31). These were the major textual roles that women as writers could embody in texts; each role gave them power, but only in relation to the masculine power systems of the church, the state, the family, and the bedroom. Those roles still reverberate through current characterizations of women, though women writers today tend to play up the fracturing of self, using the segmented forms of the postmodernism essay to explore how the components of a personality all work to create a cohesive whole.

The roles that Sidonie Smith identified are similar in that they are all formulated in relationship with something else; none of the roles are individual. This is common among many autobiographies written by women, as they have primarily grounded their in-text identity “through relation to the chosen other” (Heilbrun 24). Mason similarly found that women writers create their identity in regards to relationship or connections with others, such that “the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the

⁵ See Nussbaum, Olney, etc. for discussions of the self in creative nonfiction, specifically spiritual autobiography.

real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’” (Watson 69). These relationships are at the center of many texts, and the other is primarily male and often human—though not always. Sometimes, as in spiritual autobiography, the ‘other’ is God himself.

Young adults today are highly aware of the fragmented nature of reality, so this textual fragmentation is familiar to them, even somewhat comforting. They also feel this fracturing in their own identities, as they sense how they interact differently in each area of their lives. The lack of constituting a cultural place for their fragmented unarticulated spiritual identities will be problematic as students grow into full-fledged adults who must communicate their values as members of a broader society. Teaching spiritual nonfiction and creative nonfiction has a practical benefit,⁶ but the real power comes in its constitutive nature, how it creates a language and a community from experience.

This is what many students seek: a language and a purpose for their spiritual experiences. This is why constitutive rhetoric, creative nonfiction, and religious rhetoric should be put into conversation to address the spiritual needs of young adults who are approaching college with few concrete beliefs of their own but many conceptions about what religion and religious people are like. Through an understanding of how rhetoric creates a community even while the community seeks to refine and convert the rhetoric, students will become agents in their own constitution by joining communities of people who own the labels emerging adults fear but consider the terms in nontraditional ways. In spiritual autobiography, we find well-crafted narratives that, like *Philoctetes*, provide students with narratives “that recognize what is at the moment most real to [them] about

⁶ Peter Elbow and Douglas Hesse outline the value of personal writing for life both inside and outside the academy clearly in their articles.

[their] experience” within a larger context (White, *Heracles* 22). As they are hailed by the texts and identified as part of a larger audience, students become empowered to use similar strategies to communicate their own spiritual commitments in ways that provide meaning for their larger community, both within the classroom and beyond.

CHAPTER THREE

Necessary Others: Kathleen Norris's *The Cloister Walk*

Since the Protestant Reformation, Catholics and Protestants have eyed each other warily. This formal split in Christianity preceded a good many others: some of which were painful, some of which were bloody, and all of which changed how the Christian faith was rhetorically constituted: by those leaving, by those staying, and by those on the outside. Now many emerging adults are splitting from labels in general, wary of feeling locked into a particular view of the world that could be later disproved by fact or experience. They also fear appearing judgmental and intolerant. They seek a place of belonging and authority for those who feel like outsiders within religious traditions, a place that does not exclude other potentially powerful and fulfilling traditions. They seek a position that is “both/and,” not “either/or.”

Kathleen Norris, described by a critic as a “poet by vocation and training, writing workshop leader by choice and financial necessity, Presbyterian by heritage and Benedictine oblate (associate) by religious impulse” has created a place like this for herself (Weiss 132), reconstituting the exclusivity of the Christian church into a inclusivity that embraces multiple branches of the Christian tradition. Norris demonstrates to the emerging adult reader that Christianity does not have to be an “either/or” endeavor; it can be “both/and” in regards to labels, religious practice, and faith communities. Norris’s experiences show emerging adult students the variety of forms that a religious faith can take and that owning one label does not necessarily mean

rejecting another. She also appeals to the sense of outsider status that many emerging adults feel in the world of religious institutions. By constructing herself as a “necessary other,” Norris demonstrates her commitment to communities even while being outside those same communities in some way (38). This role as necessary other marks poets and prophets, those who have public callings that identify them as different yet fulfill a cultural role of providing hope or truth. Through this role, Norris connects with emerging adults who feel they do not fit in the faith of their fathers and mothers, showing that their discomfort, their otherness, does not preclude them from finding identity within a faith tradition. In fact, it can provide a measure of strength.

Long before emerging adults were considering myriad faith practices, Norris was dividing her time between a Benedictine monastery and a small-town Presbyterian church. She writes about these two communities in many of her nonfiction works—her first memoir, *Dakota*, is about her spiritual connection to place and her later memoir, *Amazing Grace*, is about the language used within the church—but her 1996 memoir *The Cloister Walk* focuses on the relationship and tension between her two faith communities. Her book has been categorized as “a mixed genre: a conscious blend of nature writing, theology and church history, feminist reflection, and spiritual autobiography” (Weiss 132), as it records a compiled year of Norris as a Benedictine oblate at St. John’s Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota.¹

In order to reconstitute a version of Christianity that includes a necessary other identity and multiple faith traditions, Norris carefully develops her ethos within the group she is hoping to constitute as part of her community. She uses her roles as a woman and

¹ Norris was actually at the monastery for two nine-month stints and she compiles her two years into one liturgical year.

an artist—both major components of her identity—to assist her in crossing the perceived divide between Protestantism and Catholicism, while also crafting a persona of someone on the outside of both. This otherness does not limit her; in many ways, it gives her power to consider these familiar and long-held religious practices from a different perspective. Norris is a woman, an artist, a Protestant, and a Benedictine oblate. None of those things contradict the others, yet they all cause tension, either because of their conflicts with other aspects of her identity or with other communities of power that she encounters. The way Norris crafts her authorial self—by including these versions of herself and exploring how they impact each other—reconstitutes what a Christian might be, if labels were not considered restricting but rather freeing: to explore, experience, and embrace. In this way, readers, particularly emerging adults, may find their own freedom to claim multiple religious labels and consider their status as necessary others as both providing a measure of authority and constituting a particular type of community into which they are inviting their readers. This ethos can then empower students to construct the language needed to communicate their spiritual experiences to the community of faith they are constituting through their writing.

Constituting Ethos

In autobiographical writing, ethos must be carefully constructed, as it is highly important in writing where truth is a key factor of the narrative. As Bruner says, writing an autobiography requires “combining witness, interpretation, and stance to create an account that has both verisimilitude and negotiability,” wherein “stance” equals an “autobiographer’s posture toward the world, toward self, toward fate and the possible, and also toward interpretation itself” (45-46). In order to maintain this stance, the writer

needs to present a cohesive, or at least consistent, identity. This consistency of character is what preserves familiarity with the reader. If this consistency is not maintained, Elbaz describes, “Either [the readers] don’t fully trust [the author], or we condescend as we read; we think we can ‘read him like a book’ rather than wondering with him about the mystery of character” (57). To ward against this, the self portrayed by the writer needs to “demonstrate both a concern for character and a self-reflexive understanding of the activity of characterization” (Elbaz 57). That is, the author must consider how she constructs herself in her text.

Writers are rarely one cohesive self. Older conceptions of the autobiographical voice are “often predicated on the idea of a single, buried, unified, ‘authentic’ voice that the writer must uncover, rather than on the idea of an array of socialized voices that writers compose out of” (Eldred 6). As postmodern conceptions of the self developed, we came to understand how individuals are different versions of themselves in different contexts. As Walt Whitman famously wrote, we contain multitudes. Humans also “inhabit systems of social intercourse in which the ability to articulate an identity narrative—whether written, related orally, or simply dropped piece by piece into the social discourse of daily life—confirms the possession of a working identity” and thus a consistent ethos (Eakin, “Introduction” 6). An authorial voice constituted by a number of identities that work together to create a semi-cohesive whole is credible to contemporary readers. It seems honest about the social constructions of the self, and this ethos is the catalyst for the audience’s acceptance of the proposed community that will constitute their collective identity. In other words, the author’s selfhood frames the community into which the audience enters.

Michael Leff and Ebony Utley looked at Martin Luther King Jr.'s construction of his ethos in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," focusing on "1) the rhetor's construction of self, 2) the rhetor's construction of the audience (what Edwin Black calls the 'second persona'), and 3) the enactment within the text of the relationship between rhetor and audience" (40). King does this in particular ways given his two audiences: the explicit white audience and the implicit black audience. He constructs himself as "an agent who grounds his identity in the religious, intellectual, and political values of the American tribe, and it enacts a form of agency that sustains connection between author and reader even in the presence of disagreement" (47). King demonstrates his understanding of the cultural situation he is writing within and what would be most persuasive and valuable to his audience. Thus, his ethos is difficult to assail, as he has taken into account his audience's situation and reconstructed a new version of audience from that, with him as the central authority. Leff and Utley assert that King uses language to present himself as an insider, not an outsider, and yet I would argue that King fits Norris's explication of the "necessary other": someone enough on the margins to speak into a situation, being both inside and outside, indwelling it and observing it from the edges.

The writer's construction of self sets the tone for the piece, giving the audience an identity and a purpose to work toward together. This authorial self "shows in the tone of voice he adopts, in the signals he gives the reader as to how to take that tone of voice, in the attitudes he invites his reader to have toward the world or toward people or ideas within it, in the straightforwardness or trickiness with which he addresses his reader—his honesty or falseness—and in the way he treats the materials of his language and culture" (White, *When Words* 15). All of these elements work together to create a certain ethos

that the audience can view with trust or suspicion. Once the readers trusts the writer, they are willing to become part of this reconstituted community that not only reflects them as an audience but also reflects the writer who has constituted it.

Norris demonstrates an ability to be both inside and outside of each of her particular personas, but through it all, she demonstrates how these personas give her a unique perspective into the ecumenical nature of the Christian church, an ideal community where everyone is welcome and labels describe rather than divide. Norris's fragmented self is not a problem, but a strength as it creates multiple ways for her to view her faith and for her audience to connect with her as a necessary other "who contains multitudes." This view of the authorial self provides her audience, emerging adults in this case, with the opportunity to try on different labels and identities—even ones with which they do not feel completely comfortable—as they construct their personal faith commitments based on their past experiences, their current social situation, and their beliefs about the world around them. Norris creates a place for them within her text where they can be necessary others alongside her: inquisitive, unsettled, doubtful, and diverse, taking on labels that free them to explore. Through her writing, students then learn strategies for developing their own ethos as writers and creating communities out of that necessary otherness in which their own readers are free to explore.

Norris as Necessary Other

In an essay within *The Cloister Walk* titled "Jeremiah as Writer: The Necessary Other," Norris talks about prophets, artists, and monks as "necessary others" within the larger culture. These individuals are not full members of the larger culture because of their function, but are called upon by that culture to respond to the occurrences within it:

sometimes to remind, sometimes to reproach. These necessary others “interact strongly with their world, and ...there is a measure of suffering involved as they come to a mature understanding of their communal role,” according to Norris (40). Even while the culture occasionally mocks and demeans them, it needs them desperately, looking to them for “hope of transformation” (41). These necessary others are “free to speak, and indeed must speak” in ways that others cannot (39). The position is both lonely and communal. They feel apart and different, but recognize that these “oddities are what constitute their value to others” (39). Necessary others’ work is public and yet deeply private, as they are both within the culture to which they speak and yet separate. Norris ends the section with imagining the church sanctuary as “home, a place where there is no ‘other,’” and yet she realizes her role as necessary other is ultimately needed (46). The church may be a “refuge, a place to find the divided self made whole,” but division and fragmentation are sometimes necessary in order for change to occur (46). This is the paradox of the necessary other, and Norris explores both the suffering and privilege this role affords her.

Her conception of the necessary other permeates the ways she presents herself within her text. Norris’s variety of roles provides ethos in different areas. In each role, she is outside of the community, reflecting on it and what it means, even while being invested in the community enough to wish to speak to and explore it. In doing so, she demonstrates it is possible for religious identities to flourish on the outskirts of the larger religious culture. Through this articulation, emerging adult students realize that just because one takes on a label does not mean that they fit within the role perfectly. They can find comfort, even calling, in constituting their authorial roles as necessary others within their communities, finding themselves in good company with poets and prophets.

Norris as Protestant

Though Norris feels a strong connection to the Benedictine monks, particularly those at St. John's Abbey and University, a significant part of her spiritual identity is her self-identification as "a complete Protestant with a decidedly ecumenical bent" (*Dakota* 91). Her experience as a young woman in that faith tradition was rocky, and she left the church as a young adult, finding "salvation through writing" (43). After twenty years away, she came back to the Protestant church—specifically, Spencer Presbyterian Church, where her grandmother had been a member for sixty years—when she moved to her family homestead in Lemmon, a small town near the border between North and South Dakota. Norris described attending church as "kind of an exercise in nostalgia" at the start ("What I Took Home" 9), before becoming gripped by how the church functioned within the community.² In Lemmon, "church is both a serious commitment and a joy," and Norris chooses to commit to it and find joy in it (272). Yet she also finds it true that "to attach oneself to place is to surrender to it, and suffer with it" (244).³

Despite her familial connection to Lemmon, Norris maintains a sense of being an outsider in the community, as her experiences are different from those around her. Norris lived in New York for many years before coming 'home.' She continues to fly to either coast for lectures and workshops, and she spends time away at monasteries. Her function is also different. She is a poet in the land of farmers, "a person of the literary culture" miles away from any academic environment (246). This tension is reflected in her experience after her poem was printed in the *New Yorker*. The pastor announced it as

² This process is described in her memoir *Dakota*.

