

**Leaders and the Blessed:
Student Religious Identity Negotiation at the University of Michigan**

by

Jessica Yvonne Joslin

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Doctoral committee:

Professor Lisa Lattuca, Chair
Professor Sarah Fenstermaker
Professor Jacqueline Mattis
Clinical Professor Betty Overton

Jessica Y. Joslin

jjjoslin@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-1406-5457

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*To the forty-five students who generously shared
their lives with me for this research.*

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As I acknowledge in this dissertation, I both study religion and am a religious person. Some consider this fertile ground for bias that risks weakening my objectivity. I could write extensively on my own thoughts on that matter, including whether neutrality is a worthy or achievable goal; but in brief, I'll simply say I do not share that view. When talking with the students in this study, shared faith commitment allowed for our relationships to be built on a foundation of trust, intimacy and connection. I was gifted a precious window into the lives of 45 diverse and brilliant students. Their voices and stories accompanied me throughout each stage of the writing and analysis process, and were a steady source of inspiration. Through their kind sharing, and learning about their faith, hopes, concerns and dreams, I saw new depths of my own belief. For that, I am ever grateful. As they transition on to life beyond Michigan, I hope – indeed, I pray – that their faith continues to provide them comfort and guidance as they lean in to life's big questions.

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ABSTRACT

Colleges frequently espouse a commitment to diversity; however, religious diversity remains on the sidelines of diversity conversations on many secular campuses. Actively supporting religious diversity on a secular campus appears counter to the secular commitment of the public university and complicates its purported religious neutrality. Yet, large numbers of religious students call their campuses home, and religion plays a particularly crucial role in the lives of students who are often marginalized on college campuses. Failing to recognize the importance of this essential resource in these students' lives limits a university's ability to engage fully with its students.

Scholarship on intersectionality and feminist conceptions of identity have long argued that different aspects of a person's identity are deeply integrated. Yet, research on religious college students rarely considers how students' religious lives intersect with other aspects of their identities. Recently, scholars have begun to question secularism's professed neutrality toward individuals with religious identities, observing that often the forms of religious expression that are most critiqued are those with other marginalized identities. This leads to the following research questions:

- How do students understand their religious selves, and how do they say that understanding influences how they perceive, and interact with others in the campus environment?
 - How might religious students describe aspects of their categorical identities, such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation, as influencing how they present their religious selves

on campus?

- How might religious students describe the ways in which the campus environment influences how they present their religious selves on campus?

This dissertation discusses the results of a qualitative study of the experiences of religious students at the University of Michigan. Within the study, I focus on the experiences of students in four student groups: 1) a Muslim group, 2) a Jewish group, 3) a predominantly white Christian group, and 4) a predominantly students of color Christian group. I collected data through a combination of interviews and group discussions. The diversity of these research sites highlights the ways in which different aspects of identity influence how students describe their experience of religion and their strategies for interacting with the secular environment.

In all of the groups, students used their faith as a tool to help them navigate college life. Students were strategic in their choices regarding when and how they shared their faith with others. Their faith was influential in how they approached their coursework, thought about dating, experienced campus social life, and found friends and community. The intersectional nature of the participants' identities had profound impact on how they related to others both in and outside of their respective groups, and their perception of and hope for inclusion on the campus environment. Across the groups, students appreciated the support they received in their religious community.

Overall, this research highlights the fact that religion is critically important to many students and should be seen as a fundamental part of the diversity of higher education. Many avenues for further research remain to help us learn more about how religious students negotiate secular university environments. Interviewing students from different religious sects and denominations would enhance our knowledge of the experiences of religious students on secular

campuses. Additionally, more research is needed regarding the relationship between religious identity and other aspects of identity, including how those relationships shape student experience.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Right in the middle of Harvard Yard stands a rather intimidating monument to God. Designed to match the grandeur of its neighbor, Widener Library (Bunting, 1985), Memorial Church occupies a prime piece of Harvard real estate. The church's imposing spire flanks a grassy quad known as Tercentenary Theater, which hosts Harvard's graduation each spring. The doors of the library and the church face each other directly across the theater, so that in exiting either building one is immediately reminded of the presence of the other. A path between the doors of the church and those of the library locks the two buildings in permanent partnership, each watching over a distinct, but once thought to be complementary component of students' lives.

In many respects, this handshake between the church and academic life is a relic of the past. Despite an early investment in faith-based education, an increasing divide between religion and academic study has marked the last two hundred years of the history of higher education in the U.S. Many of the nation's colleges were founded with the charge to educate students in ways that supported and grew their Christian faith (Marsden, 1994; Reuben, 1996; Sloan, 1994). Scholars disagree on exactly when colleges became more reticent to allow the Bible to influence their classrooms and activities; however, most say it was around the mid to late 1800s (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Marsden, 1994; Reuben, 1996; Sloan, 1994). According to the historian of higher education Julie Reuben (1996), during this period faculty began to question the notion

that scientific truth and religious truth existed harmoniously with one another. The publication of Charles Darwin's famous *Origin of Species* escalated the growing conflict between religious and scientific scholarship (Marsden, 1994). As faculty gained more power through creating organizations like the American Association of University Professors in the early twentieth century, they advocated against administrative pressure to align their research and teaching with prescribed Christian beliefs (Marsden, 1994; Reuben, 1996). These reformers argued that the "truth" of religion differed from the factual scientific truth that they were charged to pursue (Reuben, 1996). Religious faith had emotional and moral value, but was at its core anti-intellectual (Reuben, 1996). Once faith was effectively positioned as oppositional to the academic aims of America's colleges, the rift between religion and the university grew wider through much of the twentieth century (Marsden, 1994; Reuben, 1996). The divide between religion and higher education along broader national trends towards secularization led a number of scholars to predict that the end of the twentieth century would mark a new secular era (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). However, the twentieth century marched on and religion failed to yield (Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

Beginning in the 1960s through the G.I. Bill, the Higher Education Act and other reforms, American higher education became far more diverse on a number of markers than it had been previously (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Thelin, 2004). Changes in immigration laws following WWII made it possible for new populations to come to the U.S., and with them came a greater religious diversity on and off the nation's campuses (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012). Likely brought on in part by these broader national trends and federal policies such as Title IX, by the last few decades of the twentieth century higher education institutions across the country began to invest in programs and initiatives designed to support increasing diversity (Jacobsen &

Jacobsen, 2012; Smith, 2009). Around the same time, new theories and developments in psychology and education (e.g. Astin, 1984; Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1963; 1964; 1968; 1994; Kolberg, 1975) challenged colleges to focus on new student-centered and individualized modes of learning (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012).

Not surprisingly, religion itself did not remain static among all these changes. Just as universities were moving toward individualized modes of education, expressions of religion were also becoming increasingly personalized (Cox, 2009; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012). Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2012) described this shift toward individualized forms of religious practice:

Being religious used to mean being part of a historic religious community, but most Americans now assume that a person can be spiritual or religious to varying degrees without any connection to a particular religious group. The differences between religious and nonreligious life stances are not always obvious, and the line between the public and private has also become more blurred. (p. 27)

More and more Americans identify as “spiritual” instead of religious, and the numbers of individuals who call themselves nonreligious has similarly increased (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012, Putnam & Campbell, 2010). All of these developments mean that the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Protestantism that once dominated the American religious landscape and against which universities once actively positioned themselves no longer exists in the same form.

Higher education became increasingly interested in considering diversity as an institutional goal and supporting students’ individual learning needs. At the same time religion itself was becoming more individualized, more diverse, and less institutionally driven. The changes in religion in recent decades combined with those in higher education create possible sites of engagement between religion and the academy. Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2012) went so

far as to suggest that religion has been given an opportunity to “trickle and then cascade back into the “public” work of colleges and universities” (p. 29, quotations in original):

Religious perspectives are unavoidably intertwined with multiculturalism and epistemological pluralism; the divergent ways that people make sense of reality are often influenced by their own religious or religion-like views of the world. Similarly, questions of ethics or professional conduct open the door to religion, because religious beliefs, values, and habits of behavior shape how people define what is good and right action. Finally, student-centered learning contains an implicit receptivity to religion, because respecting the autonomy of students as learners necessarily entails some degree of respect for the religious identities and the spiritual quests of those students. (p. 29)

Though Jacobsen and Jacobsen’s assertion that religion and the university are reengaging with each other is debatable, it is difficult for universities to ignore the large numbers of religious students who call their campuses home.

Approximately four in five first-year college students report that they have attended religious services in the past year, more than three-fourths say they believe in God, and more than two-thirds indicate that their religious and spiritual beliefs regularly provide them with support and guidance (Astin & Astin, 2005). These students bring their religion with them to residence halls and classrooms at colleges and universities across the country; their beliefs influence how they approach their coursework (Rettinger & Jordan, 2005), think about their goals (Smith & Snell, 2009), select student activities in which to participate (Ozorak, 2003), and interact with their peers (Berkel, Vandier & Bahner, 2004; Ellison, Bradshaw, Rote, Storch, & Trevino, 2008; Smith & Snell, 2009). Students report in large numbers that they are interested in discussing religion and spirituality in their classrooms and with their peers (Astin, Astin, &

Lindholm, 2010).

Religion plays a particularly crucial role in the lives of students who are often marginalized on college campuses. Women and people of color tend to be more religious than their white and male counterparts (Bryant, 2007; Jones, St. Peter, Fernandes, Herrenkol, Kosterman & Hawkins, 2010; Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun & Navarro-Rivera, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2016), thus how universities engage with religion disproportionately impacts these students. Studies have consistently shown that women of color use their faith as a tool to cope with adversity (Mattis, 2003; Musgrave, Allen & Allen, 2002).

Research Focus & Questions

In her book, *Diversity's Promise for Higher Education: Making it Work*, Daryl Smith (2009) instructs readers that, “Engaging history fearlessly and truthfully is fundamental to transforming institutions” (p. 14). As I discussed previously, American higher education has a complex and somewhat divided history with religion. However, as our campuses have become more diverse and greater focus has been put on individual student learning and development that relationship is beginning to change (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012) – but into what?

A modest, but growing, body of literature examines the religious and spiritual lives of American college students. One of the most ambitious of these studies was a seven-year longitudinal study on spirituality in higher education, which surveyed over 14,000 students at over 130 institutions across the country (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). A number of other researchers have examined students’ faith development (e.g. Fowler, 1981; Parks, 1986; 2000; Peek, 2005; Small, 2011), the experiences of students who are members of religious minority groups (i.e. predominantly non-Christian students) (e.g. Kurien, 2005; Peek, 2005; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Small, 2011), and how students’ thoughts about religion and spirituality change

throughout emerging adulthood (e.g. Smith & Snell, 2009). Moreover, a series of case studies and ethnographies of religious groups and religious students on college campuses has sought to capture some of their experiences within broader campus life (e.g. Bramadat, 2000; Bryant, 2005; Kim, 2006; Kurien, 2005; Magolda & Gross, 2009; Moran, Lang & Oliver, 2007; Perry & Armstrong, 2007; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Wilkins, 2008).

While this research should be commended for shining a light on the experiences of religious college students, much of this literature examines religious identity narrowly and fails to consider how students' religious and spiritual lives intersect with other aspects of their identity, such as race, class, sexual-orientation, gender, and ethnicity (for notable exceptions see Kim, 2006; Peek, 2005; Wilkins, 2008). The paucity of this research base is troubling because as I will discuss in more detail, recent conceptualizations of individual identity argue that different aspects of a person's identity are not additive, but integrated (Hames-García, 2011; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; 2002). They are also profoundly influenced by social interaction and the expectations of an individual's environment (Goffman, 1959). Thus, identity can be understood as being comprised of three parts: 1) it is individually chosen based on how one understands and perceives of oneself (Goffman, 1963); 2) it is socially negotiated as individuals figure out how and what parts of their identities they wish to share with others (Goffman, 1959; 1963; Hames-García, 2011); and 3) it is culturally defined (Goffman, 1959; 1963; Hames-García, 2011), meaning what an institution values in their students' identities influences how those students understand and present themselves.

This means of conceptualizing identity is complicated when applied to so-called "traditional age" college students between the ages of about 18 to 23. Much has been written about the fact that this is period of life marked by frequent change and exploration (Arnett, 1998;

Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Pascarella & Terezini, 1991; Rindfuss, 1991). How college students understand their identities, what they share with their peers, and how they engage with their environment is often in flux. During these years young people actively reflect upon, consider and reconsider their worldviews and beliefs (Perry, 1968; Pascarella & Terezini, 1991), including their religious beliefs (Smith & Snell, 2009). Older adults often look back at this period as one of great importance in their own development (Martin & Smyer, 1990), so understanding how students conceptualize and experience their identities during this period is of real value to educators in helping them to be able to effectively support students' development during this period of significant growth and reflection.

Colleges overwhelmingly espouse a commitment to diversity in their mission statements (Morphew & Hartley, 2006), and both of the major U.S. student affairs professional organizations, ACPA and NASPA, list valuing and promoting diversity among their top commitments (ACPA, 2015; NASPA, 2015). If colleges are serious about supporting diversity then knowing how religious students are engaging with their campuses is a key step in learning how to effectively support a diverse student population. The complexity of individual identities combined with universities' historically divided relationship with religion, lead to the following research question: How do students understand their religious selves, and how do they say that understanding influences how they perceive, and interact with others in the campus environment? Following this question, I ask:

- How might religious students describe aspects of their categorical identities, such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation, as influencing how they present their religious selves on campus?
- How might religious students describe the ways in which the campus environment

influences how they present their religious selves on campus?

Scope of the Research

In order to answer these research questions, this dissertation will present and discuss the findings of my qualitative study at the University of Michigan (U-M), a large secular university. Specifically, this dissertation focuses on the experiences of students within four respondent groups: 1) a Muslim student group, 2) a Jewish student group, 3) a predominantly white Christian student group, and 4) a predominantly students of color Christian student group. I conducted interviews and group discussions with students from each of these four groups. Together these sites highlight the complex and diverse experiences of the campus life of religious students, and how they understand their religious selves.

The University of Michigan, like many of its peer institutions, has long articulated a commitment to diversity. What makes the University of Michigan unique is that its commitment took national stage in the early 2000s when U-M aggressively defended its ability to use affirmative action in admissions. In two Supreme Court cases, *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*, Michigan was forced to defend its consideration of race in law school and undergraduate admissions. Unfortunately, Michigan's limited Supreme Court victory was quickly undercut by a state constitutional amendment known as Proposal 2 passed in 2006.

Despite a legislative defeat, Michigan has maintained a number of diversity programs. Since 1991, U-M has required undergraduates in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (which enrolls the vast majority of Michigan's undergraduates) to complete a Race and Ethnicity course requirement. Michigan is home to the oldest LGBTQ resource center (the Spectrum Center) in the country and a nationally recognized Intergroup Dialogue program. As a part of the University's 2010 accreditation process, the university pledged to support diversity in a range of

forms in its vision statement:

We celebrate and promote diversity in all its forms, seeking the understanding and perspective that distinct life experiences bring. We proclaim ourselves a scholarly community in which ideas may be freely expressed and challenged, and where all people are welcomed, respected, and nurtured in their academic and social development.

(University of Michigan, 2010, bold in original)

Unfortunately, in the years following Proposal 2, Michigan's success at promoting diversity has been mixed. In the winter 2006 term, 6.75 percent of undergraduates were black, that number dropped to 4.24 percent in winter 2018 term (University of Michigan Office of the Registrar, 2018). These changes in enrollment did not go unnoticed by many Michigan undergraduates. In 2013, numerous black students again brought national attention to Michigan by sharing their experiences of being black at Michigan with the hashtag #BBUM (Gringas & Adamczyk, 2013). The following year, Michigan's Black Student Union presented administrators with a list of seven demands, including affordable student housing, a more conveniently located multicultural center, and an increase in black enrollment to ten percent (Amron & Bryan, 2014).

Michigan's recently appointed president, Mark Schlissel, indicated that he is committed to improving diversity:

At the very core of our excellence is our longstanding commitment to build and nurture a campus community characterized by a diversity of people, heritage, academic disciplines and scholarly pursuits. We know that a broad spectrum of perspectives leads to richer educational experiences and intellectual engagement for everyone. Our many and varied voices must all be heard and equally valued. They help us challenge one another's

preconceived notions and expand our understanding. The fabric of our community is simply more vibrant when it is a diverse one. (Schlissel, 2014)

In an effort to build on these statements, President Schlissel hosted a campus-wide diversity summit in November 2015, which included a range of activities from talks to opportunities for student input in how to improve diversity on campus and the experiences of students from underrepresented groups (Iseler, 2015). Each school, college, and major unit within the university was required to produce five-year strategic diversity plans by spring 2016, to be implemented starting in September 2016. The long-term impact of these plans and conversations on admissions and campus climate remains to be seen.

Notably absent from Michigan's ongoing diversity conversations is mention of the experiences of religious students. Considering religious students' experience of diversity raises a number of questions. For example, how do Michigan's religious students experience their role in campus diversity? In other words, do religious students feel included in conversations and pronouncements about diversity by administrators, faculty, staff, and students? Do religious students believe that their religious identities are accepted by the campus environment and by faculty, staff, and/or peers, or do they perceive that their religious identities, or aspects of their religious identities, are unwelcome? Do they believe that Michigan limits or controls their religious expression? Do they perceive faculty, staff, and/or their peers as valuing the multiple aspects of their identity?

To address these and other questions, this study focuses specifically on Muslim, Jewish and Christian student groups for a number of reasons. First, these three represent the three largest religious traditions in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2015) and on college campuses (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). Thus, the experiences of students in these religious groups may

provide insight into the experiences of a large number of students beyond Michigan. Second, each of these three religious traditions has somewhat distinct requirements for its followers regarding religious presentation. For example, many Muslim women chose to wear a veil and publicly present to others their religious identification. Many Jewish and Muslim individuals abide by particular meal practices that also may disclose their religious identification to others. Most sects of Christianity, on the other hand, do not ask followers to adhere to particular displays and meal practices.¹ This variety enriches the analysis of how students' religious selves interact with their environment, through highlighting themes and differences across religious traditions.

I include two Christian groups to capture the diversity of what is by far the largest religious tradition represented on college campuses (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). Also, Christianity is extremely racially segregated (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), so studying two different Christian groups, one predominantly white and one predominately people of color, provides a more complete picture of the experiences of Christian students on a college campus. It also allows for greater consideration of how other aspects of a student's identity, such as her race, may influence her presentation of her religion on campus. All religious groups contain tremendous internal diversity. Accordingly, differences and similarities between and within each of the four groups are highlighted and discussed.

The history of the relationship between religion and secular higher education is complex. The continued presence of religious students on secular campuses presents a number of challenges for administrators as they negotiate how to support these students while maintaining their secular mission. This challenge is particularly great for institutions like the University of

¹ There are a few exceptions to this. For example, the Church of Latter Day Saints encourages followers not to consume alcohol or caffeine, and many Catholics avoid or limit meat during Lent.

Michigan that continue to espouse a broad commitment to diversity. Of course, Michigan is not the only campus eager to reflect on diversity and its welcome to students of a range of identities. Studying the experiences of religious students helps highlight how religious students engage with and participate in campus diversity, and support campuses looking to thoughtfully engage with religious students.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This chapter is divided into two sections. It begins with the three concepts central to my dissertation, 1) religion, 2) identity and 3) religious identity, and describes how I use those terms in this project. The second section reviews what researchers have learned about religion in higher education and the relationship between religious students and the college environment.

Understanding these terms and what is known about the experiences of religious students in higher education provides a foundation for the analysis of my data that follows. Religion and identity are highly indexical terms, so explaining how I use them in this dissertation is essential. Additionally, awareness of current research on religious college students helps to situate the experiences of the students in my study within a broader context.

Understanding Religion, Identity and Religious Identity

In order to effectively engage in a discussion of the religious identities of students, it is necessary for me to define religion, identity and the combination of these two terms. As the following segments indicate, these concepts are complex in history and application so I cannot define them simply. What follows is a discussion of how I deploy these terms throughout the project.

Religion. What we think of as religion is nearly as diverse as the people who participate in its various formations. Coming up with a description that captures all of those variations is

extremely difficult, and is likely partially why the field of religious studies itself cannot agree on a definition. However, that is certainly not due to lack of trying.

The study of religion separate from theological study began in Europe during the early modern period (Orsi, 2005). In the centuries that followed the Middle Ages, Europeans began to engage in rapid and aggressive colonialism, including Christopher Columbus' trip to the "new world" in 1492. The religions these explorers encountered presented a challenge to their imperialist efforts to control local populations (Orsi, 2005). The scholar of religious studies, Robert Orsi (2005) argues that the study of religion during this period was less about understanding different traditions, as much as it was focused on dominating foreign others. He describes the consequences of this historical relationship between the study of religion and European imperialism:

Discourse about "religions" and "religion" was key to controlling and dominating these populations...So the history of the study of religion is also always a political history, just as the political and intellectual history of modernity is also a religious history... Within this political and historical frame, the academic study of religion has been organized around a distinct and identifiable set of moral judgments and values that are most often implicit and commonly evident more in convention and scholarly ethos than precept.

(Orsi, 2005, p. 178)

This relationship between the study of religion and the politics and ethics that characterize imperialist projects means that it is often difficult to separate definitions of religion from their motivating moral judgments. Orsi (2005) offers the following example to illustrate this point:

"Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholarship on "Hindu" ritual, for instance, echoed

with anti-Catholic contempt for corporal religious idioms and revealed less about religious practices in south Asia than about internecine European hatreds” (p. 178).

The prominent anthropologist and scholar of religion, Talal Asad (1983), argues that the Christian Church has also long been involved in constructing and negotiating definitions of religion. The Medieval Church in Europe was very concerned with separating the ‘authentic’ religion of the Catholic Church from other formulations that threatened to draw citizens away from their responsibilities to the Church (Asad, 1983). Closely related to this project was a determination to define what was, and what was not, the Catholic Church, or the sacred from the secular (Asad, 1983). This desire to divide the religious from the non-religious has endured well beyond the ancient Christian Church (Asad, 1983).

Although the Christian Church in all of its various formulations remains quite powerful, it has given way to the authority of the state in Europe, the U.S. and in many other parts of the world (Asad, 1983). Asad (1983) describes how this shift in authority has impacted definitions of religion:

Several times before the Reformation the boundary between the religious and the secular was re-drawn, but always the formal authority of the Church remained pre-eminent. In later centuries, with the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production and the modern state, the churches would also be clear about the need to distinguish ‘the religious’ from ‘the secular’, shifting, as they did so, the weight of religious truth more and more onto the moods and motivations of the believer. Social discipline would, in this period, gradually abandon religious space, letting ‘belief’, ‘faith’ and ‘conscience’ take its place. (p. 244)

Put another way, who and what is religious, changes depending upon who and what is in power. The Christian Church had particular motivations to define a religion in ways that allowed for the church to preserve its authority, and as the state has taken the place of power the Church once held, it too has motivations to define religion in ways that allow for its power to be maintained.

The role of both the Christian Church and the state in defining religion and controlling its formulations through imperialist practices is frequently absent from enduring definitions of religion. The famed anthropologist and ethnographer, Clifford Geertz (1973), defined religion as:

A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (p. 90)

Though appreciative of the contributions that Geertz has made to the study of religion, Asad (1983) expressed concern that popular definitions of religion ignore the role of power in shaping the understanding and practice of religion:

The connection between religious theory and practice is fundamentally a matter of power — of disciplines creating religion, interpreting true meanings, forbidding certain utterances and practices and authorizing others. Hence the questions that Geertz does not ask: how does religious discourse actually define religion? What are the historical conditions in which it can effectively act as a demand for the imitation, or the prohibition, or the authentication of truthful utterances and practices? How does power create religion? (p. 246)

The role of power in shaping definitions of religion and the line between the religious and the secular suggest that religion, like identity, is something that is formed and understood through

interaction. In this case, it is the interaction between religion and the state, religion and power, and religion and the secular. The constant back and forth between these various forces means that religion, like other institutional and social practices, is a very dynamic, local, and historically situated construct.

The influence of imperialism and secularism in understandings of religion became particularly apparent after the events of September 11th, 2001 (Mahmood, 2006; 2012; Orsi, 2005). It was during this period that the secularism of the State exposed itself as being far from religiously neutral; instead particular religious norms were privileged and others were admonished (Mahmood, 2006). Nearly moments after the September 11th attacks, the U.S. began an active imperialist campaign against the Muslim world within its borders and abroad. Citing Rand Corporation reports, the feminist anthropologist and scholar of Islam, Saba Mahmood (2006) documents the desire of the U.S. State Department to remake Islam from within. Mahmood explained that Rand Reports even proposed seeking to change the way that Muslims engage with the Qur'an:

A cornerstone of this strategy is to convince Muslims that they must learn to *historicize* the Quran, not unlike what Christians did with the Bible. In a distinctly paternalistic tone, the Rand report spells this prescription out: "The Old Testament is not different from the Quran in endorsing the conduct and containing a number of rules that are literally unthinkable...in today's society. This does not pose a problem because few people today would insist that we should all be living in the exact literal manner of the Biblical patriarchs. Instead, we allow our vision of Judaism's and Christianity's true message to dominate over literal text, which we regard as history and legend." (p. 335-336, italics in original)

Far from religiously neutral, the Rand Report demonstrates that the U.S. government sought to change some of the most intimate aspects of Islamic religious practice, and privileged particular readings of religious texts over others.

Returning to my research question, ‘How do students negotiate and manage their religious identity within particular university contexts?’ this understanding of religion supports the notion that religion is something that is negotiated between individuals and the influences within their environment. Religion is far from static but changes in presentation and meaning as it interacts with its environment, consistently being divided into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ formulations and being shaped by secularism, its supposed opposite. This means of understanding religion is important to my research question because it suggests that religion does not determine its own boundaries, but does so in conversation with various secular and religious authorities, each of which have particular incentives to define religion in a way that allows power and a specific worldview to be maintained. Moreover, the kind of thinking about religion I have described here proposes that the ways in which students enact and think about their religious practices and beliefs is shaped in part by the secular authority of their institution.

Identity. Although identity is a term that many are familiar with, defining it is far from a straightforward task. In her book on the complexity of sociological theories of identity, Lawler (2014) explained why defining identity is so difficult:

Part of the slipperiness of the term ‘identity’ derives from the difficulties of defining it adequately. It is not possible to provide a single overarching definition of what it is, how it is developed and how it works. Indeed, it is important not to try, because what identity *means* depends on how it is *thought about*. There are, in other words, various ways to theorizing the concept, each of which develops difference kinds of definition. Thus, it is

not entirely possible to answer the question ‘what is identity?’ without theorizing about it.
(p. 7, italics in original)

In order to figure out what identity is, it is necessary to ask several additional questions such as: What is the self? What is the relationship between the self and society? Who am I relative to others? What is the nature of the fluidity of identity – how is it shaped? How does it change? Why? As compelling as these questions are for me to think about, their answers are well outside of the bounds of this dissertation. Accordingly, instead of providing a definition of identity here, I will discuss some of the theories of identity that have shaped my own thinking on this project.

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, I understand identity to arise primarily through social interaction. This understanding of identity is rooted in both feminist intersectional theory and in Goffman’s (1959) theory of identity performance. Goffman (1959) argued that identity is something people both have and display. For example, the identity of being a woman is something that a woman has and experiences through her body and in encounters with others, and it is also something she chooses how to present, depending on the situation. Goffman described identity performance as a kind of impression management: “[W]hen an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey” (p. 4). In other words, identities are not static but are negotiated through social interaction.

The contribution of intersectionality to feminist theory, critical legal scholarship, and to numerous other fields is tremendous; however, overtime it has become a catchall term for any type of research that considers the relationship among multiple identities (Hames-García, 2011). For this reason, I want to be specific about how I understand and use the term in this dissertation. Arguably one of the biggest contributions of intersectionality is that it challenges the more linear

and additive understanding of identity present in much of the social sciences, where individuals are treated as sets of variables comprised of the statistical interaction of their race, class, gender, and other identity markers (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). West and Fenstermaker (1995) suggest that this way of thinking about intersectionality often incorrectly leads to thinking of individual's identities as a kind of Venn diagram, with her race, for example, in one circle, her class in another, and her race and class in the area where they overlap. While this understanding of identity does suggest that there is a relationship between two aspects of a person's identity, it also wrongly implies that a person is comprised of aspects of themselves other than the intersection – that there is some part of the self that is just their race or class. This means of thinking allows conversations about identity to remain in the kind of additive, mathematical style that intersectional thinking allegedly seeks to challenge.

West and Fenstermaker (1995; 2002) and over 15 years later, Hames-García (2011), suggest that seeing identities as multiple provides a means of understanding identity beyond the limits of equations. Hames-García (2011) explained that the problem of thinking about identity as additive or multiplicative is that it suggests that different aspects of one's self can be separated into their component parts:

The multiplicity of the self in relation to social identities lies in the inadequacy of understanding the self as the sum of so many discrete parts: femaleness + blackness + motherhood, for example. The mutual interaction and the relation of its parts to one another constitute the self. Social identities - or aspects of the self that have political significance in a given society and that one shares with a significant number of others in that society so as to result in a sense of shared fate (for example, ability, citizenship, class, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, and sexuality) - overlap in fundamental ways.

These social identities, therefore, do not constitute essentially separate categories that occasionally intersect. (p. 5)

Like Hames-García, West and Fenstermaker (1995; 2002) contend that identity is a dynamic construct that is influenced by others. Using an ethnomethodological approach, West and Fenstermaker argue that just as one's identity is shaped through interaction so is difference "an ongoing interactional accomplishment" (p. 56). In other words, as Hames-García (2011) explains, identities and the differences between ourselves and others are the result of constant interactions:

Rather than thinking of them abstractly as separable categories, I would like to consider social identities from the perspective of the day to day. From this perspective, social identities do not simply intersect now and then. They blend, constantly and differently, like the colors of a photograph. (p. 6)

The combination and constant interaction between aspects of one's self and others is what allows difference to be created and recreated as the self and presentation of self is renegotiated through interaction.