³ This commitment to community may be unfamiliar to many emerging adults, due to their transitory lifestyle and the rarity of them settling into a community until later in life.

“one of the ‘joys of the congregation,’” and Norris notes, “His gesture made me more a part of the Lemmon community, even as it separated me from it” (247). People in the community were both proud of her accomplishment and a little uncertain, due to their lack of context for her work. Over time, the community has come to regard her with “a healthy mix of pride and wariness” (350). This nature of her role in the community makes her a necessary other: one who knows a community well enough to invest in it, but still separate enough to be able to reflect on it. Young adults struggling with their spiritual identity know this feeling of being on the outskirts of a community well, but rarely is it presented as being a place with purpose.

Norris’s experience of preaching at her church gives another example of the necessary otherness she embodies as an ecumenical South Dakota Protestant. In *Dakota*, she recounts the experience of being asked to preach. When the church was between pastors, the chair of the worship committee said to her, “You’re a writer, you can do it” (*Dakota* 119). After bringing in another elder, a housewife, to lead communion services, Norris realizes that “in a larger urban church with well-credentialed clergy, that woman and I would not have been asked to preach. We would never have discovered that we could preach” (*Dakota* 119). That is a benefit of a small-town, a desert as Norris symbolically calls it, referencing its lack of resources and the need to make do with what they have. So when Norris preaches, she attempts to “yoke [her] disparate worlds together in such a way that the congregation can benefit,” sharing tales of the desert fathers and mothers that seem familiar to those in a tight-knit community (*Cloister* 273). She uses her otherness to speak as a sort of prophet, bringing separate worlds together to create new meaning. This combination appeals to the emerging adult reader, who values

an individual's experience over the tenets of an organized religion, as well as the act of picking and choosing religious practices based on individual feelings and preference. Unifying the stories of two faith traditions shows it is possible for these traditions to exist together, combining the best parts of each to create a new spiritual identity.

Norris's role as a necessary other in Lemmon means that she sees things that others may overlook. Her role as an outsider gives her the ability to find beauty in places not normally considered beautiful, particularly evident in her section on trees. Most trees in South Dakota have been carefully planted at some point in history. Most South Dakotans know this, yet it is easy for those within the community to overlook them.⁴ Norris connects the life of the physical to the spiritual. Norris ruminates on trees weakened by disease, wondering, "Will we have the energy, the hope, to replace them?" (289). It is no grand leap of logic to connect this question to her struggle to find a place within both the Protestant and the Catholic traditions after years away from any faith tradition at all. The underlying question beneath this text asks if a life as necessary other is worth it, but Norris provides an answer through the trees: in the plains, trees are more than plants; they are "message-bearer[s]," signifying what it takes to survive there (290). They themselves are necessary others, elements that do not belong but work to survive and transmit the message that the hard work is worth it. These trees also confirm to Norris—and those following her spiritual journey—that the life of faith gives and takes, and while it may be simple and sparse, the hard work of finding a place within different roles and faith traditions is beautiful work. Thus Norris constitutes herself within the world of South Dakota and the Presbyterians as one who can see beauty in sparseness, the

⁴ As a former South Dakotan, I could relate to Norris's explication of trees' purpose.

work of a necessary other within the larger faith tradition, and students realize they can do the same.

Norris as Oblate

In Latin, “oblate” means “to offer” (Norris xviii). It is not a term familiar to most Protestants, yet the early church used this term to refer to Jesus, who offered his life as a sacrifice to his calling. As a reflection of that commitment, the Catholic church uses the word to describe someone who has taken “an abbreviated yet powerful profession of monastic vows” (xvii). The oblate commits to both a role and a community; to join the Benedictines, “you attach yourself to a particular monastery by signing a document on the altar during mass, in which you promise to follow the Rule of St. Benedict insofar as your situation in life will allow” (xvii). It is not a commitment to be taken lightly, but it can reap great spiritual rewards, as Norris has found. In becoming an oblate, she became part of the Benedictine community, or what she considers a family.

Norris’s first experience with the Benedictines was while staying in a convent during an arts residency shortly after moving to South Dakota. Norris was forthright with the sisters: she defined herself as an outsider, not just to Catholicism but to religious traditions in general. She told them she did not attend church regularly, and when she did, it was a Protestant church. The sisters were unconcerned, and they invited Norris to read the Rule of St. Benedict. Norris was taken with the straightforward and practical language of the Rule, which was based on scripture but applied to daily life—particularly in terms of hospitality, service, and community. Norris began to think she could exist with these people, and further, that she would want to exist with them.

The position Norris takes when she writes about her time with the Benedictines is one of learner and listener. Norris remains an other within the community, as she never converts to Catholicism. She maintains her identity as a Protestant, even as she grows deeper into the Benedictine community. Because of this, she presents herself as one who is constantly learning. Her inexperience gives her authority to speak about what she is learning, and she is invested in the things she learns, as they are part of this community to which she is committed. She asks questions on behalf of the reader; she makes sense of the experiences and texts, providing the readers with the meaning she has discovered as an outsider encountering these saints and traditions for the first time. Norris constantly shares the wisdom and stories of those within the community, often with direct quotes. In this way, her experiences, while immensely personal, are also part of the larger Benedictine community, as their wisdom is contained within the pages of Norris's memoir. This seems only right, as she becomes part of their spiritual community and incorporates their values of hospitality and encountering Christ into her own spiritual life. From this, emerging adults can see the benefit of a religious community, instead of remaining in the nebulous, unsupervised, and sometimes lonely state of spirituality.

Norris makes a striking connection between the poet she is at her core and the monks she loves, calling them "the best degenerates in America" (146). Both poets and monks are not utilitarian in a highly utilitarian society; thus the culture "alternately ignores, romanticizes, and despises them" (145). At the same time, the culture is grateful that the poets and monks do their work, as most others cannot either by ability or choice (145). Norris draws a distinct line connecting these two callings, saying that they fill crucial roles in the culture. They announce that "the symbolic act *matters*" and is worth

doing, even if it does not make money or fame (147). In this way, Norris and the monks are necessary others together, outside of the rest of society. Norris invites her audience to join them, particularly those who feel they are not considered useful but who can provide beauty instead of utility.

As a necessary other within the Benedictine community, Norris does not shy away from engaging problematic issues in this community. She discusses the wearing of the habit, celibacy, the virgin saints: issues that have caused others to criticize this community. The people who daily live with these issues criticize it too. They are not blind to the problematic aspects. They also struggle with working too much, with tensions between members of the community, and with pride and pettiness; they are ordinary people after all. Norris reveals these issues by interviewing and asking hard questions, which the members of the community always seem willing to answer in thoughtful (and often humorous) ways. They never make Norris feel like an outsider, even though she is—her work and her marriage, her life outside of the monastery, make her an outsider within this community. Norris demonstrates what one can do as a necessary other, the purpose this role can have in a community and in individual lives. While it can be lonely and isolating, it can also be powerful.

Because of the Benedictines being necessary others in their own regard, they accept Norris as she is—woman, artist, and Protestant—and welcome her into their community. She does not have to give up aspects of her personality, past, or selfhood to participate. The Benedictines demonstrate that the church can and should love the whole aspect of a person. This acceptance gives Norris the permission to explore different aspects of herself within the context of the monastery, finding how she can fit into such a

place. Once again, she is both an insider and an outsider; she is “both/and,” not “either/or.” The religious community, whatever that looks like, should be a place for those who both embrace and struggle with their places on the borders, and through Norris’s experiences, she, along with her Benedictine friends, begin to constitute a place like this for her and others.

Norris as Artist

Norris considers herself a necessary other most explicitly in her role as artist and writer. Her primary artistic identity, at least in *The Cloister Walk*, is poet, wordsmith, and workshop teacher. Before writing *Dakota*, Norris published four books of poetry. Timothy Gray describes Norris as an “unlikely spiritual guide” of 1970s New York before she moved out of the city and to South Dakota (218). Norris’s poetry is a significant part of her spiritual expression. She says, “Poetry, like prayer, is a dialogue with the sacred,” and later, that “both prayer and poetry begin deep within a person, beyond the reach of language (64, 143). She considers her poetry to be an expression of faith, spurred on by that indefinable desire to create that many artists feel and attempt to communicate. Further, Norris says, “[the Benedictine] liturgy feeds my poetry” (141), indicating her time as an oblate has made her a better poet and artist. As both a writer of poetry and a lover of it, Norris also champions the poetry found in the metaphors of the Bible, reveling in their power and believing them to be true in a way that literal readers (particularly of the Bible and other sacred texts) struggle to understand.

While she finds her artistic lens allows her to interpret the traditions of faith in rich and varied ways, this lens also creates a sense of otherness in both the larger world

and the literary world. Norris repeatedly describes her lack of academic credentials.⁵ She separates herself early in the book from any academic, saying she is “a poet who is ‘not learned.’ I have no advanced degrees and have never worked in academia” (9). Later in the same section, she describes a form of experiential knowledge that poets use, “perhaps akin to what Hildegard termed seeing, hearing, and knowing simultaneously” (11). She describes this way of knowing as causing tension between her and the other academics present in the Benedictine monastery.⁶ Norris recounts her own unease around the scholars present, feeling what she calls their “scorn” (37). As she describes:

Scholars speak with authority, and they must, as they are trying to convince the reader that they have a worthwhile point of view. On the other hand, poets speak with no authority but that which the reader is willing to grant them. ... And to be a poet, which at its root means ‘maker,’ to be a maker of phenomena, speaking without reference to authority but simply because the words are given you, is not necessarily welcome in the academic world. (37)

She senses that poets unsettle academics, as poets break down the categories of authority: for example, Norris being called a “theologian” despite not having advanced theological training (42). The authority Norris receives, as poet, comes from “experience tested in isolation, as by the desert fathers and mothers, and also tried in the crucible of community” (43). She provides a different perspective on life. Her ways of knowing are as valuable as the academics’, and her value as a necessary other is what she can bring to a community. Being on the outside is still a painful experience, though—both a calling and an isolation.

⁵ These assertions of Norris echo Petroff’s discussion of the female visionary writers of the Middle Ages, many of whom insisted that “they have not studied how to express themselves; they are ignorant of rhetoric; they have not read any of their ideas in books” (“Introduction” 27). Their experiences were their own, and they indicated they had no formal education in these matters.

⁶ Norris’s tenures at the monastery were as a resident scholar at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John’s, along with other scholars. Her second experience was riddled with tension.

Norris also feels that her role as necessary other extends from the monastery to schools where she is a visiting artist “on behalf of similes and metaphors (officially)” and unofficially to help the troubled students find their voices (54). She invites students to break the rules: ignoring grammar, working in groups, not even finishing poems. She prefers metaphors to definitions, and she prefers the children who are bad students and able to communicate a unique perspective to the good students who want to know the right way to write a poem. She once again crafts herself as an other in the academic setting,⁷ and she desires to seek out the other “others”—the future necessary others. This artistic role she embodies, both within the larger world and also the world of faith, provides room for other necessary others, particularly emerging adults, who find themselves out of place within the world of institutionally-acquired knowledge or institutional religion. As necessary others, she says, they can be known and know in ways that others cannot, and this is both good and essential.

Norris as Woman

Norris recognizes that her position as a woman gives her a specific perspective on the Protestant faith of her foremothers and the liturgical faith in which she finds rest. As a woman in these faith traditions, she is automatically a necessary other. Both strands of Christianity have not always made room for female voices. The Protestant faith specifically can struggle to point to historical figures, particularly female ones; as Norris says, while growing up she “envied Catholic girls their name days, holy cards, medals and stories of women saints. I had few female images of holiness, except for the silent Mary of the crèche, and ‘girls of the Bible’ stories sanitized for middle-class

⁷ Despite not considering herself an academic, Norris does use quite a few academic metaphors in this section, particularly in regards to chemistry.

consumption” (188). Her Protestant upbringing emphasized the present and personal relationship between an individual and the male-image of her God, fearing to revere too highly the cloud of witnesses of the past. Within the monastic tradition, though, Norris finds women—saints and desert mothers—who spoke with wisdom, and she gleans strength from them.

Additionally, Norris’s past experiences as a woman in her faith tradition shape how she approaches her faith in her spiritual autobiography. As a child, Norris loved singing in the church, but as she grew, she began to believe “one had to be dressed up, both outwardly and inwardly, to meet God” (90). She walked away when she “could not longer be ‘good,’ which for girls especially meant not breaking rules, not giving voice to anger or resentment, and not complaining” (91). Norris draws on the history of how women are expected to behave in larger society, implicating the church in the perpetuation of these gender roles. Norris also identifies the tendency of American culture to encourage women to deny their own pain and to ignore violence levied against them, and she says that Benedictine women have found the Psalms to be “an outlet for such anger” against this sort of violence (95). Norris has found the monastic community with their regular oral recitation of the psalms to be especially freeing for her as a Christian woman in a way that counteracts her negative childhood experiences with religion. She has the freedom to be angry in a way not normally encouraged for women, particularly within the church. In recording her own experiences of learning how to be angry, she gives others, both male and female, the space to be angered about gender discrimination, inequality, and other personal and societal ills that affect their

relationships with God. She also shows emerging adults way to reconcile one's past and present experience of religion through her role of necessary other.