While intersectionality asserts that different aspects of identity should never be viewed independently of other aspects of the self, depending upon the social context and situation a particular categorical identity can be more salient or appear more prominent than others in the context of the interaction itself (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). West and Fenstermaker (1995) thoughtfully observe that, "foreground and background, context, salience, and center shift from interaction to interaction, but all operate independently" (p. 33). Examining a particular aspect of identity, like religion, and its salience in particular interactional contexts allows for an analysis of how different categorical identities interact and are informed by one another in a given

environment. However, although some aspects of identity appear more obvious than others at different times, those aspects are nonetheless interconnected to all aspects of the self.

For the purposes of my dissertation, this understanding of identity is particularly important because it suggests that one cannot study the religious identity of a student without simultaneously examining other aspects of her identity, such as her race, class or gender. Each of these aspects of a student's identity influences how she negotiates and manages religious identity within a university. Accordingly, any examination of one aspect of identity and its role in students' lives and experiences means encountering other aspects of their identities and seeking to understand their relationship to the identity of interest.

This view of identity also influences how one comprehends religion, and how I approach religion in this dissertation, through disrupting the supposed dichotomy between religious belief and expression. This division has its roots in the Christian ideal of the divide between the body and the spirit proclaimed in many of the New Testament Pauline letters. As Mahmood (2005) points out, the Muslim women at the center of her research defy this assumed distinction between how one presents one's religion and one's interior ideas regarding one's religion. Recognizing that how a person understands herself and how she represents her identity are interconnected, as both intersectionality and Goffman's theories propose, and challenges the alleged dichotomy between religious belief and expression. Moreover, religious belief and expression, like all other aspects of identity, are shaped by other aspects of the self, such as one's race, class, and sexual orientation. In this view, religion is no longer simply some separate interior or spiritual part of one's identity, but it is interconnected with all other aspects of the self.

Religious Identity. Arguably, I did more to problematize and destabilize these two terms in this chapter, than I did to offer a useful, concise definition. However, looking across my descriptions of each of these two concepts, the following points influence my own thinking on religious identity throughout the dissertation:

- Although I am interested in how students negotiate their religious identities on campus, I recognize that the religious identities of the students are inseparably connected to other aspects of their identity. Therefore, it is important to consider the ways in which these other aspects of one's self influence their presentation and experience of religion in the campus environment.
- Just as identity is something that is negotiated between individuals and their environment, so too is religion negotiated between individuals and authorities within a given environment. Put another way, religion, individual's ways of interacting with religion, and acting religious do not exist as fixed in the social world, instead religion and religious identities are accomplished and created through interaction.
- Both secular and religious authorities engage with religion and define its limits in ways that allow for their power to be maintained or increased.

The following section reviews previous research relevant to this study of the religious identities of college students.

Religion on College Campuses and the Experiences of Religious Students

Interest in religion on college campuses has grown tremendously in recent years. Calls for increased understanding of and support for religious students are particularly great among student affairs scholars and practitioners (e.g. Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward 2006; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm 2005; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Parks, 2000). Some academics are beginning to

explore how to encourage productive conversations about religion in their classrooms (e.g. Edwards, 2006). Even as interest in the role of religion in the university and the experiences of religious students has swelled, scholarship on the topic remains somewhat limited (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009).

We do know that an overwhelming number of students begin college identifying with a religious group. UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute's famous 2004 survey of over 112,000 first-year students at 236 colleges found that 83 percent of students report they have a relationship with a denomination, and 79 percent believe in God (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). However, many studies report that student religious engagement drops over the course of the college years (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Funk & Willits, 1987; Hunter, 1983; Saenz & Barrera, 2007; Sherkat, 1998). One such study by Uecker, Regenerus and Vaaler (2007) looked at a sample of several thousand students and found significant declines in religious attendance and commitment among college-going youth.

Speculation regarding the reasons for this decline abounds within and outside the academy. Conservative and Evangelical films, books and politicians often reference this trend to suggest that colleges are hostile to religious students, particularly Christian students (for examples see: Budziszewski, 2014; Chick, 2002; Gentile & Rosenfeld, 2012; Hatcher-Travis & Cronk, 2014). However, Uecker and colleagues (2007) believe that the reported decline in religious attendance among college students in theirs and other studies is likely exaggerated. Reductions in religious attendance are greater among youth who do not attend college than those who do, leading the authors to assert that "higher education is not the enemy of religiosity that so many have made it out to be" (Uecker et al., 2007, p. 1683). In fact, they found that 86 percent of college students maintain their religious affiliation suggesting "religious belief systems remain

largely untouched for the duration of their education” (Uecker et al., 2007, p. 1683). The authors continued to postulate, “anti-religious hostility on campus may be at a decades-long low” (Uecker et al., 2007, p. 1683).

Studies that have examined the effect of college on students’ religious beliefs have produced similarly complicated results. A number of survey studies found little change in students’ religious beliefs throughout college (Hurtado, Sax, Saenz, Harper, Oseguera, Curley, Lopez, Wolf & Arellano, 2007; Lee, Matzkin & Arthur, 2006). Clydesdale (2007) studied the experiences of 125 students before and after their first-year in college, and found that students put their religious, political, gender, race and other identities in an “identity lockbox” prior to college, preferring not to question them during the college years.

Alternatively, research on a number of Christian groups suggests that college actively challenges students’ religious beliefs. Lee’s (2002) study of Catholic students found that students maintained their faith in college, but interacting with their peers did cause them to reevaluate some aspects of their beliefs. Counter to Uecker and colleagues (2007) assertion, a series of ethnographies, interviews, and case studies of Christian clubs and organizations seems to at least support the broad claim that being a Christian on a secular college campus entails some challenges. These qualitative studies suggest that some Christian subcultures, particularly conservative and/or evangelical subcultures, experience themselves as oppositional to the broader institutional culture at secular institutions (e.g. Bramadat, 2000; Bryant, 2005; Kim, 2006; Magolda & Gross, 2009; Moran, Lang & Oliver, 2007; Perry & Armstrong, 2007; Wilkins, 2008). Christian students reported experiencing difficulties in engaging with their peers often due to social differences and their limited desire to participate in the drinking and permissive sexual culture that consumes some aspects campus life (Wilkins, 2008). These

students described additional difficulties participating in the classroom, believing that it was sometimes necessary to hide their beliefs in order to go along with the secular worldview that dominated their courses (Bryant, 2005, Moran et al., 2007).

Despite significant gains in religious diversity across the country (Pew Research Center, 2015) college students remain predominantly Christian (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009); far less is known about how non-Christian students interact with and are influenced by the college environment. What researchers know about Muslim and Jewish students suggests that like their Christian peers, these students' experiences in the college environment influences how they think of themselves and their religious identity.

Research on Muslim students consistently finds that these students must adapt to significant challenges on campus due to discrimination (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; 2010; Peek, 2005; Speck, 1997). Through interviewing Muslim college women who veil on a secular campus, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) found that the Muslim women in their sample were very aware of the fact that their veil influenced how they were seen by others. These women believed that the veil caused them to be seen as exotic, fundamental or oppressed – responses that produced “either ethnocentric amusement or alienation” (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003, p. 58). The negative perceptions of the veil by non-Muslims on campus caused these women to question the purpose of wearing the veil and its relationship to their religious practices, motivating some to choose to discontinue their veil practice (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Peek (2005) interviewed over 100 Muslim college students and identified three stages of religious development: Religion as Ascribed Identity, Religion as Chosen Identity, and Religion as Declared Identity. For Peek, identity growth, or increased ownership of one's religious identity, occurs for Muslim students when they are asked to declare their religious identity in the face of difficulty. Yet, despite

experiencing frequent challenges and discrimination, like those described in both of these studies, Muslim students continue to engage in more “diversity-related activities” than their Christian or Jewish peers, such as participating in a racial/ethnic student organization or activity (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010, p. 134).

A large percentage of Jewish Americans attend college (Kadushin & Tighe, 2008). Seventy-two percent of non-Orthodox and 50 percent of Orthodox Jews under the age of 30 either attend or have attended college (Kadushin & Tighe, 2008). These students typically come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and have better high school grades than their non-Jewish peers (Bowman, Felix & Ortis, 2014). Jewish students attend elite colleges at impressive rates and tend to excel academically (Bowman et al., 2014; Kadushin & Tighe, 2008). Kadushin and Tighe (2008) found that Jewish students comprise between seven and twenty-five percent of many highly selective universities. Despite their high college attendance, Jewish students comprise only about two percent of college students overall (Bowman et al., 2014), a number that is only slightly higher than their overall proportion of the U.S. population (1.8 percent) (Tighe, Saxe, de Kramer, & Parmer, 2013).

In a 19-campus survey of Jewish college student life, Kadushin and Tighe (2008) found that the majority of responding students reported that it was not difficult to be Jewish on a college campus. Americans generally view Jewish people favorably (Pew Research Center, 2014), which may in part explain this finding. However, Kadushin and Tighe discovered that students’ degree of comfort was linked to a number of factors. The greater the proportion of Jewish peers, the more comfortable Jewish students felt. In addition, Jewish students who actively engaged in Jewish practices, such as keeping Kosher, experienced more challenges than their less-engaged Jewish peers. Despite the fact that Jewish students appear to enjoy a degree of

ease on college campuses, Small (2011) reports that they recognize that their Christian peers are the largest and most dominant religious group on campus.

The range of descriptions of the experiences of religious students on secular college campuses means that a lot of questions remain regarding the impact of the college environment on religious students. For example, on one hand, there is the consistent cry among particular groups of Christians that secular higher education is wholly unwelcoming to Christian beliefs. On the other hand, more recent historical trends indicate that colleges and universities may be entering a new state of engagement with religious students and perhaps religious hostility on campuses is actually at a “decades-long low” (Uecker et al, 2007, p. 1683).

The college environment is key to religious students’ college experience. For example, while Jewish students describe enjoying a degree of comfort on many college campuses, the key to that comfort appears to be a strong, campus-based community of Jewish peers to support them in their identity (Kadushin & Tighe, 2008). Moreover, Kadushin and Tighe’s (2008) finding regarding the relationship between participating in Jewish practices and comfort on campus indicates that there is something about actively participating in religious practices in the college environment that negatively impacts these students’ wellbeing. Research on Christian and Muslim students suggest that, for them, college is a time of great religious adversity and discrimination.

CHAPTER III

Methods & Data Collection

I conducted a qualitative study of religious students at one secular university with a long-standing and strongly emphasized commitment to diversity: The University of Michigan. I looked at the experiences of Michigan students who are members of four different religious groups: 1) a Muslim student group, 2) a Jewish student group, 3) a predominantly white Christian student group, and 4) and a Christian group comprised predominantly of students of color. In this section, I describe the theoretical factors that influence my perspective on research and approach to the field, outline my study design, indicate how I managed and analyzed the data I collected, and briefly discuss my position as a researcher.

Theoretical Perspective & Qualitative Methodology

The conceptions of identity outlined in the previous chapter served as the theoretical lens that guided this research. As I summarized in the introductory chapter, this mode of understanding identity suggests it is comprised of three parts: 1) it is individually chosen based on how one understands and perceives oneself (Goffman, 1963), 2) it is socially negotiated as individuals figure out how and what parts of their identities they wish to share with others (Goffman, 1959; 1963; Hames-García, 2011), and 3) it is culturally defined (Goffman, 1959; 1963; Hames-García, 2011), meaning what an institution values or not in their students' identities influences how those students understand and present themselves. Additionally, as I discussed in the brief history of higher education I provided in the first chapter, what an

institution values in its students and how it relates to them is context-dependent and historically situated.

Qualitative research design is well-suited to this theoretical perspective. Qualitative research is focused on “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). My research questions are similarly focused on understanding how individuals interpret and make meaning out of their experiences within their environment. Qualitative research recognizes that individuals construct their own varied social realities and there are multiple means of interpreting a particular event or experience (Flick, 2002; Merriam, 2009). In line with this method, the understanding of identity used in this dissertation assumes that there are multiple ways of understanding and engaging with the world based on one’s own context, identity, and experience.

Qualitative research tools also make it possible to engage in a kind of interpretive work that is unavailable using quantitative methods. For example, as I have discussed, previous research on Christian college students at secular universities suggests that those students sometimes describe having to hide their beliefs in the classroom (Bryant, 2005, Moran et al., 2007) and experience some challenges engaging with their non-Christian peers (Wilkins, 2008). Research on Muslim students suggests that they also face challenges or discrimination that leads some Muslim women to stop wearing a veil (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Both these groups of students negotiate challenges and the judgment of others; however, the nature of these challenges is arguably very different for Muslim and Christian students. The current hostile political climate towards Muslims adds a layer of complexity to their experiences. Qualitative research provides the tools to explore the nature and complexity of these experiences for each of these two groups.

Overall, the nature of my research questions, goals, and theoretical lens, make a qualitative study and appropriate method for this dissertation.

The Setting: The University of Michigan

The University of Michigan is a large public research university located in Ann Arbor, MI.² It has a student population of over 40,000, over half of which are undergraduates. Michigan is home to eighteen schools ranging from education, to engineering, to art and design, to medicine, and enrolls students in a number of degree programs from bachelors to Ph.D., as well as an array of professional degrees. The university has a Carnegie Classification of “highest research activity” (Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education, 2015) and is a member of the Big Ten Conference and the Association of American Universities.

As a public institution, U-M, is partially funded by the state and, like other state and government agencies, is expected to abide by the Establishment and Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment³ of the U.S. Constitution (U.S. Const. amend. I). Michigan takes this charge very seriously. However, like many universities across the country, Michigan once had a very close relationship with religious students – particularly Christian ones. Many of U-M’s first faculty and administrators were Christian clergy (Austin, 1957). Students interested in discussing their Christian faith outside of the classroom formed a number of organizations, including what may be the oldest college chapter of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in the U.S. founded in 1858 (Austin, 1957). Interested in including women among their ranks⁴, Michigan’s YMCA eventually changed its name to the Students’ Christian Association (later the

² The University of Michigan has additional campuses in Dearborn and Flint, MI however this study will focus exclusively on the system’s flagship campus in Ann Arbor.

³ The Free Exercise and Establishment Clause reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” (U.S. Const. amend. I).

⁴ U-M began admitting women in 1870.

Student Christian Association) or SCA (Austin, 1957). The SCA was wildly successful and grew into Michigan's most active student organization by the end of the 1800s (Austin, 1957).

Between 1900-1920 the SCA underwent a series of changes; a YMCA and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) chapter were eventually formed, leaving Michigan with three prominent Christian organizations (Austin, 1957). Originally, the three groups were headquartered in Newberry Hall, which still boasts an SCA inscription today, but needing more space and with the help of some funding from John D. Rockefeller, the group soon moved into Lane Hall (Austin, 1957). Over time the SCA's influence decreased and control of Lane and Newberry Halls were transferred to the University (Austin, 1957).