As a woman engaging in these two different faith traditions, Norris seeks a way of living with and through both of them, even the problematic elements. She discusses some aspects of the religious past that give feminists pause when discussing the nature of the church, and she does so from the viewpoint of an necessary other: both in the Catholic church as a Protestant, and in church tradition as a woman. First, Norris discusses the virgin martyrs. Long believed to set women of faith back, Norris instead frames the virgin martyrs as women who seized their only available means of power and reclaimed it, using death as an opportunity to upset traditional power structure based on sex and violence. For these women, Norris argues, virginity was “a state of being, of powerful potential, a *point vierge* from which they could act in radical resistance to authority” (190). Norris says much of current culture's understanding of virginity comes from a male's perspective, that of ignorance and waiting; from a female's perspective, it carries a deeper meaning, one of a state of being, of selfhood and identity (200). Norris says these virgin martyrs are to be celebrated for their singleness of purpose, which she describes as choosing death over a loss of honor, thus upending the traditional patriarchal system and grasping the only power they could have. In this way, these women should be models for others to be bold and hold to what they believe to be true about themselves and their faith among the prevailing cultural winds.

Norris also highlights the female perspective on monastic life, when words like “celibacy” and “monk” primarily conjure up images of men and their monastic experience. In looking at celibacy, Norris uses interviews with Benedictine men and

women to differentiate between how the genders experience the practice, saying that men primarily consider celibacy as a redirection of energies while women tend to consider celibacy as a matter of communal living (254). Both genders view celibacy as a way of loving generously instead of focusing attention on one individual. Similarly, the ways that male and female Benedictine women view the habit differs based on societal expectations. Whereas men tend to see it as an identifying factor, women have a more complicated history with the habit, one that involves restriction, romanticization, objectification, and ultimately a representation of a historical requirement of women subjecting themselves to the authority of a patriarchal church that did not understand them (318). In these two sections, Norris discusses the uniquely feminine experience of these two standard elements of the monastic life. In her gentle divulging and analyzing, replete with direct quotes from those who live within these tensions, she communicates the often painful ways that Benedictine women experience their spirituality. Yet within these institutions, women are able to find personal meaning and places for themselves within the spiritual traditions handed down to them. As necessary others within the tradition, they reconstitute meaning for themselves, as Norris does with her melding of Catholic and Protestant practices for her own personal spiritual journey. Readers are implicitly welcomed to do the same after observing these other women do so.

A key part of Norris's perspective as a woman comes with the relationships that have shaped who she is, the primary being her (often struggling) marriage with a fellow artist. Her marriage is significant in multiple ways. First of all, their married relationship sets her apart from her Benedictine monastic friends, most of whom are celibate. As Norris says, "A married woman such as myself, for example, who makes frequent visits

to a monastery, will follow the Rule in a far different way than the men and women who commit their lives entirely to a monastic community” (xvii). In this way, she is an outsider in the community as a married woman. Marriage also gives her a different perspective on elements of the monastic life, such as celibacy, the virgin martyrs, and communal living. Norris comes to understand this way of life, but her marriage still distinguishes her from her monastic friends.

Additionally, her connection to the monastery is not something she shares with her husband. He is not part of her ruminations on the lessons from the monastery. Particularly at the beginning of the book, her candid discussions of her husband reveal tension. Norris reveals painful periods of their marriage, which seems tempestuous at times and separate at others. David spends time at the monastery with her, though he does not engage in the community. Norris calls their differing religious experiences “a comic spectacle ... what makes me giddy with joy annoys or angers him” (181-182). Norris’s relationship with her husband is affected by what she learns at the monastery, as she reflects on ways she has failed her husband and ways they have come back together, and yet her experience as an oblate is largely separate. Her role as a wife influences her spirituality, but in the ways that she as a woman experiences it, not reliant on her husband’s expression of his own spirituality. Her relationship with God is her own, not dependent on her role as wife.

As a necessary other, Norris speaks to the domestic life, a place where women have ruled for generations, and she constitutes it into a spiritual space. She embeds within these domestic acts a sense of spirituality and power that they may not have previously had. She discusses women cooking or baking together, experiences that provide a sense

of community. She also ruminates on doing laundry and working in the garden, work that engages the personal sphere of the home but also moves outside it to the yard, a hybrid private/public place where the community enters in. Even drying laundry on the line is both private and public. Norris describes these actions as spiritual rituals, endowing them with a purpose beyond the mundane. She also connects these acts with a female spiritual heritage, giving them a spiritual power unlocked by knowing and engaging in a ritual repeatedly and fully. Women who may feel ensconced in the home, raising children or running a household, are released to have spiritual encounters in that place. This is spoken out of her experience as a spiritual woman and her desire to be part of a faith tradition, whether it is one hundreds of years old or one of her own making. This desire may be one echoed by the emerging adult student, disconnected from a larger faith tradition and seeking both a place within that tradition and a way to articulate his own experiences through writing.

Norris as Writer

The multitudes that Norris contains all have something in common: they are all necessary others in one of the communities in which Norris invests herself. Because of this, this multiplicity of selves create her authority, her necessary ethos, as she reconstitutes a sense of Christian community that blurs the boundaries between faith traditions. She does this by showing it is possible to embody multiple roles at once. Norris shows it is possible to be a “Protestant with an ecumenical bent;” she can find value and joy in both the faith traditions she has inherited and those she has chosen. Her role as necessary other makes them all possible. Norris demonstrates that her calling as a necessary other affects her spirituality, as do her gender and her artistic work, and these

roles provide a sense of self that is acknowledged and ultimately trusted by her readers. All of her ways of being bring her into communion with a higher power, and while she often feels like an other (necessary or otherwise), Norris finds worth in continuing in these roles, for they provide her a certain outlook on the world. This otherness provides more authorial ethos, as it shows that Christian life is often fraught with division and discomfort, and yet one can still choose to belong. This is particularly empowering for the emerging adult, who may feel forced into choosing labels at the exclusion of others even while the labels do not seem to fit them or their experiences. Norris says this tension may be part of one's calling, and if it is, one should develop that sense of otherness by asking questions and learning, making one's position on the boundary a place from which to see the larger culture and speak into it.

One critic describes Norris as being “truly ecumenical...because she sees the synthesizing elements in the denominations within Christianity. She comments on the slightly skewed views of the different groups and is able to recognize and express the value of opposing perspectives, step back, and comment on how each one fits into the whole” (Weaver). This ability to synthesize the differences and similarities of perspectives that have often been set up as opposite poles creates a reconstituted understanding of Christian spirituality. She shows the Protestant and Catholic traditions are not two poles; rather they are two options of many that can be chosen by a person of faith. Instead of leaving one faith tradition for another, the person of faith brings her past along with her—and this is valuable, holistic, and even holy. This perspective resonates with many emerging adults and their desire to choose traditions that appeal to them and their spiritual experiences.

Norris is honest about feeling out of place and also the joys of feeling settled in a place. In doing so, she invites others into her experience, whether Catholic, Protestant, or somewhere in the middle on the spectrum. She demonstrates that there is freedom for others to explore their spirituality outside—and inside—the boundaries of denominational labels and there is value in writing down that exploration. These readers, particularly students, can be part of her ecumenical community and learn to identify the aspects of their selves that provide them authority and perspective on the spiritual commitments in their lives. As they do this for themselves, students should begin to feel empowered to do the same for others: to display authority—not despite of, but rather because of their fragmented identities—which will then assist them in creating the necessary language with which to communicate their spiritual experiences. Students should know that they have more than the right to speak; they have a calling, and the composition class will help them fulfill that calling as they articulate their spiritual commitments both inside and outside of their spiritual communities.

In *The Cloister Walk*, Norris describes an experience getting a haircut in New York City from an effervescent gay man who speaks with fondness of monks he had known. He says, “They don’t preach at you, they let you experience it for yourself. You know, I’ve never felt so close to God before or since. It blew me the fuck away” (70). Norris’s response is telling: “I caught his eye in the mirror and nodded, ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I know what you mean’” (70). This memoir is Norris’s experience of being blown away by the contemplative life and then bringing it home with her, to her South Dakota Protestant roots. She, as an artist and as a woman, has a place among the Presbyterians and Benedictines, reconstituting the boundaries of what a Christian might be. This type of

engaging with God accepts all aspects of an individual's selfhood. In this way, students who read her works are allowed to be blown away by the graciousness and discipline of the broader spiritual life, without leaving other identities, especially the necessary other identities, at the door to the sanctuary.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cursing Christians: Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*

Religious individuals are not known for being funny. In 2002, Vassilis Saroglou's findings confirmed what many already suspected: from the psychological perspective, "religion associates negatively with personality traits, cognitive structures and social consequences typical to humor" (205).¹ The final statement of Saroglou's article anticipates reader response: "We ask people who will react to this article by insisting they know religious people with a good sense of humor, to think twice: it is possible that religious people may have a good sense of humor *despite* their religiosity; and not necessarily *because* of it" (206, emphasis in original). Saroglou's point is valid. Many of the necessary components associated with humor, particularly humor that pushes the boundary of polite society, is incompatible with traditional religion due to its irreverence, disrespect, and extreme and colorful language. It is no wonder religion, particularly Christianity, is not considered any fun. This is a common conception among many emerging adults, and a reason (among many) that some emerging adults are hesitant to be associated with other religious individuals.

Samuel Joeckel provides the religiously-committed individual with some hope for humor in his response to Saroglou that identifies concepts within Christianity that

¹ These traits typical to humor include: "incongruity, ambiguity, possibility of nonsense, low dogmatism and low authoritarianism, playfulness, spontaneity, attraction to novelty and risk, lack of truthfulness and finality, affective and moral disengagement, loss of control and order as implied by emotionality, and finally transgression, especially transgression of prohibitions related to aggression/dominance and sexuality" (Saroglou 205).

correspond with the opportunity for humor. He concedes at the end of his article, though, that he has “sketched out the sort of Christian for whom humor is more likely to be embraced: one open to ambiguity and interpretive flexibility, and one willing to challenge dogmatism and closed systems (one I identified as the flexible Christian)” (432). This flexible Christian is the type attractive to the emerging adult student: a religious person who does not take herself or her faith too seriously. This describes the kind of Christian that Anne Lamott is: flexible, challenging, and irreverent.

The term “irreverent” is frequently used to describe writer Anne Lamott, along with other characteristics not normally considered to exist alongside the Christian label.² Already a successful novelist, Lamott wrote her memoir *Operating Instructions* in 1993, which she describes as a “black-humored and quite slanted...anti-George Bush baby book” about her son’s birth and her first year as a single mother (133). After that book, the majority of her nonfiction could be called spiritual autobiography, her first being 1999’s *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. In this collection of essays, Lamott describes her conversion to Christianity and the years after the birth of her son Sam and death of her best friend Pammy. Most of the chapters are about Lamott, Sam, and other ordinary people, who she writes about “with extraordinary insight and humor in prose seasoned liberally with salty language” (Haught).

Lamott does not pretend to be anyone special, yet she finds the spiritual in the everyday. As Weaver says, Lamott’s appeal is her ability to “juxtapose the profane with the holy and present herself as a sort of ‘everyman’ of the human condition to which anyone can relate, regardless of religious affiliation. The fact that she does search for

² Such as “Democrat.” See articles written by Debra Bendis, Nancy Haught, and Agnieszka Tennant.

spirituality (though finding it where she least expected it), only makes her more representative of her generation” and the generations following her. Lamott makes the sacred accessible to the average individual without hiding behind formality or theology. Her informality in talking to God—she describes prayer as “you close your eyes, breathe, and say, ‘hi’”(Nelson 54)—and her vivid and seemingly brutally honest depiction of herself and others are what make her writing unexpected, particularly for the religious reader. In many ways, Lamott is creating a whole new religious language, composed of the profanity and physicality of everyday life.

Lamott’s constitution of the Christian life, marked by humor and irreverence, counters some of the perceptions that many emerging adults have of the church being “hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, antihomosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental” or “overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive, and doubtless” (Kinnaman and Lyons 29-30, Kinnaman 92-93). Lamott shows it is possible to directly contradict many of these labels and yet remain devoted to a church and a faith. Her language provides another perspective on the Christian life, one that creates the opportunity for a community that uses language beyond that traditionally accepted by organized religion. She does this through blurring the lines between sacred and profane language; using humor to characterize both herself and those around her; and talking about the physical world and her experience of it as holy. Through new understanding of religious language, Lamott constitutes a faith that is inclusive rather than exclusive, and grounded in reality, showing students that they can constitute religious identities with whatever language they have. They can join Lamott’s community of laughter and then create their own spiritual identities including irreverence, humor, and the physical world.

Constituting Language

According to constitutive rhetoric, creating a new community requires a new language, understood by all potential members of the community. A writer like Lamott, who is constituting a new type of Christian community, must choose her words carefully. If a readership does not understand what a writer means by the terms she uses, then the readers cannot be considered a cohesive community, as they cannot feel unified with each other nor can they distinguish their group from others. To develop this cohesion, “a speaker would have to find a way of talking about what has happened, and what will happen, that [both parties] could both accept, and which could thus serve as the ground of a newly constituted community between them” (White, *Heracles* 6). By “way of talking,” White means a language that can be used by both parties, “a shared set of terms for telling the story of what has happened and what will happen, for the expression of motive and value, and for the enactment of those movements of the mind leading to a common end that we call reason” (*Heracles* 6). With this new language, the parties can reconstitute activities of the past into a meaningful shared history, and they can give what is to come meaning before it even occurs. Particularly in spiritual autobiography, the writer can create a version of her past that fits within a larger narrative structure for her religious community, creating meaning and purpose. Students often lack language and purpose in talking and writing about their religious commitments. They do not know how to articulate their spiritual experiences and beliefs to others, much less themselves. Writers like Lamott can provide a demonstration of how to choose the words and concepts needed to create meaning from experiences.

It is not just about the meaning created by the words, White says. It is also about *how* the language is used. For example, when practicing law, it matters how the law is presented or discussed within the lawyer's speech or writing. White explains, "The lawyer is always saying not only, 'Here is how this case should be decided,' but also 'Here—in this language—is the way this case and similar cases should be talked about. The language I am speaking is the proper language of justice in our culture'" (*Heracles* 34). The speaker is arguing that the subject should be talked about in a particular way, that the language she uses is valid, appropriate, and the correct way to talk about the subject. In this way, the lawyer reconstitutes the entire language of a case, and those who agree or understand her position are ushered into the community.

In a similar way, a writer like Lamott presents her spiritual experiences using a particular language. If she is successful, her audience understands that language as accurately representing spiritual experiences, and they may use it to represent their own spiritual commitments. Writing in this way is a matter of both persuasion and constitution, for each shift in language shifts perceptions of what the community is actually discussing. The community sees it is possible to talk about concepts in different ways by using different words, which changes their understanding of those concepts and provides greater possibility for meaning. Particularly for students who feel constricted by society's definitions of religious language and labels, this new religious language gives them a wider range of meanings with which they can affiliate themselves. For even those who choose not to associate with a religious label, those "spiritual but not religious" or the religious "nones," their perceptions of what constitutes a religious individual can broaden.

This construction of language is not done in a vacuum. As White says, “Like law, rhetoric invents, and like law it invents not out of nothing but out of something. It always starts in a particular place among particular people. . . . Rhetoric always takes place with given materials” (*Heracles* 39). This constitution needs to happen within a language and within a culture, as all language is culture-based. For example, Lamott works within a given culture: she uses terms that are familiar to her ideal audience, and yet she seeks to complicate her readers’ understanding of these terms and thus religious experience in general. When Lamott references Jesus, her readers know to whom she is referring, even as she continues to broaden who she believes Jesus to be. The cultural context can be restricting, but it is also a starting place for understanding and ultimately reconstituting. In Lamott’s case, she is aware of the culture she is working within and how she must maneuver her construction of language and herself. As a result, her language is accessible and grounded, even for those who are not within the Christian culture.

The constitution of a new shared language and thus a new identity within a cultural context is a process that involves both the writer and the audience. James Boyd White describes this process in *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, using Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* as an example. In this text, “Burke offers . . . a language of generality to which the reader may turn from any of the activities of life in order to claim a meaning for what he does and to connect it with the rest of life; it is truly a constitutional language. This text thus creates a central place or platform from which the world can be viewed as a whole” (White, *When Words* 208). This language creates a new worldview that the audience can use to interpret other situations. Burke creates this “language of generality” in three ways. First, Burke uses *combination*. He asserts that “a

discourse rooted in a single value will always be too simple to be true,” so it is necessary to complicate terms, considering their multiple implications—positive and negative (201). In Burke’s text, he does this with the term “liberty.” Burke uses combination to create *distinction*, persuading his audience of the need to “create a language at once of greater difficulty than the language their opponents use and having greater correspondence with the world than theirs” (202). This strategy differentiates this community and language from other communities and discourses, providing a rationale for this change in identity. Lastly, Burke uses *metaphors* to bring together elements that would be considered distinct from each other in other discourses. These metaphors show it is possible to talk about these elements in the same terms, using a new language that is both more complicated and more integrated. This model of language construction does not only apply to political theory; it can also be seen in spiritual autobiography that reconstitutes terms and identities for its audience by providing language for them to understand familiar concepts in new ways.

Lamott’s Language of Generality

Anne Lamott uses these strategies of language construction in her spiritual autobiography *Traveling Mercies* to reconstitute Christian religious community through language. Because she does so, readers, particularly emerging adults who may consider religious commitments to be restrictive or inflexible, may find the community of faith as portrayed by Lamott to be a vibrant, flexible, open space in which the sacred meets the profane (combination), the reverent meets the irreverent (distinction), and the physical meets the spiritual (metaphor). As such, these students may discover a place for themselves within the community constructed by her text, as well as new ways to

communicate their faith experiences through writing outside of the terminology presented by traditional faith communities.

Combining the Sacred with the Profane

Lamott does not use traditional language to talk about her conversion, characterizing it as “a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another” in her opening narrative “Overture: Lily Pads” (3). Her “safe places” ranged from Catholicism to Christian Science, atheism, Judaism, and other faiths. Her path was not smooth by any means, and the words she uses reflect that journey. Lamott believed in God after a “lurch of faith” in college (28), but hers was a “patchwork God, sewn together from bits of rag and ribbon, Eastern and Western, pagan and Hebrew, everything but the kitchen sink and Jesus” (41). While this perspective converges with the emerging adult value of picking and choosing religious practices, this patchwork is ultimately unsatisfying for Lamott, particularly when she is disconnected from those communities of faiths. Also, her “lurch of faith” is not the moment of change in her life: she will be an alcoholic and drug addict who has an abortion, all of this despite her attendance at church. Her staggering from one faith to another and one substance to another shows that the way to religious commitment is not often straight. Still, while her past includes painful events, her language shows that she sees these events as necessary steps that brought her to the moment of conversion. In this way, these moments can all be considered sacred, though many of them seem profane—not just in terms of coarse language, but also in lacking an obvious element of the divine. Lamott complicates the ideas of sacred and secular, showing that often there can be little difference between the two. She combines terms and considers implications in order to constitute a new religious

language, demonstrating to readers that all elements of life can be spiritual, depending on how one articulates them.

Even her moment of conversion combines the sacred and profane. Lamott was bleeding from her abortion, just recently sober and scared, and she feels the presence of Jesus in her room. Her response: “I turned to the wall and said out loud, ‘I would rather die’” (49). From that moment on, Jesus follows her around like the presence of a cat. Lamott goes to church, hungover as usual, and is so overcome that she races home. She “[feels] the little cat running along at my heels” and at the door to her home, her “beautiful moment of conversion happens”: “I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, ‘Fuck it: I quit.’ I took a long deep breath and said out loud, ‘All right. You can come in’” (50). In this moment, Lamott articulates the different emotions of a conversion experience, or at least the conversion of a neurotic, self-deprecating addict who desires a divine presence even while avoiding it. Her conversion narrative is traditional in that it has a moment of change, and yet that moment does not change much of her life right away. Lamott’s conversion takes time, and in presenting this narrative, she reconstitutes the concept of “conversion”—she complicates it, implying that the moment matters but may not change much. This experience also provides a context for Lamott’s future faith journey that combines resignation with beauty and profanity with sacred moments of the presence of God. Through her modification of conversion language, she creates space for others who did not have a conventionally “beautiful moment of conversion” to tell their stories, or for those without a conversion experience, perhaps to reconsider moments of life not generally considered beautiful or sacred and convert them into spiritual experiences.

Lamott also combines the sacred and profane in her description of dusty Marin City and its weekly flea market. A “ghetto in this luscious affluent country, built in a dusty bowl,” the city has too much crime and too few churches (45). The crowded and dirty flea market filled with stolen, cheap goods is where Lamott goes after nights of drinking and drugs. Adjacent to the market is a church that ends up being Lamott’s lifeline. St. Andrew Presbyterian Church “looked homely and impoverished, a ramshackle building” but its music makes Lamott stop and huddle just inside the doorway (46). Lamott combines the flea market and the church into one sacred/profane experience, both dirty and spiritual. Lamott says, “You’d always have to shower after you got home, you’d be so covered with dust, the soles of your shoes sticky with syrup from snow cones, or gum, or one of those small paper canoes that hot dogs are served in” (47). But sitting in the folding chairs of church made the thing inside Lamott “that was stiff and rotting...feel soft and tender” (48). Even her insides are profane and sacred, the two terms conflated in this moment so that the sacredness takes over and the presence of the divine is everywhere. Lamott reclaims the dirtiness of life and constitutes it as something that can represent and produce a spiritual experience. The dust of the flea market reminds her of her addicted past, but also her spiritual present and future. Sacred becomes a term that can stretch over a variety of experiences for Lamott and her emerging adult readers.

This is not the only time Lamott converts a profane place into a sacred one. She enjoys juxtaposing a physical location and the spiritual experience she has there. For example, Lamott writes in a later essay that “some people think that God is in the details, but I have come to believe that God is in the bathroom,” as she uses the bathroom as a place to hide after a scary medical experience (161). While the bathroom is not a place

where most would consider finding God, Lamott makes that encounter a possibility, opening up what exactly can be constituted as sacred. Student readers then are no longer restricted by conventional religious language and perceptions of what is sacred. They can find their own sacred spaces in their own histories to constitute as significant moments within their spiritual lives. To emerging adults who consider morality as coming from personal experience instead of an outside religious institution or religious text, Lamott's view of the sacred grounded in lived moments makes sense.

Lamott also does not necessarily value what is traditionally valued in the religious life. She constitutes certain virtues and practices as less sacred and more profane with her language, indicating the virtuousness depends on the individual embodying (or attempting to embody) those particular virtues. Lamott's prayers are informal at best, as she asserts that the best prayers she knows are "Help me, help me, help me," and "Thank you, thank you, thank you," a far cry from the poetry of the Lord's Prayer (82). Yet she embeds her informal prayers with a true desire to hear from God. She also approaches practices of the religious life, like fasting and forgiveness, with a wry irreverence. She says, "I...am not heavily into fasting; the thought of missing even a single meal sends me running in search of Ben and Jerry's Mint Oreo" and she is also "not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness...I am one of the other kind" (91, 128). It is not that Lamott does not value these practices; she just downplays their importance to her in their traditional incarnation. In both instances, she finds the sacred in other things: a photograph of a large Mennonite family and in the large home of her son's friend's mother, who Lamott considered her "Enemy Lite" (129). In reconstructing spiritual practices as found in the unexpected, Lamott constitutes her spiritual experiences as

having both broader scope and broader implications than other views of the spiritual life. This appeals to the emerging adult view of morality as individualized and self-evident.

The term profanity is most often used to refer to socially-inappropriate language, most generally cursing. Lamott is proficient in that type of profanity too, and she is aware that those are not words a “Good Christian” uses. Yet she does so honestly—the reader gets the sense that this is just how Lamott speaks. In the essay about Ash Wednesday, a holy Christian holiday, she recounts yelling at her son Sam for disobeying her, saying, “I shouted at the top of my lungs, and I used the word *fucking*, as in ‘goddamn fucking TV that we’re getting rid of’”(92). She is not proud of her actions toward her son, but she is not embarrassed by her verbiage, as it constitutes her reality. Often, Lamott recounts her salty language, but in doing so, she implies to the reader that she does not consider her frequent cursing that offensive. She is more concerned with the health of her own spiritual life, and she presents Jesus as being more concerned with that too. While she rarely presents profane words as sacred—save for within her conversion experience—she does attribute them to a part of existence, even a spiritual one. As Lamott presents it, nothing is truly sacred, in the sense it cannot be challenged or subverted, and yet everything is, for she reveals God to be in everything. Even the profanity. This is something with which many emerging adults can connect.

Distinguishing the Irreverent from the Reverent

As evidenced by Saroglou and Joeckel’s research, religious individuals are not traditionally humorous, especially in terms of irreverent humor. Humor has the power to both constitute a community and damage it. White talks about its power in a hypothetical situation in which someone against racism is told a racist joke and laughs. This individual

feels embarrassed because “he is ashamed of the person he has become in this relationship with this speaker” (*Heracles* 91). Humor can push an audience too far, making them self-conscious. If they are not comfortable with the language of the speaker, even if it is “funny” language, they will reject the identity being presented and remain apart from the constituted community. But if the humor is successful, the audience feels like they now have a shared experience and language that represents a unified community. The audience needs to feel comfortable with the language that has been constituted between them and the speaker, the language used to constitute their world and their community. Yet a key component of language is its “radical uncertainty”:
“uncertainty as to the meaning of words, uncertainty as to their effect on others, uncertainty even as to our own motivations” (White, *Heracles* 40). A writer can never be completely sure whether her audience truly understands or accepts her reconstitution of language. Humor has great risks, and also great rewards.

Lamott often approaches the boundary between humor and irreverence. Her irreverence mostly concerns people, politics, and the state of the world. Her relationship with God is informal, yet rarely sacrilegious—at least according to most emerging adults.³ Regardless, Lamott’s particular brand of humor is wry and self-deprecating, full of snarky asides that are likely exaggerated to prove a point or provide context for Lamott’s often larger-than-life emotions. For example, before her conversion to Christianity, she gives her position as not being “remotely ready for Christianity—I mean, I wasn’t *that* far gone” (41, emphasis in original). Lamott uses her humor to set herself apart from those who cannot or will not joke about their faith. This extends to her real life self also; in an interview where she was asked if she thinks God has a sense of

³ More traditionally conservative religious individuals may feel differently.

humor, Lamott replied, “I’m hoping. I’m doomed if he or she doesn’t” (Bendis 743). Through her humor, Lamott seeks to differentiate herself and her community from other more traditional religious communities. Lamott is creating a distinction: she is showing how different an irreverent life is, even an irreverent Christian one. She presents it as being more fun and ultimately more honest.