In a surprising move for a public university, in 1936 Michigan agreed to take over the SCA and formed the Student Religious Association to promote interest in religion among students (Austin, 1957). This move also signaled that the University recognized that it now enrolled a more religiously diverse student body, which it wished to support (Austin, 1957). By the mid-twentieth century, the University increased its administrative support for religious students eventually leading to the creation of an Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) charged with supporting students in their own faith as well with preparing them to live in a pluralistic world (University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library, n.d.). Toward the end of the twentieth century, many of the ORA's (later the Office of Ethics and Religion) responsibilities were shifted to other parts of the University or dissolved (University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library, n.d.), and the office was closed in the 1990s.

Michigan continued its rollback of engagement with religious life and study throughout the 1990s. Though the University maintains academic programs in Judaic and Islamic studies, the religious studies department (or the Program on the Studies in Religion as it was called) has

been in suspension since 1999 (Axelrad, 2011). Religious studies departments and programs exist at many of Michigan's peer institutions, so the absence of a religion department at Michigan is notable. Students are still able to self-design a religious studies major, but as a former professor in the program noted the experience is lonelier than it once was:

It's enormously useful to have others who are following something of the same curriculum in classes with you, so you can discuss areas of interest, be in seminars together and do courses in methodology together. Students can do Independent Concentration Projects, but independence is often accompanied by isolation and it takes very great effort on the part of the student and faculty adviser...to overcome that isolation. (Axelrad, 2011)

Without a religious studies department, students who wish to study religion have to do so largely on their own.

When religious students arrive at Michigan they join a campus community with two competing histories. Michigan has both a well-articulated commitment to diversity, and has spent the last several decades rolling back support for religious exploration or study. Through looking closely at the experiences of students at four different research sites at U-M⁵: 1) Michigan Muslim Student Union (MMSU, a Muslim student organization), 2) Jewish Students United (a primarily Modern Orthodox Jewish organization), 3) Haven (a primarily white Christian student organization) and 4) Ignite (a Christian student organization comprised primarily of students of

⁵ Two notes about these groups: 1) All of the student group names are pseudonyms. 2) As mentioned earlier, I selected Jewish, Muslim and Christian groups because they extremely varied traditions, and are some of largest of the world's religious groups. However, these three religious traditions are monotheistic. This commonality may make it easier to analyze across the groups, but it also misses the voices of students connected to religious groups with different belief systems.

color) my dissertation seeks to understand how current religious students negotiate their religious identity in this campus environment.

Little information is available regarding the religious demographics of University of Michigan students. In 2016, the University conducted a campus climate survey as a part of its diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and asked respondents about their religious affiliation (University of Michigan, 2016). The report described Michigan as being home to a “very pluralistic population with regard to religious beliefs” (University of Michigan, 2016, p. 11). With regard to the groups in this study, they found that 18% of students’ report being Baptist (1.5%), Methodist (2.3%), Presbyterian (1.7%), Protestant (Non-Denominational) (1.0%), Seventh Day Adventist (0.4%), Christian (Non-Denominational) (10.4%), or Other Christian (0.7%) (University of Michigan, 2016, p. 16).⁶ Eight percent of students indicate that they have a Jewish religious background, and 2.7% report having a Muslim religious background. (University of Michigan, 2016, p. 16). Though these students were not interviewed in this study, it is worth noting that 38.4% of Michigan students report identifying as Agnostic (12.3%), Atheist (11.5%), or having no religious background (14.6%) (University of Michigan, 2016, p. 16). Accordingly, the students interviewed were on a campus with a large number of non-religious peers.

⁶ I did not ask the students in the Christian groups specifically what branch of Christianity they identify with most closely. The closest I came to that question was asking them to describe what Christianity means to them. I suspect that the majority of Christian students interviewed would have identified as one of the following categories in the survey: Protestant (Non-Denominational), Christian (Non-Denominational), or Other Christian. Together these groups comprise approximately 12.1% of students. I included Methodist, Presbyterian and Seventh Day Adventist in the list above, because I believe it is possible that students in each of the groups could have selected these options as well.

A Note About Religious Group Funding

As a public university, Michigan places limits on the kinds of student group activities that it will fund. The University's Center for Campus Involvement outlines the rules related to funding religious organizations:

University funds cannot be used to provide direct support of religious worship. This prohibition does not preclude use of University funds in connection with activities involving the expression of religious viewpoints nor does it preclude groups that engage in religious worship from receiving funding for other activities. (University of Michigan Center for Campus Involvement, 2018)

All of the groups in this study included worship among their primary activities. Three of the groups in this study, Haven, MMSU and JSU benefit from resources provided by organizations outside the University. Specifically, an independent foundation funds the two Muslim campus chaplains. Haven is a Michigan chapter of a larger national campus Christian organization that supports its numerous full and part-time staff. JSU alumna/e, the Jewish community in Southeast Michigan and outside foundations provides JSU with several rabbis and support staff; the group also receives funds from graduates. Ignite is the only group in this study that, at the time of writing, did not have access to an independent funding source or dedicated group staff.

Recruitment

I began recruiting participants in the summer of 2016, by connecting with the staff of relevant campus religious groups. I first emailed the leadership of Michigan's Association of Religious Counselors (ARC).⁷ ARC "is an independent association of representatives from

⁷ ARC helps facilitate relationships between the University and its members. The ARC Constitution outlines the requirements for membership, but in brief, members agree to work collaboratively and respectfully with one another to "[advocate] for the moral, religious, and

religious and spiritual communities that serve the students, staff, and faculty of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor” (Association of Religious Counselors, n.d.) that meets monthly throughout the academic year. A member of the ARC executive board suggested the names of individuals involved with religious life who might be interested in having their students participate in my research. It is through ARC that I was able to connect with one of the staff leaders of Haven, who shared information about my study over their group listserv. Once a few students from Haven were interested, I used snowball sampling to recruit additional Haven students.

I wrote several staff within Michigan’s Jewish community and eventually met with one of the Rabbis affiliated with the Jewish Student Union. He agreed to share information about my study over the group’s listserv and Facebook group, and invited me to come to a Shabbat dinner and speak briefly. One of the challenges of doing recruitment on Shabbat is that it was the tradition of the group’s leadership, as well as many within the Orthodox Jewish communities, not to write on the holiday. I passed out business cards, but was unable to collect students’ contact information. Thankfully, some students responded and I was able to recruit additional students through snowball sampling.

My connections with the other religious groups began more informally. The female Muslim chaplain and I had some mutual friends, and she invited me to attend an MMSU event and collect emails of interested students. After an initial interview with one female participant, she shared my information over what she described as a “sisterhood” text chain with dozens of other Muslim women. Through that connection, I received several more participants.

Ignite is primarily a student-led organization, so I used the U-M student group directory

spiritual dimensions of university life,” and pay annual dues (Association of Religious Counselors, n.d.).

to find the contact information of the group’s president. She invited me to an Ignite worship service and permitted me to make an announcement about my research. I collected emails of interested group members and found additional participants through snowball sampling. ¹ Ignite is composed almost entirely of women, so I was unable to recruit any men for the study. I will talk further about the role of gender in this group in the corresponding findings chapter.

To incentivize participation, I used research grant funds to offer all participants a \$50 Amazon gift card that I would send by email after they had completed two individual interviews and a group discussion. On average, this amounted to about two to three hours of participants’ time. If they only participated in the first interview and/or group discussion, they were not compensated. During the interviews, students regularly indicated that they enjoyed talking about their religious identity, but added that the gift card helped significantly to make involvement in the study attractive in the midst of their busy schedules.

Table 1: Study Participants Per Group & by Gender

Group	Men	Women	Total Participants
Haven	9	5*	14
Michigan Muslim Student Union	6	8	14
Ignite	0	9	9
Jewish Students United	5	3	8
Total	20	25	45

*One female participant only completed the first interview.

I interviewed and recruited participants in Haven and MMSU during the Fall 2016 term, and Ignite and Jewish Students United participants during the Winter 2017 term. I had a much easier time recruiting students in the fall term. Haven and MMSU data collection coincided with the 2016 presidential election, a time when religion and religious diversity was a heightened part of our national discourse in ways that may have helped to increase students’ interest in participating in the study. Before the election, I had three Muslim women participants, within a

few days afterward five more expressed interest. Students appeared eager for the opportunity to talk in a quiet and safe setting about their identity as a Muslim woman. Additionally, I speculate that in the fall, students are adjusting to their academic schedules and have time available before student group activity ramps up for the year. My experience as a Graduate Student Instructor tells me that students are generally busier in the winter term with student group activities and making summer and post-graduation plans. However, I cannot say conclusively why recruitment was more difficult in the winter term.

Data Collection

Interviews and group discussions were my primary modes of data collection. The use of two complementary data collection techniques allowed for triangulation of findings, giving me the chance to check my findings in using one method of data collection with my findings employing another method (Hollander, 2004; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005). This data collection approach improved the likelihood that my findings accurately captured the experiences of the students in this study. I used the following procedure for each of the four student groups.

Procedure.

Semi-structured interviews. I conducted two individual interviews with each of the student participants. One interview took place before the group discussion, the other after. The first interview (see appendix A for protocol) was designed to provide background information about each student. The interview questions were divided into three sections: demographic and religious identity, pre-college experiences and decisions, and why students chose to be a part of a particular college religious group. The first interviews averaged about 30-45 minutes.

The second interview (see appendix C for protocol) took place a few weeks after the first interview and closed out the data collection phase of the research. This interview focused on

students' experiences on campus and within their particular religious student group. The questions sought to zero in on how students' experience their multiple and intersecting identities at Michigan (e.g. What is it like to be a black Christian woman at U-M? What is it like to be a Muslim woman who wears a hijab on campus?). This interview also provided an opportunity to address any questions that remained after the preceding interviews. The second interview also took about 30-45 minutes on average.

All interviews were audio recorded, with the permission of the participant, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Group discussions. After the first interviews were completed, I conducted group discussions (see appendix B for group discussion protocol). My decision to rely on group discussions as a form of data collection derives from my understanding of identity. As I have previously described, the conceptualization of identity in this study views it as constructed in interaction between individuals and their environment. Group discussions, more so than individual interviews, provide a means of studying how participants in a group interact with one another (Flick, 2002). This interaction is particularly important to the study of identity, because as I explained in my discussion of this concept, identity and the differences between the self and others are shaped through constant interaction.

Group discussions as a method of research were developed in Germany at the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in the 1950s (Bohnsack, 2004; Flick, 2002). Group discussions rely on so-called 'real groups' (Flick, 2002). Real groups "start from a history of shared interaction in relation to the issue under discussion and thus have already developed forms of common activities and underlying patterns of meaning" (Nießen, 1977 quoted and translated in Flick, 2002, p. 115). Within the university context, for example, a real group could be the faculty

within a department, doctoral students who work in a particular lab, or in this case the members of a particular religious student organization. Group discussions privilege the studying of interaction and allow for a “group opinion” to develop (Bohnsack, 2004). A “group opinion” is more than a combination of individual members’ opinions, but instead is the result of the participants’ collective interactions in the discussion itself (Bohnsack, 2004).

The researcher generally begins the group discussion with a specific prompt or question for the group to discuss (Flick, 2002). Depending on the research, participants could also be asked to address a particular image, film clip, or scenario (Flick, 2002). After explaining the prompt, image, short film, or scenario at hand, the researcher’s participation in the group discussion is quite limited (Flick, 2002). Because this method concentrates on allowing the group itself to interact and form a group opinion, the researcher’s participation is generally limited to three forms:

Formal direction is limited to the control of the agenda of the speakers and to fixing the beginning, course and end of the discussion. *Topical steering* comprised the introduction of new questions and steering the discussion towards a deeming and extension of specific topics and parts. Beyond this, *steering the dynamics* of the interaction ranges from reflating the discussion to using provocative questions, polarizing a slow discussion or accommodating relations of dominance by purposively addressing members remaining rather reserved in the discussion (Flick, 2000, p. 116, italics in original).

Holding the discussion with members of a real group means that the group begins already having had experience speaking to one another, so they should have an easier time communicating than if the group were comprised of strangers.

Outside Germany, the group discussion method is sometimes referred to as a focus group (Flick, 2002) and some proponents use a similar method to the one described here (e.g. Barbour, 2008; Hollander, 2004). However, focus groups refer to a very broad methodology, that can take a number of forms and bring together a range of individuals who do not always comprise a real group (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Accordingly, I have chosen to use the term group discussions to refer to this specific methodology.

I kept the group discussions small enough (no larger than five students) to allow enough room for all participants to offer their thoughts if they wished to do so. The group questions explored the relationship between the group and the university, what it is like being a religious student at Michigan, and how students decide whether and how to talk about their religious identity with others. All group discussions were audio and video recorded (to aid in the ease of transcription), with the permission of the participants, and transcribed for analysis.

In accordance with group discussion methodology, my participation in these groups was extremely limited; I offered brief prompts to help begin the discussion, and intervening when it is time to move to the next topic. By limiting my participation, I encouraged group members to talk to each other instead of simply responding to my questions.

Data Management & Analysis

This research generated a data corpus that required careful organization and management to allow for a thoughtful and through analysis. I maintained a database of research site files to organize my data (Merriam, 2009). Recordings, transcripts and memos were entered in these research site files. To protect the anonymity of my participants, individuals and groups were be identified only by their pseudonyms in written reports. Any records that connected pseudonyms to their real names were destroyed immediately after the data collection phase.

For each of these of the four groups, I began my analysis by exploring my data for patterns and themes, and recording what I found in memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Work with the data was ongoing and took place concurrently with data collection. Engaging in ongoing analysis helped manage the large quantity of data generated through this research. Accordingly, throughout the data collection and analyzing process I regularly reviewed my data and wrote memos to record how my learning and thinking is evolving with each state of the research process.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, I employed a grounded theoretical frame (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and coded the individual interviews and group discussion using open coding and the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I began by creating codes that corresponded to the questions asked in each of the two interviews (see appendix A and C) and the group discussion (see appendix B). For example, there was a code for responses to the question regarding what being a member of their religious tradition means to them, what identities other than their faith identity they found meaningful, and whether they plan to continue to stay involved in their respective religious group. Additional codes were developed as themes within and across groups became clear. Examples of group-specific codes include: discussing wearing a hijab, practicing Shabbat, mention of Israel and evangelizing. Examples of cross-group codes that arose include: drinking/alcohol, classroom experiences, dating, and politics/the 2016 presidential election.⁸ These codes were especially helpful in addressing my second research sub-question regarding how religious students describe the ways in which the campus environment influences how they present their religious selves on campus.

I also created specific codes to assist in answering my first research sub-question: How

⁸ The interviews and group discussions took place in the months surrounding the 2016 presidential election.

might religious students describe aspects of their identity, such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation, as influencing how they present their religious selves on campus? These codes included instances where students spoke directly about the role of particular aspects of identity, other than religious identity, in their lives, such as the impact of gender or race. Coding for specific aspects of identity appears counter to the definition of identity outlined in the previous chapter. However, these initial codes were used primarily to help organize and distill the tremendous amount of data elicited through the interviews and group discussions and consider how students thought about relationships between particular aspects of their identity. For example, when students spoke about the experience of being a Christian woman or Palestinian Muslim and these were coded accordingly. Though I coded students' discussion of being a Christian woman, to continue the example, as "gender" this code was used to capture the relationship between students' religious and gender identities.