Lamott pokes fun at others within the traditional Christian culture while also poking fun at herself. She characterizes a man on an airplane as reading a book by “one of those right-wing Christians who thinks that Jesus is coming back next Tuesday right after lunch,” a book which she reviewed as being “hard-core right-wing paranoid anti-Semitic homophobic misogynistic propaganda—not to put too fine a point on it” (60). She also jokes about her relationship with her son, who after Pammy’s death becomes “clingy and heavily Oedipal...I began to call myself Jocasta; he began to call me darling” (69). In that essay, she says that the tiredness produced by intense sadness means that “sometimes grief looks like narcolepsy” (74). One of her most famous lines, one that sums up her view of herself and her faith, is regarding to her “Enemy Lite,” the mother at Sam’s school: “I thought such awful thoughts [about her] that I cannot even say them out loud because they would make Jesus want to drink gin straight out of the cat dish” (131). No one is safe from her razor sharp wit, not even herself, which means that everyone is invited into the community. Lamott shows she values a snarky wit, and she presents that form of language as a valid way for Christians to communicate. Students often feel limited by the parameters of religious language. In Lamott’s constituted community, one can joke about Jesus, as long as it holds a particular purpose: to cut the tension, to create

equality, or to challenge and prompt consideration. Her language is open to all kinds of expression, even if it may be seen as irreverence.

Humor is a risk worth taking for many writers because it creates a sense of connection between the author and the reader. Particularly for a writer such as Lamott who came to faith through such a lurching path, humor is her way of providing context and cutting through the darkness of life to provide needed levity and context for her and her readers. Lamott uses her humor to indicate to her audience that life can be difficult but it can also be wonderful, given the proper community. She invites others to laugh with her about everything: the sacred, the profane, the spiritual, the physical. She makes the reverent irreverent, and approaches the irreverent things with a slight sense of reverence. Lamott constitutes a community of laughter, when many readers, particularly emerging adults, may not associate a faith community with so much snarkiness.

Combining the Physical with the Spiritual

Christianity has never been too comfortable with the life of the body, preferring to focus on the life of the spirit instead. As Trudelle Thomas explains, “traditional Christianity has regarded the body (especially the female body) as a source of temptation, corruption, and death,” and she attributes the lack of writing about the physical nature of childbirth and motherhood within the Christian tradition to that long-held perception (277). Thomas goes on to say that motherhood is powerful because it is “poised at the threshold between life and death, between the spiritual world and the physical” (274). In the past, the spiritual and the physical worlds have been considered separate from each other, with the things of this world perhaps pointing to the sacred but with no real power of their own. Because of the sensory nature of temptation and the intangible nature of

belief, religion tends to value the inner life instead of the outer life. Much like in the classroom where spiritual matters are left at the door, emerging adults may feel stifled or incomplete if religious language does not include the ability to express the spirituality of their tangible world. Lamott does not shy away from discussing her interactions with the physical world, particularly in terms of her sensory experiences of motherhood and other life moments. In discussing these aspects through metaphor, the final stage of White's language construction process, Lamott redefines the spiritual life, taking physicality from sinful into sacred.

One of the major ways Lamott does this is in her sensory descriptions. *Traveling Mercies* is replete with descriptions of sounds, smells, tastes, and sights. Given her past experiences with addiction—alcohol, drugs, and food—Lamott is extra-conscious of her body and how she experiences life through it. In her essays about her recoveries from these addictions, she holds little back in regards to the physical effects of both the addictions and the rehabilitation. In other essays, she talks about the taste of food (“Hunger”), the smell of the beach (“Fields”), and the sounds of music (“Knocking on Heaven's Door”). For Lamott, a major element in her conversion to Christianity was music, which she describes as being a part of physical existence: “your essential rhythm is your heartbeat; your essential sound, the breath. We're walking temples of noise, and when you add tender hearts to this mix, it somehow lets us meet in place we couldn't get to any other way” (65). Lamott also often talks of touch, feeling like music—or God—is holding her.⁴ These sensory experiences give a tangible nature to the spiritual life through metaphor. Metaphor brings an audience closer to approximating the emotional meaning

⁴ Relating to touch, Lamott avoids discussing sexuality much in this text, even in all of her discussion of the physical.

of events, crucial in spiritual autobiography and constituting a new type of community. It allows communities to “meet in a place [they] couldn’t get to any other way.”

Death is another element of the physical life that Lamott considers. Her best friend Pammy died shortly before this book begins, and her death colors many of the essays within it, as does the death of Lamott’s father years before. Timothy Baker has written about the role of death in autobiographies, and he sees the experience as one “in which a re-thinking of the self is necessitated in light of the death of the other” (222). A writer must renegotiate the self after the loss of a key individual in her life.⁵ Death is a moment often discussed in spiritual autobiography, but generally in the light of eternal life or an afterlife, which makes the experience of the death of another a positive experience instead of negative. Lamott, with characteristic honesty, avoids most discussion of “a better place” and instead focuses on the impact of death on this earth, particularly her overwhelming grief at the loss of her best friend.

In “Ash Wednesday,” Lamott brings the experience of death together with the physical world, using metaphor and sensory images to describe her experience with reality after such a loss. Within the framework of considering Lent, a traditional religious reminder of sacrifice and death, Lamott reminisces about holding the ashes of two people she cared very much about, her father and Pammy. She describes the touch of the ashes: their grittiness, “both so heavy and so light. They’re impossible to let go of entirely” (Lamott 94). Lamott explains how the ashes do not cooperate; rather “they cling, they haunt. They get in your hair, in your eyes, in your clothes” (95). Going one step further,

⁵ This re-thinking is necessary because, according to Emmanuel Levinas, “the death of the other is neither second-hand knowledge nor firsthand experience, but affects the very identity of the ‘I’. While it cannot be equated with the death of the self, the death of the other is our true experience with death” (as qtd. in Baker 223).

Lamott tastes Pammy's ashes as a way to connect with her deceased friend. She says, "I licked my friend's ashes off my hand, to taste them, to taste her, to taste what was left after all that was clean and alive had been consumed, burned away. They tasted metallic, and they blew every which way" (95). Lamott's sensory experience of death grounds the spiritual experience into a tangible one that has spiritual and eternal repercussions without denying the power of the physical. She does not deny the spiritual significance of this experience, but she does not overlook the physical in order to reach the spiritual. With her language of metaphor and physicality, Lamott gives permission for the religious person to be grounded in reality, to feel pain and to have physical experiences.

Lamott also reflects on her relationship with her physical body. Instead making something normally spiritual into something physical, Lamott takes the purely physical and creates a spiritual experience from it. Especially as a woman who is a middle-aged mother, she discusses both her frustrations and gratefulness for her body, often within the same essay. She goes through cycles of acceptance and repulsion with her own body, trying to convince herself that "no one needs that plastic-body perfection from women of age and substance. Also, that I do not live in my thighs or in my droopy butt. I live in joy and motion and cover-ups. I live in the nourishment of food and the sun and the warmth of the people who love me" (197). Lamott's description of her body is particularly poignant in the essay titled "The Aunties," a term of endearment that she uses for her thighs after she had an experience at the beach that involved young women looking at her with a measure of pity. After this, Lamott decides that she is going to own her body with pride and care. As she says:

I had decided I was going to take my thighs and butt with me proudly wherever I went. ... I would treat them as if they were beloved elderly

aunties, the kind who did embarrassing things at the beach, like roll their stockings into tubes around their ankles, but whom I was proud of because they were so great in every *real and important* way. (202, emphasis in original)

Instead of either denying the reality of aging or the importance of the physical body, she makes the decision to honor her body and what it allows her to do. She takes care of her legs, moisturizing and thanking them. Instead of fighting her body, she accepts it as a gift, both physical and spiritual. The final value that emerges through this experience is that “sometimes you start with the outside and you get it right. You tend to your spirit through the body” (206). In this way, the spiritual is presented as embodied through imagery and metaphor, the impact of the physical on the eternal. Lamott provides a language for this embodiment, implicitly asserting that her spiritual community values the physical presence of the body and the senses that provide an understanding of the physical world. She makes her spiritual life specific and tangible, instead of general and broad. In doing so, she once again values the particular and the individual, and their role in constituting their own spiritual experiences, which is something that emerging adults need to hear expressed by a writer such as Lamott. While they may not have experiences of death or aging like Lamott’s, students’ physical experiences are valid and worth discussion in her religious community—thus, they are also worth writing about.

A New Religious Language

Anne Lamott constitutes a new language through the process outlined by White, using combination, distinction, and metaphor to broaden the language of religion to encompass other religious experiences. This language relies on the combination of terms, such as sacred and profane, and the distinguishing of Lamott’s newly constituted

community from other religious communities that may be more traditional. It also uses metaphor to collapse the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual, relying on sensory experiences to make tangible the ineffable. These strategies create a new language with which this community can express their religious experiences. Lamott also provides a place for the emerging adult student, who is often so focused on the individual in terms of morality and spiritual life, to find a way to articulate her experiences for the good of a broader community. Lamott says one can use the profane to find the sacred, the irreverent to find the reverent, and the physical to find the spiritual. All of these ways of knowing and expressing are at the disposal of the emerging adult, as long as he is able to find or construct a language that is understood and accepted by his audience. Even humor is a tool that can be used to constitute a close-knit community. All of these elements are available to students if they just learn how to wield them, particularly in their own writing but even in their verbal communication of these experiences.

Lamott understands students' reluctance to attach themselves to labels. She herself admits to sometimes being uncomfortable with labels, likely because she feels she does not fit the version of born-again Christian that most individuals have in their heads. On an airplane, a fellow passenger asked her if she was born again. Before responding, she reflects that some of her friends consider her "Christian-ish," but she knows the truth:

I'm just a bad Christian. A bad born-again Christian. And certainly, like the apostle Peter, I am capable of denying it, of presenting myself as a sort of leftist liberation-theology enthusiast and maybe sort of a vaguely Jesusy bon vivant. But it's not true. And I believe that when you get on a plane, if you start lying you are totally doomed. (61)

This is her truth: she is a Christian, and I would argue not even a bad one. Instead, she contradicts the traditional religious identity. In doing so, she creates a new identity, one

that provides a place for those who feel they do not fit in with the stereotypical Christian culture. Lamott broadens this culture with her humor, her irreverence, her physicality, and her profanity. Lamott has come to terms with her religious identity, and she invites others to do the same. She demonstrates with her life and writing that the label Christian can mean a liberal, pacifist, LGBTQ ally with the mouth of a sailor. By doing this, she expands the conception of Christian, saying that even those who stagger into it are welcome. By her example, students then are free to stagger into their own constitutions of faith and language, as they seek to create communities of laughter and irreverence in their own spiritual experiences. In the same way that Lamott shows “bad Christians” can be Christians too, students are free to craft their own religious identities and language through their spiritual writing, as they seek to express their spiritual commitments to themselves and others within the classroom and in larger religious communities.

CHAPTER FIVE

Teaching About Lily Pads: Religious Rhetoric and Spiritual Autobiography in First-Year Writing

Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies* opens with a spiritual autobiography that traces the moments that brought her to Christian faith as an adult. She calls these moments "lily pads": "round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land" (Lamott 3). As she revisits the people, places, and instances from her past that prepared her for conversion, she "can see how flimsy and indirect a path they made. Yet each step brought me closer to the verdant pad of faith on which I somehow stay afloat today" (3). Lamott's lily pad metaphor is apt for reflection on a spiritual life: lily pads are anchored yet they move with the water. They are natural and yet create a path; they are randomly placed and yet purposeful. They are individual, yet part of a whole that moves and makes movement possible. When the image is unpacked, this metaphor can provide a new way of conceiving personal spiritual commitments, particularly for emerging adults who often reject any seemingly rigid structures. For them, the spiritual journey is no longer a solid path, of which one can see the clear next step. Instead, the winding route greatly depends on the next hop.

These lily pads can also be a way to constitute the writing process when expressing the ineffable. The route is not always clear, and metaphoric language both complicates and clarifies spiritual experiences, as evidenced in the last chapter with Lamott's construction of language. Spiritual autobiography and its necessary metaphors have power for students in studies of composition, as they learn to articulate their

religious or spiritual commitments as particular moments that create a path toward or away from particular constructions of faith. Students also need to develop their authorial ethos, even as a necessary other within religious tradition. Engaging students through a course that presents the constitutive power of spiritual autobiography can provide opportunities for students to come to terms with their own religious identities and learn the value of spiritual expression, both for themselves and their communities.

Putting It Into Practice

Instructors provide many reasons that they avoid issues of religion in the classroom, often based on past experiences or anecdotal evidence. Some believe students will fall back on cliché or the trite discourses of their faith communities. Others believe that students will be unwilling to engage in critical thinking or critical analysis of their own work if they write about personal commitments, or they will use these essays to proselytize their classmates. Another concern is that students will struggle with differentiating between types of authority, solely using biblical texts as proof. Lastly, many professors would just prefer not to bring it up, in case students feel defensive, divided, or uncomfortable around matters of faith in the classroom. These concerns are valid, but there are particular pedagogical methods that instructors may use to help students benefit from the constitutive function of spiritual autobiography.

Pushback to this pedagogical avoidance has manifest in teachers sharing courses they have taught that focus on student spiritual identity and (to some extent) creative nonfiction and spiritual autobiography. Each course—depending on the professor, the institutional context, and the educational requirements the course fulfills—is crafted

differently.¹ Elizabeth Petroff at the University of Massachusetts teaches a class called Spiritual Autobiography that applies toward the university's global humanities requirement, so students read spiritual writing from all over the world. Susan Schiller has taught a course called Contemplation in Literature and Writing as a special topics course for juniors and seniors at a large public university. Organized religion is at a distance in Schiller's course, but she focuses on spiritual practice, particularly of meditation and contemplation. On the other end of the spectrum, Jeffrey Ringer taught an evangelical-themed version of Rhetoric and Research, a required first-year course for students at the evangelical Lee University, wherein the class explored what it meant to identify as a contemporary evangelical Christian. Gesa Kirsch taught a creative nonfiction course in which she highlighted general spirituality and contemplation, particularly as it reflected in increased civic engagement. All of these courses were focused on writing, and students completed both reflective and researched texts while also considering questions of religion and/or spirituality. Schiller gives advice to those who would approach this kind of education, saying she's "come to expect...resistance" but if professors ground their work in theory and document outcomes, "a well planned course is defensible to all those who might question it" (67). These instructors and others are crafting courses based on religious rhetoric and spiritual identity in ways that fit both their educational goals and institutional contexts. This pedagogy is being done differently but for similar purposes: to

¹ Here I feel I should make a distinction between a course framed in terms of religion and one framed in terms of spirituality. The former is narrower than the latter, with spirituality covering a multitude of religious and spiritual practices and virtues. Schiller's course on contemplation and meditation is an example of this, as she avoids any discussion of institutional religion. Ringer's course on evangelicalism is an example of a course on religion, wherein discussions of theology or perceptions of particular faith communities within a larger societal concepts are acceptable. With the specificity of the latter, professors should be careful to take a stance of exploration rather than conversion, and language of spirituality may be better suited for assignments involving a student's personal commitments. For either type of class, terminology should be discussed at the start of the class, in order to constitute a classroom community of understanding and exploration.

engage students cohesively, challenge their concepts of diversity, and give them an opportunity to constitute religious communities through writing. These courses ask students to do important and challenging work, work that will shape their perceptions of themselves and others if they allow it to do so.

Considerations

There are cautionary elements of a class focused on spiritual autobiography, religious rhetoric, or other issues of religion and faith. The topic is inherently personal and can be highly inflammatory, thanks to some of the loudest contemporary voices speaking about religion in public spheres. Additionally, engaging with issues of spirituality, particularly religious identity, in the classroom requires vulnerability and trust among those within the classroom community. The classroom needs to be constituted as a place of inquiry and reflection, not aggression; the latter can easily happen when someone feels her core beliefs are being challenged or misunderstood. Without engagement by the entire class on these issues, open and honest discussion is difficult. At the same time, there are ways to engage these risks openly and carefully.

First and foremost, the professor needs to be constantly aware that the number of students in the classroom will correspond with the number of perspectives on issues of faith, even at an institution affiliated with a particular faith. Particularly on the campus of a faith-based university, like the one with which I am affiliated, the students who do not identify with evangelical Christianity likely already feel marginalized by others on the campus. They may need a place to feel like their voices can be heard. The fact that they have chosen a course centered on spiritual autobiography means they want the chance to

explore their own perspectives.² Creating a classroom space where spiritual identity is communicated—outside of the bounds of a sanctuary, chapel service, or dormitory—provides the freedom for students to explore how to articulate their experience as a person of different or lacking religious faith in a campus and cultural context in which Christianity is a large (and assumed) part. Yet without careful framing, the classroom could be just one more place they are isolated.

The danger is that students will become alienated from each other. Students may be morally offended by what they perceive to be a challenge to their core beliefs and react negatively, thinking that they were warned about big bad academia trying to steal every ideal they hold dear.³ Another concern is a student's inability to engage with these issues in a civil way. As already discussed, students likely do not have the vocabulary to discuss their commitments. Because of this, they may fall back on cliché. Nor may they have the confidence or maturity to engage ethically. They may feel the need to defend instead of communicate, explain instead of share, and become the defenders of their faith. Through the work of constitutive rhetoric, they can develop their own ways of discussing their faith and using rhetoric effectively. Reading spiritual autobiography, where writers engage issues of faith with humble authority and humorous language, can allow space for a student to see where spiritual identity can be fluid and changing.⁴

² Creating the course as a special topics course, where students can self-select and know the subject of the course ahead of time, is the best way of constructing these sorts of courses. That way, the students are not blindsided, and those who may have intense emotional and psychological damage due to abusive spiritual communities can select not to take this particular course.

³ See books like *How to Stay Christian in College* by J. Budziszewski.

⁴ Assuming the median age of the classroom, though, can be misleading. Depending on institutional context, there are likely older students in the first-year writing classrooms. Students may have taken a gap year or a few years off to work before returning. There are veterans and mothers. To assume all of the class is straight from high school would be doing the diversity of the class a disservice. At the same

Another consideration is the ability and comfort level of the professor. As researchers like Anderson, Downs, and others have discussed, we as professors are already dispensing our personal convictions. Professors of writing believe that writing is important; that is a personal commitment. Issues arise when we struggle with our own personal convictions, wondering how they relate to our work and how we can avoid the bifurcation we are trying to prevent in our students. Our personal biases may create conflict when students assume we are not being objective in our assessment but rather are allowing our personal commitments to overtake our objectivity. As Susan Schiller says, “A spiritual approach [in the classroom]...takes a certain type of courage that comes from one’s own spiritual development and experiences in the classroom” (57). Professors must also bear in mind that students may want to see the professor, perhaps presented as an authority in most classroom issues, as an authority in issues of faith when she may not be. She *is* an expert in writing, so if the focus remains on articulating well and clearly a position (whether personal or otherwise), her feedback should be sound. A professor who presents herself as an audience but not necessarily an expert can be a benefit instead of a detriment. In other cases, the professor may adopt the position of student, looking to learn and not propagate stereotypes.

One final consideration: professors must remember that, when asking students to share, students may have emotional and psychological brokenness in their past regarding communities of faith. As with other possible trigger issues, delicacy is key. Reminding students that people have been hurt by the church and could be hurt again in their classroom will hopefully help keep conversations civil and humble. This must be a

time, noting general university trends will help identify those who are perhaps feeling out of place and find ways to bring their experiences and voices to the forefront.

particular consideration during times of peer review, when texts that may be highly personal come to the public for critique. Using models of spiritual autobiography that discuss pains and betrayals produced by the church can show ways to talk and write about painful pasts, along with a highly structured peer review session after extensive exposure to the practice.

Benefits

There is much to celebrate about a classroom where multiculturalism is embraced in all forms: race, sexuality, ethnic background, and religion. An effective way to approach these issues is through narrative, particularly one's personal story. It is difficult for students to argue with another's personal experience; for all students, but particularly those part of the majority culture, hearing a story about a different way of thinking can be powerful. Additionally, students will begin to understand the diversity that is found within their university culture. As they hear classmates share their writing, students recognize how their personal experiences differ and how these differences compose the community they live within. Even at a faith-based institution, where many of the students reflect the overall institutional mission, students will find that the beliefs of the campus are not homogenous. There will be variety in both expression and theology. This will hopefully serve to challenge students' potentially uncomplicated perceptions of their faith and of the campus culture.

In some writing courses, students are taught to present a text void of their perspective, opinion, or voice. This could contribute to some students' dislike for writing classes. These spiritual rhetoric projects can be ways to involve students' personal identities in their academic work, showing it is possible to be both an academic and a

person of faith with strong convictions. Students will realize that their personal convictions are also part of their future career paths, and that journey toward integration starts now. This class provides the chance for students to express all aspects of their being, without telling them—either explicitly or implicitly—that a part of them is anti-intellectual. The course also challenges the academy's emphasis on rationalism and positivism as the only ways of knowing truth. As Jon Ritz notes, teaching spirituality and the personal essay can help privilege ways of knowing outside of the traditional modes of the academy (24).

The writing classroom can become a place outside of the confines of institutionalized religion that spiritual discussions can take place. The classroom can provide both a personal and professional approach to the articulation of spiritual commitments. It invites students to attempt to investigate how religious rhetoric guides their lives and thoughts, while also exploring the impact it has on communities and individuals. The professor is asking students to think about what they believe and why, and students are encouraged to express their own ways of believing in various modes. When done carefully, students do not feel the need to be on either the defensive or the offensive; they can just explore.

Through the constitutional power of spiritual autobiography, students may also begin to see how they can both integrate and separate their personal from their professional lives. On the one hand, individuals need to know that their faith commitments have value and substance, even within the walls of the academy. And yet, after studying the audience and discourses of which they are part or they have observed, students will find that their personal commitments need to be expressed different ways in

different contexts, according to purpose. Rhetoric is not “one size fits all,” and students will start seeing ways to navigate different rhetorical contexts, keeping their faith as a crucial component of their beings, but perhaps not expressed identically in every opportunity. This can be an important lesson in a real-life application of the rhetorical situation, particularly purpose and audience. In trying to understand their classmates, students begin to realize the challenge of speaking to a diverse audience. The course explores audience analysis and the considerations that must exist when engaging with an audience whose spiritual tradition differs than one’s own.

Many opportunities are available to create a truly open and vulnerable classroom, if students are willing to engage well and charitably. The classroom should be a place where students feel heard and understood. Then they should move to learning and understanding others. This will guide learning—not just for first-year students’ future classes but also for the rest of adulthood in which individuals will navigate the sometimes-murky waters of faith in a complex world. This course should enlighten, challenge, and shape how a student constitutes her faith experiences through writing as she moves forward in the academy and beyond.

Spiritual Journeys: Faith, Community, and Spiritual Autobiography

The institutional context in which this course was developed is an interesting hybrid: a large private university closely tied with its religious heritage. Baylor University is proud to be the nation’s largest Christian university, and many students choose Baylor because of its Baptist religious commitments. While students are not required to sign a statement of faith upon admission, they are required to attend chapel twice a week for two semesters. The cultural surroundings of central Texas tend to be

conservative, evangelical, and Republican. At the same time, a number of students choose Baylor for a reason beyond its religious affiliation, whether it is sports, academics, or parental pressure. While the majority of the students continue to be white and upper- or middle-class, an increasing number of minority students are attending Baylor. This prompts more discussions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religious preference, both outside and inside the classroom.

This course in particular examines how spiritual memoir and creative nonfiction can communicate both individual and communal convictions. In doing so, students evaluate both how they constitute their own personal religious (or spiritual) commitments and this can affect a community. The unit assignments follow a similar progression to the one Petroff uses in her *Spiritual Autobiography* course, moving from remembering (units one and two) to relationships (unit three) to more abstract and complicated issues (unit four). This development guides the student from concrete to more complex/abstract thinking. The goal at the end of the course is that students are able to articulate their religious commitments to an outside reader, learning to use the discourse of a religious community or creating their own through White's process for developing a language of generality. Students will discover ways to construct themselves as spiritual and/or religious individuals with ethos, giving themselves the authority to do so based on what they have learned from reading others' spiritual autobiographies and the writing of their own, the latter which is compiled at the end of the course in a portfolio that encapsulates their spiritual commitments at that moment.

Readings

The first-year writing program at Baylor uses *The Prentice Hall Essential Guide for College Writers*, and this book is helpful for general writing guidance. Additionally, the books *This I Believe* and *The Best Spiritual Writing 2012* are required. Both essay compilations provide diversity in how the course approaches spiritual writing beyond just Christianity.⁵ Additional shorter readings come from spiritual autobiographies such as Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies* or Kathleen Norris's *The Cloister Walk*.⁶ These readings help students see how others constitute their own spiritual experiences, both in construction of speaker and language. While not necessarily models for students to mimic, they can provide students strategies for constituting spiritual experiences, such as developing ethos from being on the outskirts of a community or broadening spiritual language. In reading these works, students can see how professional writers have articulated their spiritual experiences, often in unexpected ways, and this provides them with possibilities within their own writing as they attempt to do similar work within the classroom.

Among those readings are occasional scholarly articles related to unit content. For example, in unit three, students read about epideictic rhetoric from both Aristotle and Lawrence Prelli. Students begin to read academic prose, developing firsthand knowledge of emerging scholarship in particular areas. Also, starting in unit two, students sign up to bring in spiritual nonfiction essays that they have discovered for class discussion. This assignment helps students take ownership and apply their learning by finding essays that

⁵ My research is in Christian spiritual autobiography, so these books will help broaden the concept of "spirituality" beyond my own personal research.

⁶ See Appendix B for a breakdown of potential readings by unit.

fit certain qualifications and leading discussion. Here, too, is an opportunity for students outside of the majority culture to interpret spiritual writing according to their own spiritual lives, and the classroom community will learn further about these classroom members from the texts they provide.

Unit One: Reading and Responding

The final product for this unit is a response essay to one of three spiritual essays I have selected.⁷ These essays all have clear purposes and some controversial ideas, so the challenge for the students is responding to these texts. Students have the options of agreeing, disagreeing, expanding, interpreting, or reflecting. The real purpose of this paper is to make sure students read essays accurately (summary) and responding clearly and confidently to another's ideas (response), thus fulfilling the learning objectives for the first unit. They will be forced, against their generational inclination, to hold a position on a spiritual issue, taking the chance of being wrong or disagreeing with someone else. While this may be against how they conceive of their personal spiritual commitments, we discuss the benefit of taking a stance, particularly within writing.

To this end, the overall objectives for unit one involve reading critically, thinking about responses, and articulating those responses to an audience. In addition, we discuss definitions and terminology regarding the labels individuals use to self-identify and to set themselves apart from others. Students who avoid terminology can see ways that labels become flexible depending on context and definition. This is useful groundwork for the rest of the semester, as the language they construct within their texts becomes more and

⁷ Prompts for all units are located in Appendix C.

more complex as the units require increased reflection on different aspects of religious and communal life.