Utilizing a grounded theory approach, I generated two kinds of propositions: those that can guide data analysis and those that will recommend directions for future study. Propositions are theories derived from the "literature, personal/professional experience, [other] theories, and/or generalizations based on empirical data" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 551). These propositions are theoretical and/or empirical in nature. Writing about these propositions in my memos helped to direct the analysis, data collection and discussion towards my research questions, and aid in the development of a conceptual framework (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Through the coding process, I realized the participants' comments could be organized into three broad categories. First, I took note of how they described what their religious tradition meant to them and what they believed was involved in being a Christian/Muslim/Jewish person. This understanding is important because as I discuss in the previous chapter, I understand

religion and religious identity as something that is negotiated between individuals and their environment. Though there are many common practices and interpretation of what it means to be a Jewish person, for example, any definition of a religious tradition that does not acknowledge variations in understanding and belief risks dismissing the rich diversity present in all of the world's traditions. Accordingly, I believe that it is important to capture how participants individually understood and engaged with their respective faith traditions.

The second and third categories largely corresponded to the two sub-questions that arose from my overall research question. The second category addresses how students spoke about the Michigan environment as influencing their faith presentation and engagement. The final category addresses when students spoke about the intersection of their religious identity with other aspects of their identity. These two categories included significantly more data than the first. To aid the writing and analysis process, I relied upon codes that corresponded to particular interview questions or aspects of student life (e.g. classes) to help organize the data.

Though the group discussions were helpful in gaining an understanding of shared and differing experiences within each group, I recognized that individual students might at times feel compelled to agree with their peers, even if particular comments did not reflect their own feelings about a topic. In my second individual interview, I therefore asked how students felt about the group discussion and any disagreements or similarities that arose. To ensure I was accurately capturing the perspectives of all the students involved, I triangulated data derived from group discussions with the individual interviews of the students involved.

My findings are presented in five chapters. I wrote one chapter for each of four groups in the study. Each of these chapters is divided into sections that correspond to the three themes listed above. The fifth findings chapter presents a cross-case analysis that identifies themes as

well as differences across and between groups. I began cross-case analysis by looking across the themes I outlined, considering commonalities and differences across the groups and reviewing memos kept throughout the analysis and writing process. This process resulted in the themes that comprise the final findings chapter.

Positionality

One of the central components of qualitative research is that the researcher's own perspectives, impressions and background play a welcome role in knowledge production (Flick, 2002; Merriam, 2009). Accordingly, the "subjectivities of the researcher *and* those being studied are a part of the research process" (Flick, 2002, p. 6, italics in original). Thus, the researcher's responsibility is not to try to eliminate her own standpoint, but to be aware of it and examine if and when it may influence the research process.

My interest in the religious identities of students is a personal one. I am approved for ordination process in the United Church of Christ, a progressive Christian denomination, and plan to pursue a career as a university chaplain after earning my doctoral degree. I was not raised in a religious home, but came to Christianity on my own in college. At the outset of this research, I suspected that sharing a faith tradition with some of my participants would help me gain access to Christian groups and connect with participants. I had observed in the past that my own religious beliefs have played a complicated role in my research. For example, in previous research projects involving religion I have made conscious decisions regarding when and what details to share regarding my own Christian identification and decision to pursue a career in ministry. In times when I have desired to be discrete, I took off the cross necklace symbolic of my own Christian faith that I frequently wear before conducting interviews. When asked why I am interested in religious topics by research participants, I sometimes answered through saying

that I have a master's degree in religious studies⁹ and am interested in the role of religion in the university. I recognize that the fact that I can choose to keep my faith from others or to share it is a privilege that is not available to everyone¹⁰. I also acknowledge that both being and presenting as a white woman may have impacted how students engaged with me.¹¹

I will discuss in more detail how my religious, race and gender presentation impacted the research process later in this dissertation. In brief, my embodiment had a profound impact on the research process. Many of the primarily white Christian students and Jewish students assumed that I shared their religious tradition. Several Muslim students would often pause what they were discussing in interviews, to make sure that I understood various elements of Islam. Though their generosity was appreciated, I began introducing myself as having a master's in religious studies, so that some knowledge of Islam would be assumed. I continually negotiated my own sense of religious presentation and participation as I asked students to tell me about how they manage their religious identities.

⁹ The actual degree I received is a Masters of Divinity, which in many denominations is the professional degree required for ministry. My hope is that in describing it as a "masters of religious studies" I avoid exposing my ministerial goals.

¹⁰ For example, if I were a Muslim woman who wore a veil my religious identification would be automatically presented to the world without the option to take it off as I would a cross necklace.

¹¹ For example, I expected that students who did not share my racial identity, like those in Ignite or MMSU, might have felt more hesitant to share their religious beliefs because they were unsure of my ability to empathize with or understand their experiences. Additionally, I anticipated that students might make assumptions about my own religious identity because of my race.

CHAPTER IV

“It’s Not Easy to be a Christian Here”: A Predominantly White Christian Student Group

Haven, a predominantly white Christian student organization at Michigan, is part of a nearly century-old effort by evangelical Christians to develop roots in universities. After the erratic behavior of prominent evangelical William Jennings Bryan in the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial tainted the public image of evangelicals¹² (Schmalzbauer, 2003), American evangelicals maintained a low public profile for a few decades, only to reemerge with a renewed commitment to become relevant to American public life. In 1942, over a hundred fifty delegates from thirty-four denominations met in St. Louis for the first annual meeting of what eventually became known as the National Association of Evangelicals. This meeting injected energy into a range of evangelical efforts, including Christian education. The number of evangelical Christian colleges grew drastically, and several campus-based ministry groups began supporting students and holding worship services on secular college and university campuses. The first campus evangelical organization, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, formed on the University of

¹² The Scopes Trial is a famous 1925 court case that addressed the teaching of evolution in state-funded schools in Tennessee. This case received tremendous national attention, akin to the O. J. Simpson trial of the mid-1990s. The defendant, John Scopes, was charged with violating a Tennessee law which prohibited the teaching of evolution in public schools. Scopes was defended by the famed defense attorney Clarence Darrow, and the state was represented by prominent evangelical William Jennings Bryan. Though Bryan won the case, his behavior during the trial promoted a stereotype of evangelicals as “backward, anti-intellectual, and intolerant” (Fletcher, 2013, p. 55).

Michigan campus in 1939, and others soon followed including, the Navigators (1949), Campus Crusade for Christ¹³ (1951) and International Students Fellowship (1953) (Schmalzbauer, 2003).

Since its founding, Haven has grown steadily and boasts a large membership with chapters on many U.S. college campuses. At the time of writing, Haven has several full and part-time professional staff, many of whom are responsible for coordinating activities across Michigan's various residence halls. Haven materials describe its core beliefs as centered on the story of Jesus Christ as revealed through the Bible, and emphasize the importance of believing in Christ to find redemption through the forgiveness of sin. These beliefs play out on campus largely through promotion of Haven's four main activities: (1) weekly men's and women's Bible studies, (2) a robust mentorship program, (3) regular evangelism efforts across campus, and (4) a weekly worship service.

For this study, fourteen Haven students were interviewed, thirteen participated in the two individual interviews and group discussion, and one only sat for the first individual interview and explained her schedule got in the way of completing the study. Nine men and five women participated, and, with the exception of two Chinese-American men, all participants were white. All identified as Christian prior to coming to college, though their commitment to their faith waned at varying points in their lives. When asked why they chose U-M as opposed to a Christian institution, most indicated that they had not seriously considered any Christian colleges and were instead attracted to Michigan's reputation, its strength in their particular academic program, proximity to family, and/or various financial benefits the institution offered.

The following sections describe the students' comments in three areas: (1) what being a Christian means to them, (2) what it is like being a Christian at Michigan, including how this

¹³ This group has since changed its name to Cru.

status influences their social and academic lives, and (3) the ways in which their identities influence how these students understand and negotiate their Christian identity at Michigan.

What Being Christian Means to Haven Students

All the students interviewed indicated that their faith was a profoundly important part of their lives. Derek described his faith as “everything.” For Felicity, “[My Christian faith] translates into every area in my life, because it’s the most important thing in my life.” Universally, Haven students described their faith as a source of great joy. Bill explained that when a person has a relationship with Christ “it just makes life extraordinary.” He described his faith as “freeing” and a source of “a whole lot of peace” and “joy.” David took comfort knowing that “God knows [and] wants what’s best for you.”

Each of the Haven students had their own unique take on what was involved in being a Christian, but generally agreed that it is important for Christians to uphold three core values or beliefs: Christians must (1) accept that everyone is “inherently sinful” (Derek) and “Jesus died for our sins,” (Mark) (2) “[believe] in the Gospel” (Bill) and (3) live in a way that “[glorifies] God” (Laura). Haven students recognized that each of these elements is deeply interrelated, and one can, for example, get instruction on how to best honor God through looking at the Gospel. Derek explained the Bible provides tools for negotiating sin and directions for living a life that “glorifies” God:

The Bible says [people are] inherently sinful like by nature [and] because of that they need a payment for their sins...and without a payment...people go to hell. [That is] kind of a radical thought I guess nowadays. But, Jesus provides the payment [for sin by dying on the cross], so...[a Christian should live in a way that] glorifies Him, which is laid out in the Bible with the Ten Commandments...and everything like that.

Like Derek, many Haven students looked to the Bible to provide some guidance in navigating college life. They were aware that the millennia between the birth of the Bible and today had led to a range of changes in the life of an 18- to 22-year-old. In order to best follow God and limit the intrusion of sin in their lives, Haven students followed strict codes of Christian behavior, some of which were encouraged by Haven staff and members (i.e. avoiding sex before marriage and drinking alcohol before age 21), and others they interpreted for themselves.

How these codes of conduct were understood varied a bit from student to student. Jared explained that for him living in a way that honored God meant, “doing my best in school...[aligning] my attitude and character to reflect what God has done for me, investing in others, caring about others, taking the opportunity to share my faith when it arises...[and] talking to my family about faith.” For Jared and other Haven students, aligning their “attitude and character” involved working hard to avoid the temptation of sin and address it when it arises. For Kevin and Laura, an important part of their faith was trying to change the way that they viewed others and engaged with their peers. Laura explained that for her this meant recognizing when she was “having judgment towards people or towards things” and “that those [views] aren’t glorifying [or] showing love to other individuals.” Kevin had worked to address racist beliefs within himself in order better connect with God: “I definitely had a lot of racist thoughts. Through coming to know Jesus, that changed into love...[but,] those were definitely bad behaviors and well, it just took an effect on my soul. I mean, how can life be good if you...are not loving your neighbor, or hating your neighbor?”

For Derek, as important, or nearly as important, as living a loving and non-judgmental life was “not drinking, not having sex and doing drugs and stuff like that.” David also highlighted the importance of upholding this set of Christian responsibilities: “I guess it’s like

the basic ones of being nice to people, and then there's some of the harder ones I guess in college for a lot of Christians...like not drinking underage. Which is something that's kind of tough."

Overwhelmed with the excitement of college life, Jason initially decided to "ignore" some of the expectations he had for himself as a Christian "for a year, 'cause...it's college!" Jason continued to describe some of his behavior during that year:

I would meet girls in class and get their number, and then come over and we'd make out and do all that kind of stuff...so that's what I would do. A lot of that...I didn't really curse much in high school, [but] I started...cussing all the time, like four letter words, you know, so a lot more, so just kind of stuff like that.

He suspected that for many college students this behavior was to be expected, but for him it was "un-normal behavior." Over time, he realized that he was "not [himself] anymore" and sought out Haven to serve as a support as he sought to live in greater alignment with his beliefs.

Not living up to the expectations of a Christian life could potentially exclude one as Christian in the eyes of Haven students. Jason found that he met students who said they were Christian, but later learned that they engaged in activities or held beliefs he viewed as disqualifying:

[When] I was in my freshman year, I found out [a friend] was a Christian. She went to the same church camp I did... [However,] I look at her beliefs on Facebook and what she posts [and] they are totally opposite of what I believe, like in everything. [That makes me think,] are you actually Christian?

Jason struggled to understand how others could have beliefs that are opposite of his own but still be Christian. He found this especially hard because he described himself as "so black and white on what I think is right." He ultimately settled on the idea that some of his peers may "accept

Jesus,” but “are just confused right now or lost.” Jason added that he believed “there is hope for them” to someday return to the kind of “black and white” understanding of acceptable Christian behavior and beliefs that guide his own decision making.

To Jason and many of the other Haven students, qualifying as a “true believer” required that a peer not only “accept Jesus”, but that he or she hold particular social views (i.e. opposition to abortion rights and marriage equality) and beliefs (i.e. creationism), in addition to upholding a number of behavioral expectations (abstaining from drinking and sex). Passing this Christian litmus test meant avoiding the partying and drinking that is often a dominant part of campus life, and holding views that study participants believed were more conservative than many of their progressive peers.

Haven students believed that maintaining conservative Christian beliefs was not an easy task in a “very, very liberal” town like Ann Arbor (Jason), and in classes where most students are “pretty liberal” (Laura). They regularly deployed the term “liberal” to describe institutions, policies, people or locations that did not have anything in common with them and with which they could not find common ground. Both Ann Arbor and Michigan were viewed as “liberal” both in politics (i.e. supporting abortion and marriage equality) and in the behavioral choices of their students and community members (i.e. engaging in sex and underage drinking), so the generally more conservative beliefs of Haven members meant that these students often stood out. Feeling little in common with the Ann Arbor and Michigan communities, Haven members believed that maintaining their beliefs often meant taking on a kind of martyr status to maintain their faith in the midst of the hostile environment.

Haven students suspected that while many Christians on campus attend Christmas and Easter services, the number of “true believers” (Jason) or people who “actually [know what it

means to] follow Christ” (Bill) was “probably very, very few” (Eileen). When without the company of their Haven peers, Haven students believed that they were often the only Christian in a classroom or attending a campus event. Kevin explained that he was “well aware” that he could be “one of two or one of three” Christian students in a class, if not the only one. When I asked various group discussions to estimate the percentage of these “true” Christians at Michigan, most believed it was not more than five to ten percent. The students’ approximation varies significantly from the data collected by the University. According to a 2016 University campus climate survey, approximately 42% students identify as Christian (University of Michigan, 2016).¹⁴ However, it is likely that most of those students would not meet many of the Haven students’ exacting standards.

Michigan’s Influence on Haven Students’ Faith Presentation and Engagement

In response to believing that they were small in number on U-M’s campus, Haven students thought a lot about how they engaged with their secular campus environment, and described Michigan as influencing how they presented and engaged with their faith in a number of ways. In both the individual interviews and in the group discussions, students agreed that being a Christian on campus came with a number of challenges that forced them to make decisions about when and how they shared their faith with others. These challenges generally fell into one of two categories. First, Haven students perceived an incongruity between their values, particularly around secularism, sex, and LGBTQ relationships, and those of the University and its progressive staff, faculty and students. Second, they expressed concern about the limits the

¹⁴ This number is comprised of the following religious categories from the survey: Baptist (1.5%), Catholic (19.3%), Christian: Non-Denominational (10.4%), Eastern Orthodox (1.1%), Episcopalian (0.7%), LDS (Mormon, 0.8%), Lutheran (2.1), Methodist (2.3), Presbyterian (1.7%), Protestant: Non-Denominational (1.0%), Seventh Day Adventist (0.4%), and Other Christian (0.7%) (University of Michigan, 2016).