We also talk about spiritual autobiography and the author's stance, using Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's five elements of subjectivity: memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency (15-16). We particularly discuss what 'truth' means in creative nonfiction, as well as how this tension is shaped by our beliefs about truth in our spiritual lives. Through these conversations, students encounter the benefits of personal writing and spiritual autobiography, not just in its value for the individual but also a community. This speaks to the value the emerging adult places on individual experience, yet complicates it by reminding students that they are part of a broader community, and the language and community that they constitute has a wider effect than just the personal.

Along with that, we begin talking about the different personal and communal discourses that we may take for granted, particularly in the case of religion. Additionally, our analysis of good writing—thesis statements, the rhetorical situation, writing a response, and providing evidence—provides students with basic writing skills they need for the rest of their essays and supplies terminology we use throughout the whole semester. We also discuss peer review; hopefully the initial approach on a paper that is shorter and likely less personal allays student fears regarding the necessity of vulnerability, as students get to know and trust each other.

Unit Two: Explaining and Describing

This unit focuses on writing a personal essay, providing students with two prompt options. The first option is a reflection on a spiritual object. Students describe the object and its significance to an audience unaware of either the object or the significance. At the

same time, the student is defining for the reader what a spiritual object actually is. The second option is similar, except that a student may write about a spiritual place, ritual, or tradition. Once again, the student seeks to demonstrate how the place or ritual has created significance in her life. For both of these options, I coax students away from crosses or church services, or other subjects clearly associated with a particular religious tradition. These symbols are often shortcuts to meaning, and I want students to express unexpected meaning instead of relying on shared tropes. This assignment speaks to the emerging adult student's focus on the subjectivity of experience and its creation of religious commitments. In this writing, though, the student must consider an audience beyond the self, one that has not had the same experience or cultural background as the writer. The student must find ways to express these spiritual experiences using appropriate and vivid language that conveys accurate meaning.

The goals for the second unit are the selection of evidence to support a thesis, the focusing of a topic in order to explain a concept, and making language and examples concrete, particularly when describing something abstract. The focus of the instruction is on descriptive language, imagery, specificity, and clarity. Additionally, we discuss the journalistic questions "What? How? Why?" so that students can learn to explain their spiritual and personal experiences to an audience in an accessible way. We also talk about religious clichés, with the hope that students find new and creative ways to discuss their spiritual experiences. Students continue to construct their religious language by means of example and metaphor. They also further explore the meaning of spiritual experiences and how to communicate those to a broader audience.

Unit Three: Evaluating and Praising

In unit three, students will compose and present an epideictic speech, praising a spiritual mentor and the spiritual qualities that mentor embodies. The major learning objectives are choosing appropriate criteria and evaluating based on those criteria, making a value claim. In conjunction, we look at epideictic rhetoric, as described by Aristotle and Lawrence Prelli's reworking of epideictic rhetoric for a composition classroom. Here we evaluate individuals and values on the basis of "acknowledgement rather than disparagement" (Prelli para. 2). The larger idea is that we are moving from individual spirituality into faith represented by relationships with others. Students consider how these relationships shape and mold their understanding of their religious and spiritual commitments. They explain what composes those spiritual commitments, in terms of spiritual virtues, and how one particular individual has helped shape their understanding of those virtues. The students' goal is to move the audience (their classmates) to "witness, think, and acknowledge" the virtues of this particular individual by showing the virtue in action with examples (Prelli para. 7). This helps the audience determine the value of these types of relationships in the overall cultural context. Considering virtues in this way both support and complicates the emerging adult idea that morality is self-evident and individually understood. Students consider how others have helped them create their conceptions of morality, and how those conceptions permeate a culture beyond the self. Additionally, students see the benefit of sharing personal convictions with a broader community, in the inspiration and goodwill that these epideictic speeches provide for the general classroom.

As epideictic speeches extol virtues publically for the good of the community, students do the same by publically presenting their short and engaging tribute speeches. Students provide criteria for a spiritual mentor, along with judgments and evidence. Again, I steer them away from the obvious choices of pastors and parents, urging them to choose someone unexpected, perhaps even a person of different or no faith. How do these people exhibit spiritual virtues that the student would like to embody? In doing these speeches, students learn not only useful oral presentation skills, but they also learn what spiritual virtues they value and the type of people they would like to emulate.⁸ They continue to constitute new ways of considering and owning their religious commitments through the use of traditional religious language that they modify to represent individuals they know in their lives and authorial ethos.

Unit Four: Problem and Solution

In the problem and solution unit, we move from the individual to the general. Instead of focusing on an individual's experience of faith, we look at communities of faith and problems that can arise within them. The essay for this unit focuses on a particular problem within a faith community of which a student is currently or has been a member. These communities could be in their hometown or within their university community. Students must find a specific problem within their community of faith. I do not allow students to look at issues such as "members not living like Christians" or "members are homophobic." The problem must be specific, and students must provide a solution. In so doing, they must consider the potential of the audience to solve this issue. Students also consider counterarguments that could arise, addressing them clearly and

⁸ In future classes, I may transition this speech into a multimodal project, where a student would work with different media to describe this individual.

showing understanding before refuting them. Some research is required, hopefully as a bridge to ENG 1304.⁹ For this essay, though, research could be broad and not necessarily scholarly (interviews, church documents, etc.). This essay highlights the difficulties of living in a spiritual community and prompts students to take responsibility for making change and speaking with authority on issues that affect their spiritual lives.

The learning outcomes involve moving from general to specific, learning how to analyze and communicating both problems and potential solutions. Students must have a good sense of their audience and its needs, as well as possible counterarguments.

Students also learn about the importance of both ethos and tone in discussing potentially tense issues. We create these discussions primarily from texts we read on issues of social justice. Reading writers like Martin Luther King Jr., John Woolman, and Dorothy Day, along with other leaders in abolition, civil rights, and women's suffrage, helps students learn how to both critique and support communities of faith. We also look at blog posts that highlight problems without providing viable solutions, using these texts to talk about the necessary movement from problem identification to solution.

This unit builds on previous ones. As students have identified themselves as spiritual individuals with spiritual experiences and relationships, now they must identify with a particular spiritual community in which they are invested and desire to see change. While they may still consider themselves a necessary other within the community, students can use that position to examine its particular needs and find unconventional solutions. The course is moving them into a commitment with a group of people that they will then seek to impact and influence. This assignment could have two outcomes, depending on the student. For young adults who may be used to being ministered to in

⁹ ENG 1304 is centered on research and persuasive writing.

spiritual settings, this is their chance to become the expert who will minister to others. For other students who avoid associating themselves with particular religious communities, this is their chance to invest in a community of faith, however they construe that community. In doing so, they are affiliated with a group of people and must consider who they are as a community, what they value, and what their needs are.

Unit Five: Reflection, Revision, and Final Portfolio

This unit focuses on revision strategies and reflection. The final project for the semester is a portfolio, for which students will revise three of their four essays. The portfolio must have a theme, which is revealed in the student's introduction to her portfolio. Finding and developing that thematic tie between all of the revised essays is key for this final project. Additionally, the revisions need to be significant, taking into account both instructor and peer comments. The final product is a visually compelling portfolio with a table of contents, a composed introduction, and a cover bearing a title that reflects the portfolio theme. Students create a cohesive product that shows how they spiritually constitute themselves at this point and the language they use to discuss their own personal spiritual lives.

Further Study

Many studies remain to be done on the subject of religious rhetoric and creative nonfiction in the composition classroom, particularly with this group of emerging adult students. The field has often worked from anecdotal evidence, which can only go so far in persuading administration and departments the value of this work. The religious rhetoric community is noting the importance of a more qualitative focus, as is the creative

writing community, and so both bear a similar necessary burden. A study that could occur in a class such as the one described above is mapping language usage from the beginning to end of the course in terms of students' own self-constitutions and the constitution of a religious community, the hypothesis being that the students end in a more diverse place than where they began. Further work could explore if there are lasting changes in students, or if the students just learn to create and use a new discourse for this course without realizing their "caustic stretching," as Jeffrey Ringer noted in his article ("Consequences"). Much remains to be measured in these types of classrooms, and the conclusions would only help push the fields of both religious rhetoric and creative nonfiction to justify and improve their methods.

In order for this class such as the one above to work, the instructor and students must carefully craft a classroom community open to this type of personal writing and "create a space where students can take contemplation and reflection seriously, a process that can enable powerful writing," as Gesa Kirsch encourages (W9). In this way, students become aware that the writing itself has the power: the language used, the way the speaker is presented, and the connection created with the audience. Students as writers have the opportunity and the responsibility to communicate their personal spiritual and religious commitments clearly and honestly, for the sake of themselves and their communities—both the ones they expect and the ones they do not. Through the constitutive power of spiritual autobiography, students will feel empowered to "take on" religious labels in both senses of the word: owning them as part of their identities, while also challenging, confronting, and perhaps modifying them in accordance with their own life experiences and perceptions of the world.

The benefits of courses such as the one described above and others that engage whole students—not just their minds, but their hearts and spirits also—are beyond measure. Few could deny that universities are engaged in life-changing work: while as many emerging adult students conceive of the university’s purpose as being simply instrumental (Smith 54), they are also learning about themselves and others through the courses they take. Certainly students are gaining skills that will provide for their future professions and goals, but their minds are also challenged and broadened. The hope is that on both the institutional and course level, universities take responsibility for the whole student, including her religious commitments. Doing this by tying mission to holistic student engagement, instructors and administrators can help students embrace their spiritual lives and welcome them into the academy, considering these spiritual lives as motivations, purposes, and worldviews that are valid ways of engaging with the world. By engaging students on both academic and spiritual levels, instructors can help students realize those levels can be merged, that intellect and spirit are not exclusive but rather two vital parts of the same important person.

Coming back to Lamott’s image of the lily pads, it is valuable to ask students to examine their personal lily pads in these courses: the moments and people that have brought them to the lily pad they currently rest on. They must develop the language for understanding those experiences based on their own spiritual experiences or the experiences of their audience, even if that language needs to be constructed or modified. They also must speak out boldly and definitely about who they are and what they believe, despite their concern that they may be wrong or they may offend. The course’s goal is that at the end of the semester, these students have the skills to effectively write in future

college courses and to communicate their lily pads openly and charitably to diverse communities. The larger goal is that at the end of the student's college career these emerging adults are able to own and articulate their own spiritual and religious commitments, moving into the broader world as individuals who can speak with authority, create needed language, and engage with others thoughtfully and charitably. Ultimately, this work will help them find a place for themselves both in the religious narrative of their faith tradition and in a community of like-minded individuals, unified by a shared language and story constituted by the emerging adult writer.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Sample Syllabus

FAS 1302 Spiritual Journeys: Faith, Community, and Spiritual Autobiography

Course Objectives

Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies* opens with a spiritual autobiography that outlines the moments that brought her to the Christian faith. She calls these moments "lily pads": "round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land" (3). As she revisits these moments she "can see how flimsy and indirect a path they made. Yet each step brought me closer to the verdant pad of faith on which I somehow stay afloat today" (3).

As you approach this course, I want you to keep this idea of lily pads in your mind. What are the moments, both good and bad, that have shaped you into the spiritual being you are? How do you define your religion or spiritual practice, and how are you both defined by it? Who are the people who have helped you to the lily pad you are currently on?

We will read a variety of creative nonfiction/spiritual autobiography essays that ask and answer these questions. Spiritual autobiography is all about lily pads, moments of change and significance. Those moments compose well-lived stories with purposes, and we will explore what those purposes might be. We will also talk about the language we use when we talk about these ineffable experiences of the spirit. At the same time, we will be learning how to write well in college. While this will not be a traditional first-year writing class that teaches traditional academic prose, we will explore how to interpret genres, identify the rhetorical situation, and follow prompts. We will also engage writing as a process, with significant time spent on peer review and revision.

The goals for this class are:

- To discuss the purpose and value of creative nonfiction as a genre and area of study
- To evaluate the language that we use to talk about religion, faith, and spirituality
- To learn how to think and write critically yet personally about texts and ideas
- To move from viewing writing as linear to understanding it as a process
- To learn how to critique and revise writing
- To produce a prose style that is creative, readable, and effective
- To engage in classroom discussion with openness and courtesy

We will do all of this in a supportive classroom community. Religion and faith are personal issues and require great vulnerability. We will become a community of learners that is respectful and trustworthy.