University put on their evangelism practices, and the implications for how best to represent the Christian faith to others on a secular campus.

Haven members recognized that they were on a campus that valued diversity and tried to make students of a range of identities feel welcome, but felt that religion was rarely included or even acknowledged in these diversity efforts. In a group discussion, Eileen, Laura and Bill agreed that religion is, as Eileen expressed, “skipped over” in conversations about identity on campus. Bill explained this point further, “Honestly, [I’ve] felt like my...faith and my religion has been sort of ignored by the University...it seems like it’s not something that the University considers very valuable.” As evidence, students cited how rarely religion was addressed in classroom or included in University initiatives.

Although frustrated by Michigan’s dismissal of religion, the study participants were not surprised by it. Many Haven students sought admissions and enrolled as students fully aware of what Brian called Michigan’s “super secular culture.” “Where I am from,” Mark explained, “the University of Michigan is completely seen as secular, non-religious, very scientific, and atheist. You are going to go there and you are going to become a liberal and it’s [likely that] you are going to stop believing.” The belief that attending college will cause a student to “stop believing” is common in Evangelical circles and is the subject of numerous books and movies from Evangelical presses and production houses. For example, a prominent Evangelical Christian publishing house, NavPress, has numerous books on the topic of maintaining Christian faith in an anti-Christian college environment. The most well-known of this series is aptly entitled, *How to Stay Christian in College*. The popular Evangelical film, *God’s Not Dead*, profiled several undergraduates’ struggles to cope with secular campus life. This broader culture conditions Evangelical undergraduates to expect secular universities to be openly opposed to their Christian

beliefs. Organizations like Haven serve as places to gather and recharge in order to face what they perceive as a combative campus environment.

Professing their Christian faith on a “secular, non-religious, very scientific, and atheist” (Mark) campus was challenging. “It’s not easy to be a Christian here,” Katie bemoaned, “So, if you are going to be a Christian...it’s going to come [with a] cost...[and] people in my classes are going to think my views are weird.” That “cost” was spread throughout their experiences as a student, ranging from their classes, to their social life, to the various stereotypes of Christians that floated around campus. I take a closer look at Haven students’ experiences negotiating their faith in their classes, overall campus life, and in their various attempts evangelizing on campus in the following sections.

Classes

Across the group discussions, students agreed that “[talking] about your identity as a Christian [in a class] can feel kind of uncomfortable” (Katie). Mark was often surprised to find a fellow Christian in an academic setting “because of this huge separation between church and state.” He added that if faith comes up, it is often a bit awkward:

[Bringing] up faith in a classroom can sometimes feel like...you know at the dinner table, you don’t talk about religion and politics, it’s almost like the same thing in the classroom. You know, those are two things that you really can’t touch upon or talk about, unless you are in a religion class. Even when you’re in a religion class, you can [only] talk about [religion] from an objective point of view, and not from, “My opinion about this is ...” [or] “I believe this.”

Brian presumed that faculty and students in his humanities and social sciences courses “have pretty staunch views in some way about religion” and felt that these views can make it “a lot

more uncomfortable to be a Christian in that atmosphere.” Both Mark and Brian believed that talking about their Christian faith was unwelcome in the classroom, unless they approached it “from an objective point of view.”

There was a common belief in the group that Christians were perceived as anti-intellectual, and that belief in the Bible is irrational. David observed “a lot of people see...Christianity [as], ‘Oh you believe in ghosts and stuff like that – pretty much like the supernatural stuff, that [is] not backed up by science so you must not actually be very smart.’” He added that his peers have occasionally expressed shock in his belief in various Bible stories: “I [have] definitely heard things like...’Wow really like you believe that [Bible story]...that doesn’t make any sense!’” He added that other students believe that he must not have “a good science and math background” because if he did then he would believe in evolution and “these things that everyone else believes.” Jason described similar experiences, noting that while others are assumed to have come to their beliefs through reason, Christians are not. He explained, “If I am agnostic or an atheist-conservative, they are going to be like, ‘You came at the conclusion, whatever.’ But if I am a Christian, ‘You must have been taught that. You’ve literally been brain-washed.’”

Dismay over having certain beliefs be dismissed as irrational or unintelligent was a point of concern in the group discussion. In one group discussion, Derek described feeling “persecuted” for believing in the Genesis creation story:

I think for me, believing that God created the world or not believing in macro-evolution¹⁵...people just think you are an idiot...I guess that’s one of the main things, as

¹⁵ Macroevolution describes significant evolutionary change over time, whereas microevolution refers to small changes from one generation to another. This distinction is often an important one for creationists who sometimes accept microevolution and recognize that certain traits can be

far as my faith, that I guess people would judge harshly is like you actually don't believe that the earth is billions of years old...or, you actually believe that the God created the earth. I guess that's something that people are saying, "Why are you just denying scientific evidence and...evolution obviously is a proven theory?" ...So, I think that can be one way that Christians, people who believe in creation, are persecuted on campus.

For Derek, part of being a Christian means believing in the creation story, so those who would not consider his perspectives on evolution were essentially rejecting his faith.

Disbelief in evolution was a frequent source of tension between Haven students and their peers and faculty. David reported taking a few classes where the instructor was "operating under the assumption that...everything about evolution is true" and "if you don't [believe in evolution] then you are out of your mind." Laura's recalled similar conversations in classes where shared belief in evolution was assumed, and was disappointed by this "closed off view" that "shuts down other people's views [on creation]." She added that when she encounters these attitudes in classes she avoids sharing her opinions on class topics, fearful of how she will be perceived.

Though students generally agreed that mention of Christianity was minimal outside of classes explicitly on the Bible or Christianity, they also reported that when Christianity or religion did come up, combative views outnumbered expressions of support. As an engineering major, Jared had only "minimal experiences" of religion being discussed in the classroom, but when was mentioned in class it was in the form of "offhanded comments to make obvious that

bred into populations, but oppose macroevolution. The Alpha Omega Institute (AOI), a pro-creationism organization that describes itself as, "a worldwide educational outreach dedicated to strengthening Christians and reaching others by teaching the truth about science, exposing the problems of evolutionary worldviews, and defending the accuracy of the Bible beginning with the Creation Account in Genesis" (Alpha Omega Institute, n.d.). AOI seeks to counter the idea macro and microevolution are two interconnected processes, but instead suggest that macroevolution "denies the Creator," while microevolution "shows the infinite creative genius behind the wonderful variety that we see in life" (Alpha Omega Institute, 2005).

the professor doesn't believe that God exists, and [that the professor thinks] it would be foolish to assume otherwise or think otherwise." Laura explained that she has had "some encounters in classes where professors or students have made light of or said things that I disagree with about Christianity, or they shined what to me is a false light on it." Laura recalled a professor in a humanities class making light of a historical figure's dedication to Catholicism and desire to serve God: "[The professor] made a joke about [the historical figure] and...made it seem like [following God is] really not an important goal to have. I think that's a great goal to have."

Kevin remembered a professor in a large introductory course telling a large lecture hall full of students that "people don't have souls." He explained, "I, obviously being a Christian, totally disagreed with that," and continued, "that's clearly anti-religious teaching, and [in front of a] class [that is] probably [one of the] most widely taken in the University." He found particularly frustrating that the professor did not premise her statement as opinion: "What she didn't say was, 'I don't believe people have souls.' She said, 'People don't have souls.' Obviously, I didn't like that. I didn't feel it was super-welcoming."

He recalled another instance in a humanities course that included a lesson on early Christianity. When his graduate student instructor (GSI) asked the class, "What is the main message of Christianity?," Kevin remembered saying something that was "pretty close to [the] Orthodox-Christian belief is that it's to serve God or to recognize Jesus as God, or something like that. [The GSI] said, 'No, it's to be a good person.'" Her confidence took Kevin aback:

The thing is, I am pretty sure GSI was Catholic. She went to Georgetown. Some people can be Catholic and it isn't necessarily close to their heart...I don't know if she necessarily knew I was Christian. She could probably get some hints, but I was just like, are you telling me what the Christianity's main message is?!...I did tell people in Haven

about that. I said, guess what one of my GSIs told me the main message of Christianity was? Which obviously most, if not all practicing Christians, would really disagree with that message.

For Kevin, this GSI's assertion was doubly problematic. First, he disagreed with her assessment of Christianity. Second, he made judgments about her faith based on her background and her words led him to question her commitment to her faith – that if she was Catholic her faith was not “necessarily close to [her] heart.” The fact that Kevin suspected that she identified as Christian was not enough; she did not meet the expectations of a “true believer” (Jason).

As a music student, Felicity spent a large portion of her undergraduate years participating in performances. Though she loved studying music, the culture at the music school regularly made her uncomfortable. The expectations of music theater performance were sometimes at odds with her Christian commitments: “there is like this kind of overall view [that in the arts] there is really no moral standards, so...like nudity on the stage sometimes and stuff and people say, ‘Oh it’s art; you can do whatever.’ I [think] no that’s wrong.” In classes that examined modern art she felt that “there is no moral compass anymore...there is so much sexualized stuff and [people] trying to be as ridiculous as possible.” She attributed the music school’s “lack of moral compass” to the fact that most members of the music school community are “very secular” and “there are so many weirdoes in music and so you just expect to be surrounded by crazy.” As evidence of the music school’s secularity, she explained that an opera performance was once scheduled over Easter weekend, preventing her and other interested Christian students from traveling home for the holiday and inhibiting their practice of their faith.

Study participants recalled a few positive interactions with faculty who disclosed their own Christian beliefs to individual students or a class as a whole. Despite these occasional

encouraging experiences, Haven students believed that Christian faculty and GSIs were rare, and that the classroom was more predictably a place of religious hostility than support.

Campus life

Haven students developed a range of strategies to justify their choices to non-religious peers. Explaining to their peers why they weren't going to a given party was an art that Haven students honed over their years in college. For Felicity, and many of the other Haven students, those conversations generally went pretty smoothly. Other students in Felicity's major would gather every year for a party. She explained her decision not to attend this way, "Everyone just goes and gets drunk out of their minds and crazy and I never go, because why would I go? It's not fun." When asked by others in her major why she doesn't attend, her response reflected her confidence in her decision:

I am not really apologetic about it or anything. So, it's like "I am not going to do that." So, they are like, "Cool," and they are really nice, lovely people. So, they are not like, "Why not? You should," because I try to be kind and accepting...and so...they are fine with it. I guess at first, they were like, "Why wouldn't you do this?" But they know me...I feel like personally, I am not too easily influenced. I am strong-willed.

Like Felicity, Derek's sports teammates regularly partied. He developed a stock response to offer when asked why he was not interested in participating:

Usually I just say, "Actually, it's not something I like to do," or something like that and most of the time they are like, "Oh, that's cool" or whatever. [If they] ask why [I don't party] then I'll go into, "Well, I...have these kind of moral standards [and] I am a Christian, so I just believe that that thing is wrong. [I am not] judging you guys for [partying] or anything, but I just choose not to"...people normally take that really well,

and...think, "Oh, that's really cool you do that." So, I don't run into too much [resistance] from giving that explanation.

Derek believed that his "moral standards" were correct, but accepted without "judging" that his teammates had different standards.

More contentious for these students than differences in choices around drinking, was Michigan's "secular culture" (Mark) colliding with their Christian beliefs. One issue that came up several times was what they perceived as Michigan's lack of concern regarding how included Christian students felt on campus. Kevin was frustrated by what he saw as the inconsistency of the University's efforts to promote diversity: "There is a lot of diversity celebrated [on campus], whether it's ethnic or different genders, women and men, just a lot of different ways. I don't feel religious diversity is celebrated." He had seen efforts to encourage students to "use words that aren't going to make people feel uncomfortable or discriminated against, derogatory, racial terms, saying something like, 'That's gay,' as a way to be bad." Kevin observed that notably absent from these efforts was any encouragement of the University not to use language about Christians in a flippant or pejorative manner: "One thing they never talked about, which is prominent, is if people use Jesus Christ in a derogatory way. Now, when you use someone's Messiah in a derogatory way, it doesn't make them [feel] too good." Kevin believed Jesus Christ's name was used in a dismissive manner far more commonly than "racial terms or epithets, or just talking about ethnic groups or women in a demeaning way." The absence of the University's concern over language that he perceived as harmful to Christians led him to conclude that Michigan's "inclusiveness only went to so far."

Haven students were especially troubled by the University's LGBTQ inclusion efforts, and wished that their campus was more open to the view that being LGBTQ is, to use Kevin's

words, not “morally legitimate.” “The University is very open and vocal in support of the LGBTQ community, which is fine in and of itself,” Kevin explained, “but it doesn’t seem like they are necessarily open to other ideas, and as Christians, we don’t think [being LGBTQ is] morally legitimate. We don’t dislike the LGBTQ community, but we also don’t feel like it’s very welcome to say, ‘We don’t think that’s morally right,’ and not receive a hostile reaction.” Kevin understood the University’s stance, but was disappointed that the campus doesn’t “seem to be open to dissenting opinions” and is unwelcoming to his views. Mark believed that U-M appeared to be advocating for LGBTQ students more so than other identity groups, “Honestly, it seems like the number one minority group. We talk about LGBTQ [people] more than we talk about race, more than we talk about religion.”

Not all of the students interviewed were unsupportive of LGBTQ people. Katie explained that her “sister is gay” and that she “want[s] rights for her, and things like that. I feel like my views are pretty tolerant.” However, Katie found that when her peers heard that she was a Christian, they were uninterested in hearing her “opinions about things,” she added, “Someone could have the same exact opinions as me, they’d still not want to hear my opinions.” In a group discussion, Katie indicated that if she has a personal relationship with someone, they are often supportive of her Christian faith, but “as a general group of people on campus, we are seen as pushy or judgmental...I do sometimes feel like there is – like everyone else can speak and share their opinions, and say whatever they want, but if you are a Christian, you kind of have to keep quiet about your opinions, if they are different.” Felicity agreed, noting that particular “moral” beliefs often lead others to judge her for being Christian:

I feel that people are fine with knowing you are Christian, but when that starts affecting your moral beliefs on things, there can be political issues. Then they dock you. I’ve had

that happen with someone in the music school or...“You’re Christian? It’s great,” but then when you believe this, this and this, it’s like, “Uh-oh,” and you are intolerant. Jason added, “As soon as your beliefs clash with their beliefs, it becomes inconvenient for them...as long as we stay out of everyone’s way, we’re fine, but as soon as we start doing stuff, we start to tick off the wrong people.”