APPENDIX B

Course Plan

FAS 1302 Spiritual Journeys: Faith, Community, and Spiritual Autobiography

Texts: *The Prentice Hall Essential Guide for College Writers* (PHG)
This I Believe (TIB)
Best Spiritual Writing (BSW)

Unit I: Reading and Responding (Weeks 1-4)

Definitions, terminology: What does “spiritual” mean? “Religion”? “Creative nonfiction”?
Thesis statements, rhetorical situation, writing a response, referencing specific and valid evidence to support points (textual and otherwise)

Essay I: Reading and Responding to a Spiritual Essay (2.5-3 pages)
Agree or disagree, interpret or reflect, expand

Possible texts: PHG Ch 1 & 2, Schwartz: “Memoir? Fiction? Where’s the Line?”, Williams: “Never Let the Truth Stand in the Way of a Good Story”
Selections from TIB and BSW
Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* “Lily Pads,” “Traveling Mercies,” “Forgiveness”
Stephen King, *On Writing*: “C.V.” 1-17
A.J. Jacobs: “The Year of Living Biblically” (selection published in *Relevant Magazine*), compared with selection from Rachel Held Evans’s *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*
Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*: “Salvation,” “Inheritance: What Religion Were You Raised in?”, “Virgin Mary, Mother of God”
Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*: “Credo”

Unit II: Explaining and Describing (Weeks 5-7)

Description: specificity, clarity, setting, communicating meaning, What/How/Why?, cause and effect, introductions

Essay II: Personal Essay (3-4 pages)
Reflection on a spiritual object or discussion of a religious ritual

Possible texts: PHG Ch 4, Root: “Collage, Montage, Mosaic, Vignette, Episode, Segment”
Selections from TIB and BSW
Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*: “Knocking on Heaven’s Door,” “Why I Make Sam Go to Church”
Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: “Seeing”
Norris, *The Cloister Walk*: “At Last, Her Laundry’s Done,” “Generations,” “One Man’s Life”
Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*: “Confession”
Dennis Covington, *Salvation at Sand Mountain*: “Following Signs”
Cheryl Strayed, *Wild*: “Tracks”

Unit III: Evaluating and Praising (Weeks 8-10)

Definitions (revisit from unit 1), parts relating to whole, criteria and judgments, diction and tone, epideictic rhetoric, oral presentations

Essay III: Epideictic Manuscript (2-3 pages) and Oral Presentation
Tribute to a spiritual mentor with visual component

Possible texts: PHG Ch. 5, Prelli: “Epideictic and the Contemplation of the Wonderful”

Selections from Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*

Selections from TIB and BSW

Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*: “Barn Raising,” “Tumbler’s Dog”

Dorothy Day, *Selected Writings*: “Peter Maurin,” “Ammon Hennacy”

Andre Dubus, *Broken Vessels*: “Broken Vessels”

Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*: “Shifts”

Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*: “Nightmare”

Unit IV: Problem and Solution (Weeks 11-13)

Problems (with faith, religion, spirituality): general, then specific; analysis and communication of problems; solutions and effects; counterarguments; conclusions; audience, ethos, tone

Essay IV: Problem/Solution Essay (4-5 pages)
Problem regarding a spiritual community

Possible texts: PHG Ch. 6 & 8

Selections from TIB and BSW

Selections from the *Journal of John Woolman*

Day, *Selected Writings*: “Security,” “The Use of Force”

Norris, *The Cloister Walk*: “Women and the Habit: A Not-So-Glorious Dilemma”

Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Blog posts (highlighting problems, not solutions)

Unit V: Reflection, Revision, and Final Portfolio (Weeks 14-15)

Revision strategies, creating a portfolio: theme, composition, introduction; critical reflection (conclusion to course)

Portfolio: Revise three of the four pieces, include introduction, creatively and thematically combine

Final: Critical reflection

APPENDIX C

Essay Prompts

Essay I: Reading and Responding Essay

Length: 2 ½-3 full pages

You will be responding to one of the following essays:

“Forgiveness,” by Anne Lamott

“Virgin Mary, Mother of God,” by Kathleen Norris

“Credo,” by Richard Rodriguez

Your assignment is to write a response to *one* of the above essays. In your essay, you should assume that your reader is familiar with the source essay’s general topic but unfamiliar with its specific details. Your essay will include two major sections: a summary and a response. Your purpose in this essay is two-fold: (1) to convince your audience that you clearly understand one of the essays listed above, and (2) to demonstrate that you can respond intelligently and persuasively to it.

Summary:

The summary section of your essay (250 words) should clearly and objectively present the main idea and the important sub-points of the essay to which you have chosen to respond. The summary should be written almost entirely in *your* words; only use particularly important quotations when they are necessary to your summary.

Response:

The response section of your essay (400-600 words) should include an original idea as its main thesis. While the summary is as close to objective as possible, the response is subjective and presents your ideas on the subject. Develop your two-part thesis into well-developed paragraphs and explain your position clearly.

Your thesis (1-2 sentences) should be focused and have two main parts. Here are the three options:

(1) **Agree** or **Disagree**

Agree *and* add something new or address something more fully;

Agree for the most part, *but disagree* with a certain main point, or

Disagree with particular words, ideas, or assertions in the essay, *and* explain what you think instead.

(2) **Interpret** or **Reflect**

Interpret the writer’s experience according to what you know about the author or the context

Reflect on the writer’s experience and what it tells you about the big picture

(3) **Expand:** Take the author’s ideas and expand them to other situations or contexts

***In all cases, your thesis (and your essay) must clearly demonstrate that you are contributing original ideas. **It is not sufficient to simply say that you agree**—you must explain *why* you agree/disagree by adding information that has not been stated in the essay to which you are responding.

Essay II: Explanatory Essay

Length: At least 3 full pages

This essay will demonstrate your ability to explain some aspect of your personal spiritual journey, a “lily pad,” as Lamott would say. This is a moment or an object with which you are familiar, but your audience will not be. Your job is to explain your subject to your audience as clearly as possible in order to help them understand your spiritual experiences better. You will employ the various methods of explanation using the three main journalistic questions *what*, *how*, and *why*. For both of the below options, balance the essentials of good explanation (e.g. analysis, clarity, conciseness, etc.) with the features of good narrative (e.g. vivid detail, description, dialogue, etc.). Do not fall back on spiritual clichés or jargon that may be unfamiliar to your reader; be creative. You must propose a topic and get it approved by your professor before you can begin writing.

Select one of the following options:

Option 1: Write about a sacred object. Think of a particular object that has spiritual significance to you. It may be something seemingly mundane, but it must have personal importance for you that you will seek to communicate to your reader. You will explain the object thoroughly using the three main journalistic questions. As you explain *what* the object is (what it looks like, feels like, perhaps tastes like), you will necessarily have to attend to details pertaining to *how* and *why*. [For example, explaining *what* is special about your object will require a detailed recounting of *how* it became significant and *why* it continues to be so.] Along the way, you will develop a working definition of what a spiritual object is and how it becomes so. Avoid traditional religious objects like a Bible or a cross; think beyond those items to something more unexpected that you will need to explain in more detail.

Option 2: Write about a specific spiritual ritual, tradition, or place, and explain its meaning or significance. Think of one specific practice or place to focus on. The goal for this option is to take something fairly common or simple (e.g. *place*: your family pew at church, your favorite chair in your living room, your favorite restaurant, etc.; *tradition*: the food you eat on a religious holiday, the way your family does road trips, etc.; *ritual*: the way you make your coffee every morning, the way you choose what to wear, etc.) and explain it in an engaging, fresh way, revealing the spiritual significance within it and explaining what it represents or means to you on a deeper level. Describe *concrete, sensory aspects* of the place/tradition/ritual (what you can perceive with the five senses), as well as the *greater significance* of the place/tradition/ritual. Again, avoid the most obvious actions/places, or at least explain them in unexpected ways.

Essay III: Tribute Speech

Length: 2-3 page manuscript + 5-6 minute in-class presentation

This essay will demonstrate your ability to analyze and judge spiritual values according to appropriate criteria determined by you. You will then explain how these values manifest in a spiritual mentor, someone you admire and respect. You will do this in an epideictic speech, composed of a manuscript, oral classroom presentation, and visual accompaniment.

Evaluation: Choose to evaluate certain spiritual values that are *specific* and *manageable*, i.e. graciousness, and not the entire embodiment of human virtue. You will need to identify the criteria you will be using to make specific judgments about your topic, thus defining what you see that topic to be. Your text must also include evidence that supports your judgments, as you are presenting this individual and his/her qualities to an audience who is unfamiliar with this person. Specific anecdotes or stories that will help support your assertions are key. Your criteria and evidence must be appropriate to the topic. You must also discuss how this individual and his/her qualities have brought about change in you. What has the overall impact of this person been on your life?

Thesis: Your thesis should include two parts: 1) your list of criteria and 2) your evaluation of how well your subject fulfills the criteria. How these two components work together in the thesis will vary from topic to topic, presentation to presentation, but both components must be clearly present. Your thesis should be evident, though not necessarily explicit, and its placement in your text will depend on your speech's construction.

Subject: Your subject must be someone who has had a visible and lasting impact on your life, even if this impact is only known to you. Think beyond pastors, parents, and grandparents; who else in your life has changed you by embodying spiritual values? Might it be someone much older, or perhaps much younger? Someone you know quite well, or someone you just met one time (or maybe not even at all)? Might it be someone of another faith, or of no faith at all? Think broadly; be creative.

Presentation: The majority of your grade is dependent upon your presentation of this person and his/her qualities to the class. Historically, an epideictic speech was for the good of the order; it was meant to benefit and inspire listeners to develop the virtues highlighted in the speech. Thus, you will be giving a 5-6 minute presentation in class. You may read off of your manuscript, but keep in mind presentations are visual as well as auditory. This means you must engage your audience: look at them, speak to them, and tell them the story. You should also present yourself as a professional authority on both this person and these virtues; this may mean dressing nicer than you normally do. We will talk more about oral presentations in class.

Visual Component: You must have a visual component to your presentation. This could be a PowerPoint, Prezi, video clip, photo, poster board, demonstration, etc. The visual component must obviously relate to your presentation in some way; it should enhance rather than distract from your speech. If you plan to use technology, please let me know and arrive early to set it up before class starts. You must be able to tear it down just as quickly. We will not have time to troubleshoot, so make sure you understand how it works (and perhaps why it may not work). Be creative with this component. Use it to help your audience see the truth in what you're saying about this person you are praising.

Essay IV: Problem and Solution Essay

Length: 4-5 full pages

This essay will identify a specific and concrete problem in one of your spiritual communities, propose a clearly defined solution, and offer sound evidence justifying the solution. You will also identify and respond to possible counterarguments. You must incorporate a limited amount of research.

Topic Requirements

Identify a problem in a spiritual community of which you are part and propose a reasonable solution.

You will identify a problem encountered by a community of which you are or were a member (either formally or informally). These could be places such as a ministry group on campus or a church community back home. It should be a group that you have gained spiritual support from, however you define that. You need to have been invested in and part of this community, whether for weeks or for years. In this community, you must identify a **specific** problem. Do not select an abstract problem, such as “church members are not behaving like true believers.” Define the situation, as you see it, in concrete and specific terms, and then propose a solution for the problem. You also must consider counterarguments that the community is likely to bring up. You must propose and get approval for your identified community and problem from your professor.

Content Requirements

Your paper should do the following (most likely in this order):

1. Deliberately address a specific audience; in fact, you may address them directly in a letter format, as long as the rest of the essay is structured in MLA format.
 2. Demonstrate that you are addressing a **serious problem**, one genuinely worth considering.
 3. Describe the problem in some detail, giving specific examples.
 4. Propose a clear thesis that makes a claim about the most effective way to solve the problem.
 5. Explain in detail your proposed **practical and achievable solution**, including the steps needed to implement the solution (keep in mind monetary concerns, unintended consequences, and long term effects).
 6. Explain the specific effects that your solution will have on the problem and why your solution will have these effects.
 7. Identify possible **counterarguments** against your proposed solution and offer responses to those counterarguments. You should present the opposing view(s) to your argument fairly and accurately. Finally, you should convincingly refute these counterarguments using specific and logical support.
 8. Conclude by reemphasizing the importance of implementing the proposed solution.
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Support Requirements

You should use concrete evidence and specific examples to support your appeals whenever possible. The data you use should be current, accurate, and drawn from reliable sources. Any sources used should be cited properly within the essay and in a Works Cited page. Because support is such a key component for this essay, **you must use at least 2 reliable sources.**

Take care that your appeals are not manipulative and they do not alienate any possible members of your audience. Your essay should show careful, logical reasoning and should avoid logical fallacies.

Unit V: Final Portfolio

Length: Three revised essays, plus introduction

This final portfolio will provide evidence of extensive revision, advanced understanding of spiritual autobiography, and the skills necessary to compile a completed thematic volume. This is the capstone project for the entire semester.

Selecting Essays

Selecting essays from among your graded work should be your main priority. You may want to select the essays that need the most revision, as evidence of significant revision is required for this project. Think of this as your chance to display the skills you have learned in each unit over the course of the semester. You also may want to select the three essays that fit best together thematically, as you will have to discuss this theme in your introduction (see below). Whichever three essays you choose, you must provide **the original graded copy** of the essay with the final portfolio. The final “exam,” which will be a critical reflection over your growth this semester, will also serve as the conclusion to this portfolio.

Contents

Your portfolio should include the following (in this order):

1. A creative and thematically appropriate title
 2. A creative and visually appealing cover
 3. A table of contents displaying purposeful order
 4. An introduction:
This introduction should provide context for the essays in the portfolio. It may explicitly discuss the theme of the portfolio, creating a connection between each seemingly disparate piece. The introduction should give a sense of you as the writer and your purpose in compiling these pieces. You should also discuss *why* these pieces: why are they significant to you, and what do you hope they provide for the reader?
 5. Three revised essays
 6. The three original essays (with final grade rubrics)
 7. A three-ring binder or folder that makes the essays easy to page through
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Additional Requirements

We will discuss in class what “significant revision” looks like, but it means more than just tidying up grammar. There should be evidence of major changes to each essay, according to my comments on the original essay and comments from peers.

Essays should all be in MLA format, though the pagination in the header should run from the beginning to the end of the portfolio (i.e. the third essay may begin on page 10). Also, please remove the paper heading (name, professor, date, class) from each essay, since the essays are compiled.

The title for your overall portfolio should indicate the theme of the entire portfolio. Avoid titles like “My Portfolio,” or even “My Spiritual Journey.” Give evidence of thought and care into the selection of the title.

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