These tensions arose in and outside the classroom around places where Haven students’ beliefs diverged from widely accepted scientific ideas, like evolution, and study participants often students found themselves on opposite sides of their peers, instructors and university administrators on issues like abortion and support of gay and lesbian relationships. In classes where there was a significant focus on identity, Mark noticed that conversations would frequently shift towards the importance of “advocating for LGBTQ rights” and “I think as a Christian in the classroom, kind of having the view of I want people to be able to do what they want to do, of course, but if it’s not the thing that I want to be advocating for the most, I think that should be okay and encouraged, and it’s just not.” Jason observed that others believed he opposed marriage equality for LGBTQ people because he was “brain-washed” and was uncritical of Christian dogma:

[As a Christian,] I have to believe that marriage is between a man and a woman because the Bible says so, and my parents told me that, and my grandparents believed that. That’s what I have to believe. So, I think that’s an assumption that people have. Yes, that’s what my parents believe and all that, but that’s what I believe too. My faith is my own...I believe that because that’s what I believe, it’s not that I am brain-washed.

Jason believed that his opposition to marriage equality led him to not only contend with frequent disagreements with his peers on the subject, but risk being dismissed as unintelligent for his views. Like Mark, Jason found there was little room for a difference of opinion.

Felicity knew that her objection to a number of social issues, like marriage equality and abortion, risked that she would be seen by her peers as “intolerant” and “unloving.” Christians, like her, “claim to know what the truth is” and part of that “truth” is understanding that in order to avoid sin, it is important to uphold particular codes of conduct, such as not engaging in LGBTQ relationships and abstaining from sex before marriage. She believed that “everyone else’s popular opinion” was in favor of a kind of free for all, where whims guided decision making where people would do “whatever works for you, [and] whatever you are feeling.” In her view, the “anything goes” approach to life that she believed was held by most of her peers was “not loving.” Felicity recognized that by objecting to people doing simply “whatever works for [them]” she risked being seen as “intolerant because we have these beliefs that might not approve of a lifestyle or something.” When I asked if she could think of an instance where she thought she was seen as intolerant by others at Michigan, she responded: “Probably I am sure, I mean [U-M advocates] for gay rights, [and] I would be not for gay rights. So, they would I am sure see that as unloving.” Felicity appeared to think that it was unfortunate that her peers often viewed her beliefs as “unloving,” but viewed their “anything goes” approach as especially unloving, and was unmotivated to change her perspectives on topics such as “gay rights.”

Perceptions of Christian students were not all negative, and the participants agreed that Haven students have what Felicity called the “nice factor.” Mark recalled having a conversation with a stranger in student union who said, “One thing that I really love about people at Haven...is they are just really nice. I think that might still be our reputation around campus,”

Mark smiled, “which is like the same concept with Jesus. Even if people disagreed with what he believed, people still couldn’t argue with his good works...I think it’s a cool thing to be a part of.”

Despite challenges, the participants were happy with their decision to attend Michigan and were proud to attend. Though the students had various degrees of commitment to Haven, they described loving the Christian community at Michigan and that Christians made up the majority of their friend-group. Jared explained that he’s “loved being a Christian [at Michigan], because I found the best community I’ve ever been a part of, many of the best friends I’ve ever had and I get to live with them, go to class with a lot of them, [and] I see them all multiple times a week. It’s just in a very like positive spiritual environment.”

The Haven students appreciated that their faith provided them with tools to cope with the challenges of college life that their peers lacked. Bill recalled that he had seen “a lot of non-Christian students really finding a lot of [their] identity in academics, but when things don’t go well...they really get down and it really crushes them.” He continued, “So, as a Christian it’s cool to recognize [and] to be reminded that as a Christian I found my identity in Christ and that when bad things happen I am not going to get crushed, because my ultimate identity in purposes in Him and it really sets me free to be able to fail in other aspects of life.” Bill’s faith had given him a different mindset and approach to campus life, and found it “really sad to see other students who don’t have that kind of foundation in that [Christian] identity...[it’s] almost like [non-Christian students are] enslaved by academics and by social life and all these other things that are going to happen in college.” Several other Haven students expressed similar sentiments and used their faith to ground them to cope with stress and adapt to the various ups and downs of

college life. Feeling the security that comes with having Christianity to ground their time on campus, Haven students were eager to share their faith with others.

Evangelizing

Membership in a Christian minority group came with a set of responsibilities. Namely, the study participants believed that they were responsible for representing Christianity positively to others and encouraging others to join them as “true believers” (Jason). Jason’s non-Christian friends knew that he was Christian, so he made an extra effort to represent Christians well and not to swear in the presence of his peers. In one student organization he is involved with, he recalled being asked to pick up something heavy and thought “I am like, ‘Pick up the f-ing thing,’ and [then I think] that’s not good...you’ve got to watch yourself sometimes in situations. I just think people are always watching you [as a Christian].” Katie similarly sought to be a “good reference point” for her peers and hoped that they would see in her a model of a strong Christian.

Beyond simply representing Christianity through their behavior, direct evangelizing comprised a notable portion of all the study participants’ time at Michigan. Evangelizing took a number of forms, from individual conversations between students and their peers to more organized efforts that involved approaching other students in prominent areas on campus. Though engaging strangers in a conversation about faith was stressful, all the study participants were highly motivated to try. Watching her non-Christian peers struggle over the various challenges that came with college life made Eileen sad, but these circumstances also provided her with numerous opportunities to teach them about the joy she found in her faith:

It’s always sad because we do not like to see non-Christian students getting upset about things that we hopefully wouldn’t get that upset about, but we have the opportunity to

show them how we have been changed and...reach out to them. So, it's a good opportunity to minister to other people.

One relatively easy strategy of sharing Haven with others was to mention it when they were asked about their involvement in campus activities. Jason explained, “[When someone asks] what are you up to this weekend or whatever, I mention that I am doing something with Haven...[and try to] spark more of a conversation and create more of an awareness.”

Michigan was well aware of Haven's evangelizing practices and sought to curtail their efforts in the residence halls. Several participants explained that Haven students used to be able to knock on doors in the residence halls and invite them to Bible studies in the building. However, overtime their access to the residence halls was restricted. Bill explained the change in policy this way: “[We used to be able] to go through the dorms and just knock on people's doors...and introduce ourselves and get to know them and invite them to Haven stuff, but then last year...a [resident assistant] got frustrated with us for doing it.” Shortly afterwards U-M added a policy which prevented them from recruiting in dorms unless they live there or are accompanied by a student who does. This restriction, Katie sighed, “kind of poses a challenge.”

Mark, Katie, Jason, Felicity and Derek's group discussion deliberated whether these restrictions of their activity in the dorms was a sign that they were, as Jason and Mark said, on the “University's radar.” Jason recalled an instance where Haven had been asked to move their large weekly gatherings out of their typical room in the student union in order to accommodate a “pro-abortion” event. To Jason, being asked to move for an abortion event “pissed [him] off” because “even if it wasn't intentionally attacking us, it seemed like it.” Mark's disagreed that being asked to move for a University event was a slight against Haven: “It could have been just an event that was pushed by the University and so, if the University has academic advising

session in [a room in the student union], it's like whatever student organization is in there, they're going to find a new place for them. I don't think it's really – actually, our relationship with the [student] union...is pretty good.” There was some variation of opinion on what their restrictions in the residence halls and having their events moved signaled about Haven's broader relationship with the University. What was clear was that Michigan's support of Haven and their activity was not presumed by all participants.

The Intersection of Christianity and Other Aspects of Identity for Haven Students

All study participants were asked to discuss what identities, other than their religious identity, were important to their understanding of themselves. With limited exceptions, when I asked Haven students about identities other than their Christian identity that were meaningful to them, they discussed a range of personal preferences and relationships, but avoided social identities, such as race and gender. Felicity and Laura described themselves as a “daughter and friend.” Jason proudly declared that he saw himself as a “very patriotic” and “God-fearing American.” Jared, Derek and David discussed enjoying playing and watching sports as important parts of their identity. If other social identities came up, they were often in the periphery. For example, Jared responded, “I'm me, that's the big one. I guess I'm a Michigan student, which is cool...I'm male, but I don't really think about other identities...I mean I identify as athletic, if that counts.” Here Jared's gender is an afterthought, certainly less vital to his understanding of himself than being a Michigan student. Though social identities were not central to these students' understanding of themselves, they strongly impacted how they saw themselves and understood their faith, and how they interacted with other Christians and the University as a whole.

White Christianity as “Us”

Haven’s predominantly white membership factored into some participants’ decision to join the group. Felicity visited a few Christian organizations before settling on Haven, and avoided another Christian group because it “is all Asian, basically.” This desire to join a largely white Christian organization was not held exclusively by white students. David, a Chinese American, sought out a largely white Christian student group, over one of the many predominately East Asian Christian organizations on campus. When asked why, he explained:

My brother and sister are both heavily involved in [a large predominately East Asian Christian organization] neither of them did Haven... I came from high school that’s predominantly white so I always felt super comfortable around Caucasians in general and less comfortable around a predominantly Asian population I guess. So, I never really considered [a large predominately East Asian Christian organization] that much...I don’t really specifically look for that kind of community.

In both cases, Haven’s largely white membership helped attract David and Felicity to Haven, and gave them the opportunity to be around people whose race and faith were familiar. Their comments highlight the fact that relationships between Haven members are not only based in common belief, but those beliefs must present themselves in a particularly raced package.

Brian, the other Chinese American participant, saw the relationship between his Chinese American identity and his faith a bit differently from David. He explained that he hadn’t specifically sought out a primarily white Christian group, but was attracted to Haven because “they just advertise the most.” Brian recalled that his faith had been “the main source of targeting” against him in his rural Michigan hometown, but thankfully, “that hasn’t been an

experience [he's] had at U-of-M." Since being at Michigan, Brian started to see his race and faith as tools that he could employ to help connect with students:

I think [my identity as an Asian American and a Christian] are helpful...given that I can relate to a student based on one or two of those things so I feel like they are definitely more apt to hear what I have to say. I mean I don't think the identities particularly advantage me but I think like they definitely set up different networks to which I might share my faith.

Brian was well-aware that he stood out in Haven, which is "about 90% white" and he could only name "a handful of students that are Asian American" in the group. He mentioned that Haven had a few of what he called "contextualized ministries" including a group for "African American students...one for international students, and one for South Asian [students] and they are trying to start one for East Asian or Asian American [students]." It appeared that the efforts to build an "East Asian or Asian American" ministry group had stalled, but Brian remained "was ready to jump on board...if that had taken place." When asked to reflect on the relationship between his Asian American and Christian identity, Brian explained that he might have a "better perspective" on the experience of being an Asian American in Haven, but "given that it's so predominantly white I don't really feel the impact of being an Asian American." Unlike David and Felicity, Brian didn't seek out a predominantly white Christian organization, but Haven's largely white membership minimized his connection to his race, or as Brian put it, being in Haven meant that he did not feel the "impact of being an Asian American."

The relationship between whiteness and the experience of being a Christian on campus was a significant focus of conversation in Derek, Jason, Mark, Felicity and Katie's group discussion. Derek, Jason and Felicity were frustrated by the University's efforts to respond to a

range of racist and Islamophobic epithets that were shared on campus through flyers and chalk messages on walkways in the weeks surrounding the 2016 presidential election. They did not object to the fact that the University reacted, but believed that the University would not have done so if there were a similar attack against Christians or white people.

After a series of racist flyers were posted across campus, the music school held a gathering for students to discuss their feelings and share resources. Felicity believed that her school would have never responded with such force if someone posed flyers on campus that she found offensive to Christians or white people:

You know that would not happen if someone did this for Christians or white people.

There is a Black Lives Matter sign, [and signs that say] Blackness is Life, Blackness is Joy and Blackness is Love [in the music school buildings]. I am white; do I not have love, joy and life or whatever? You know, so if you put whiteness is, or Christianity is...all that stuff, people get mad. I just think that's crazy.

Jason responded in agreement:

I get that and the University has resources [for black students] to help them out. I am saying that if something happened to us, they don't have resources for us...they wouldn't blatantly come out and say, "Christians, you are feeling X, Y and Z. You can go here and do that." No, they'll do it for everyone else, but I don't think they'll do it for us, and that's my concern. I am not saying there is a problem with Black Lives and all that. I am just saying that if we were targeted and I think we will be targeted, probably, one day, whether here or somewhere else...the University would respond differently if it were us.

For Felicity and Jason, whiteness and Christianity are strongly linked and that people who hold them share the unique experience of being marginalized by the University on two fronts, for their

faith and their race. They see these two identities, which they both hold, as ones the University has abandoned.

Not all the members of the group discussion agreed with Jason and Felicity's assertion that the University's support for black students was excessive or signaled lack of support for white Christian students. Mark recalled that the previous year he was one of nine Haven men who lived in a house together, two of his housemates were students of color. He explained that they were all "super close," however, "just thinking back on those two [students of color] living in the house, I could tell how much their identities even just mattered in the house that we lived in, and they felt the fact that they were the only two minority students." Mark realized that minority status affected his two housemates of color: "When no one around you looks like you that you can begin to believe, 'I don't belong.' ...I think being a minority...can alter your political views a little bit. I know both of [the students of color in my house] are more the left-leaning in the house, even though it's a house of Christians."

Katie's response to Jason and Felicity's comments was more direct. Katie reminded the group that one's "sinful nature" can lead to "implicit biases against people of other races, things that we don't want to admit." She argued that it is important to recognize that there is a "difference between the oppression that we face being Christian, which is pretty much nothing, compared to the experiences of some black students at our University. The pain that they are experiencing is very real." She added that Jason and Felicity's concern that in the future there could be an attack against white Christian students was unwarranted:

For the most part, our experiences have been good and stuff, but then when you compare that to some of the experiences of black students on our campus, I think that you'd hear really different things...I think that it's extremely valid that people can have a time to

talk about how that's impacting them, because if there were racial slurs against us, we would hope that there would be a space to talk about it too, but there isn't, as far as I've experienced. So, I feel like it's really legitimate to have that for black students on campus.

Here Katie speaks to the oppression they experience as Christians, which is "pretty much nothing" and quickly shifts to exploring the possibility of "racial slurs against us." The "us" here could refer to the all-white group discussion, or the all-white Christian group discussion. Overall, Katie's comments highlight the close link between whiteness and Christianity for her and the other group discussion students.

Gendered expectations as key to within group relationships

Jared named his gender as influential to his understanding of himself only as an afterthought, however, gender plays a significant role in how Haven is organized and how students think about their Christian identity and relationship with other Christians. Study participants explained that they understand men and women to have distinct and complementary roles. Kevin described these roles this way:

Biblically, it's clear that men and women act differently and what they do will be different. Not that it's lesser, but being a man is definitely different than being a woman... We are also supposed to be initiators and leaders within the Christian community. It's good for women to do things, but men should really be stepping up and doing things, whether... it's leading and not making our sisters do it. So, I suppose in a lot of ways, for me that means being bold, being willing to do things I am uncomfortable with.

Though Kevin was careful to clarify that it is “good for women to do things,” he believed that men should be the “initiators and leaders” in an effort to spare women from taking on those roles.

Clarifying men’s and women’s roles was a frequent topic of conversation among Haven members. The off-campus house of nine Haven men that Mark mentioned, was referred to as “the manhood,” a joking but telling illustration of the importance of gender distinctions to Haven members. Mark recalled that he was involved in one Bible study that discussed who a “Biblical man is” and “what it means to be a man.” Like Kevin, Mark agreed that men are charged with being the “initiators with things” and should seize opportunities to “step up.” As an example of this practice, Mark explained that when groups he was involved with ran into the evening, he would tell women present that he would “love to walk [them] home.” For Mark, the fact that any women he was with would want an evening walk home was presumed, so by asserting that he planned to walk any women home believed he spared women from “coming to us” and having to ask to be accompanied. Mark added that he views “men as caretakers of communities,” and walking women home at night was an example of this caretaking. This caretaking and initiator role extended to Mark’s romantic relationships:

[As a man, I] see myself as...being one of the initiators for setting what’s normal.

Usually, it’s the man that asks to go on a date and sets the tone for the date, and sets the tone for how he is going to treat her, and...even sometimes what we are going to talk about. Not that the female can’t set the tone, but I would see it as the man’s responsibility to ask her, “How are you doing? How is your relationship with God? What’s difficult lately?” Instead of waiting for her to open up about that.

For both Mark and Kevin, men were called to serve as “initiators” (Kevin & Mark) and “leaders” (Kevin) in relationships with women. Though women were given the option “do things” (Kevin) and “set the tone” (Mark) in conversation, women’s primary role was to respect men’s lead.

Though following men was a large part of how the men in the study described the role of women, the women interviewed highlighted different aspects of their identity and relationship with men. Katie and Beth believed that Christian women were celebrated in Christian life. Katie noted that she found joy in what her faith tells her about being a woman: “I love what Christianity tells me about who I am as a woman. I’m a treasured daughter of God and that He has like created me to be beautiful...God has affirmed like my identity as a woman and that’s a great part of about being a Christian.” Beth pointed to the places in the Gospels where Jesus engaged with women in a “radical” way:

[Jesus] was a radical in the way that he treated women, in that he treated them with much more respect, and much more honor. For instance, when Jesus rose from the dead women were the first ones who found him, which if you’re trying to tell a convincing story doesn’t make a lot of sense, because women weren’t seen as reputable sources of information at the time, but God saw value as a woman.

To Katie and Beth, being a Christian woman was seen as a kind of precious or “treasured” status.

The women interviewed believed in distinct roles for men and women. Felicity explained that though she “loves guy friends and hanging out with them...guys and girls are different.”

Beth described these differences this way: “God made both men and women in His own image, so men and women are equal, but we are also made with different abilities and talents.

Obviously, men can’t give birth, so I need to be a woman to do that.” Beth objected to the

stereotype of Christian women as “married to the pastor, very submissive in like the negative sense, and that is not at all what I think a Christian woman should be.” Instead, she continued,

A Christian woman is filled with the Holy Spirit, which is the power of God. A Christian woman is fierce and fights and speaks truth. But, because she is a woman, she is equipped to have children and have a family. So, she can have both the fire of God and the passion, but also understand gentleness and the beauty in a way that is different than men can. Men are a little more the power and the fighting, whereas women are like the soft fighting, that undercurrent...so being a Christian woman is being just as strong as men, but understanding that her strength manifest in different ways.

For Beth, the various traits of men and women she described are strongly linked to her identity as a Christian, in other words, her experience as a Christian and a woman are intertwined.

Beth explained that she identifies as a feminist, “but not in the more traditional sense”:
Being a feminist to me it means fighting for the value of women, but the negative feminism is when it gets flopped like kind of a revenge thing, like saying I don’t think women should dominate, we should pull ourselves back to an equal playing field. As a feminist, I identify as someone who fights for women’s rights and women’s role, but fights for the accurate role, rather than the skewed role.

When asked what she meant by “the accurate role,” Beth responded that women should be “equal with men, equal but different.”

Being a “beautiful” and “treasured daughter of God” (Katie) and “equal but different” to men (Beth) came with responsibilities. Laura believed that she and other Christian women are responsible for controlling men’s “temptations” for sex. She explained, “I don’t want to...be a temptation or cause someone to focus more on me than on God... [I try to be] aware of what I

am wearing and I try and be conservative and modest and everything.” She added that it was important for her to watch her “emotional boundaries” with men:

Just with friendships with guys, just making sure that we are not crossing emotional boundaries and telling each other too much or that might be seen as something that you will share in a relationship. Because I am in a relationship too and so I am very cautious about making sure that I am not too close with any males, because I don’t want to feel worried about that. But I think that goes with even if I wasn’t in a relationship. I wouldn’t want to cross any emotional boundaries and share too much with someone and get too close without being in a relationship.

In other words, Laura saw it as her responsibility to control the emotional and physical level of the relationships she had with men, through dressing modestly and sharing “too much” with men with whom she is not romantically involved.

The distinct roles for men and women, described by several Haven members, limit the types of relationships they can have with one another, and suggests that platonic relationships between men and women are difficult, if not impossible. David said that he used to believe that it was possible for “guys and girls to have deep relationship[s] [without] attraction,” however, he has since changed his view:

[If you trust] a person a lot you are going to be having deep conversations. And just having those with someone else like makes you feel a certain sense of...vulnerability with that person... [It is] a lot more difficult to not be attracted to other people that you are being vulnerable with.

Like Laura, David was concerned that attraction between men and women was a near inevitable result of “deep conversations.” Accordingly, relationships with another gender must be watched closely in order to avoid inadvertently becoming romantic.

In order to find respite from navigating these complex relationships between men and women, several Haven activities were divided by gender. Weekly Bible studies and mentorship relationships between younger and older members, and older members and Haven staff are all organized by gender. Participants recalled feeling safety in these single-gender environments. For Jared, all-male groups provided spaces for him to share “brotherly love” with other men:

I think when you're in a Bible study with guys you go deeper and talk about issues that you wouldn't normally talk about with the opposite gender, [and] just experience brotherly love [with one another] ... It's a lot easier for guys to embrace each other and ask how you're doing or what you're struggling with, what you're excited about, what your story is like [in an all-male group]. I think it really helps me feel more connected to others and without [the focus being] trying to pursue some type of dating relationship or something. It's just people getting to know each other with no other agenda, like you just want to get to know somebody for who they are.

Many of the men's Bible study conversations focused on what David called “sin struggles,” or efforts to avoid the temptations of sex, drinking and the general college party culture. Male participants described feeling more comfortable talking about these issues exclusively among other men. Mark found that it was “just easier maybe to be open” with other men, than with women. He added this was especially true when the conversation drifted to sharing “something [about sex],” in he believed that in those circumstances “it's really good to have that separate and to have your own space.”

Like their male peers, the women participants also appreciated having Bible studies separated by gender. Felicity believed that “it’s important to have a strong community of women, doing girly things.” She added Bible studies composed entirely of Haven women become a “very safe place” for women to talk about their challenges, and women simply “are not going to struggle in the same ways as guys.” Thus, she believed “it’s very important to have [the men’s and women’s Bible studies] separate.” Katie saw the benefit of occasionally having co-ed Bible studies because “it gives you a guy’s perspective on things, [and] some of them were really passionate in ways that I hadn’t been before.” However, like Felicity, she also believed that having separate men’s and women’s Bible studies allowed for a kind of vulnerability between women:

I think a benefit of having girls and guys Bible studies is that you can talk about issues more specific to what you are facing. A lot of like girls struggle with comparison insecurity, like body image, and guys do struggle with those things too, but maybe not always the same extent as women do. So, having it split up [allows people to] feel really comfortable being vulnerable, yeah, I think it’s helpful.

In order to create a few opportunities to meet with the other Bible study groups, men’s and women’s Bible studies mixed periodically. The men’s Bible study groups occasionally asked the women’s groups on “creative dates” (Jared), meaning the men’s group has to ask the women’s group out in an original way and/or they have to think of a unique date activity. The structure of these cross-group gatherings included many of the markings of the gender roles that the participants described. By always being the group to ask the women’s groups on these dates, men were the “initiators” (Kevin & Mark) and “set the tone” (Mark) in these in dates, women’s primary role was to go on the date.

Conclusion

Faith was a significant part of Haven students' lives. It was, as Derek put it, "everything." Haven students' religious beliefs touched every aspect of their lives at Michigan. They used their faith to help them interpret and interact with the campus environment. Several Haven students commented that their faith helped them to put academic setbacks in perspective, so they were able to adapt to challenges more easily than their peers. Participants also indicated that the combination of their religious belief and the support that the Haven community provided, helped to challenge them to consider how they could live in greater alignment with their beliefs. For example, Kevin explained that his faith prompted him to confront many of the racist beliefs that resided within himself. He described how his faith encouraged him to make this change: "I definitely had a lot of racist thoughts. Through coming to know Jesus, that changed into love...I mean, how can life be good if you...are not loving your neighbor, or hating your neighbor?"

Mark and other Haven students believed that universities' hostile relationship to religion causes many Christian college students, at Michigan and elsewhere, to "stop believing." However, the research on the impact of the college environments on students' faith commitments tells a different story. College students are no more likely than their non-college going peers to lessen their religious engagement (Uecker, Regenerus & Vaaler, 2007). In fact, students who attend 4-year colleges and universities, like U-M, are more likely than their peers who leave secondary school to work, attend community college or vocational college to maintain a connection with a religious community (Hardie, Pearce, & Denton, 2016). This research suggests that the expectation that encountering Michigan's "secular, non-religious, very scientific, and atheist" (Mark) environment will cause students to abandon their faith is rooted in more myth than fact.

This myth serves several functions for the Haven students interviewed. It reinforces the narrative that maintaining their faith at Michigan requires constant vigilance. Haven students believed that staying true to their faith demanded that they be on alert for challenges to their beliefs and limits imposed on their religious practice. It was also important that they avoid the constant temptations of college social life, such as underage drinking and premarital sex. They were prepared to expect their Christian beliefs, including the conservative social views that they understood as derived from their faith, to be constantly challenged as they were exposed to an increased diversity of ideas and peoples.

Haven students had a range of defenses at the ready to help them dismiss ideas that they perceived as a threat to their beliefs. They deployed the term “liberal” as a tool to help them reject differences between their beliefs and those of the U-M and Ann Arbor communities. The way that Haven students talked about morality helped them to ignore perspectives that they did not consider “morally legitimate” (Kevin). The ways that Felicity and Kevin discussed their beliefs on morality help illustrate this point. Felicity concluded that “there is really no moral standards” in much of the culture of the music school, and expressed disappointment that this attracts “so many weirdoes” to the program. Kevin explained that he was troubled by Michigan’s “vocal...support of the LGBTQ community” and the fact that he was not free to share his opinion that being LGBTQ is not “morally right and not receive a hostile reaction.” By encouraging students to examine how they understand art or consider the experiences of LGBTQ people, Felicity and Kevin believed, Michigan was asking them to abandon their morality. This focus on moral behavior worked to change the focus of conversations about the actions of their peers or equality for LGBTQ people, for example, to differing views on morality. Instead of being open to considering alternative ideas regarding what is moral, Haven students were

generally contemptuous of challenges to their own interpretations of Christian belief. In their view, they were not trying to be dismissive of different views, only remain committed to their own.

Many Haven participants were well-aware that they were often seen as intolerant by others in the University community. Yet, in their view, it was the University community that was intolerant of their beliefs. Kevin and Mark took this idea a step further suggesting that by focusing exclusively on discrimination against LGBTQ individuals and racial minorities, the University was dismissing the discrimination experienced by religious groups, especially Christians. As an example, Kevin explained that Jesus' name was taken in vain far more frequently than "racial terms or epithets" were used or that women were talked about "in a demeaning way." Troubled by the frequent stereotyping of Christian students in and outside of the classroom combined with the University's apparent lack of concern, some Haven students concluded that the administration's commitment to "inclusiveness only went to so far" (Kevin). In this frame, because Christian students like them were not allowed to express their beliefs freely and asked to accept amoral ideas, they were the ones who rightly deserved the University's concern and empathy.

Many Haven participants believed that white Christian students held the focus of the University's ire, and were discouraged from taking pride in their racial and religious identities. Jason was frustrated that the University regularly offered support for students of color when they faced discrimination, but would not do the same if "we were targeted." By connecting whiteness and Christianity while at the same time seeing themselves as victims of a campus environment that favored students of other identities, students like Jason were able to ignore their white privilege and avoid empathizing with their peers who hold marginalized identities. Katie gently

disagreed with her Haven peers and explained Christians do not experience “oppression” to the same degree as black students, so it is “legitimate” to have extra supports available for her peers of color. Though Katie’s objection is notable, it was quite tepid and accompanied by shared annoyance that Christians were often dismissed as “pushy or judgmental.”

Haven participants expressed frustration that they were not given free rein to share their beliefs on campus. For example, Haven members were upset that they were not given unfettered access to the residence halls for evangelizing. They felt entitled to evangelize to students in any location and express their beliefs without having to contend with the objections of the administration, or concerns that their peers might find their actions or unwelcome or their ideas painful or harmful. Inclusion on campus would require that they be able to engage with their peers, faculty and course material in ways that were aligned with their beliefs without fear of reprisal or concern for the feelings of others.

Haven students felt that maintaining their beliefs, hegemonic gender norms, and opinions on race in the midst of challenges is to be celebrated regardless of the cost. The protagonist of *God’s Not Dead*, the popular Evangelical film mentioned earlier, is an excellent example of the religious discipline to which many Haven students aspired. The film’s hero is a martyr-type character who declares his Christian belief to an atheist professor and must defend his faith to a classroom of his peers, despite risks to his social standing and academic success. Even though opposition to “macroevolution” or the desire to avoid sex before marriage, for example, set many Haven students apart from the majority of their Michigan peers and often invited ridicule, they prided themselves on holding true to these beliefs and practices.

CHAPTER V

“I’m Muslim, I’m in the Same Shoes as You... Just Trying to Get Through College”: A Muslim Group

Muslim student organizations have a long history on U.S. college campuses. The largest and most prominent of these groups is called the Muslim Student Association. The first Muslim Student Association (MSA) was founded in 1963 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and MSAs were soon organized on other campuses (Abdo, 2006). In the early days of MSA, there were few American-born Muslims on college campuses, so the majority of MSA members were international students who intended to return home after completing their degree (Abdo, 2006). Spurred by the formation of a wave of MSA’s across the U.S. and Canada, a North American organization aptly called the MSA of the United States and Canada formed in the mid-1960s (Abdo, 2006). Now there are over 600 Muslim student organizations on campuses in the U.S. and Canada (Mubarak, 2007). In addition to holding Friday prayers, and offering support for Muslim students during holidays, many Muslim campus organizations also host an “Islamic Awareness Week” to help expose non-Muslims to Islam (Abdo, 2006). Muslim student organizations are frequently called upon to participate and lead campus diversity programs and activities (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010).

U-M is home to one of the largest populations of Muslim students of any university in the U.S. A 2016 Michigan campus climate survey estimates that 2.5% of undergraduates and 2.9% of graduate students identify as Muslim (University of Michigan, 2016, p. 16). These numbers

are more than double the 1.1% of the overall U.S. population that identifies as Muslim (Mohamed, 2018). Ann Arbor is also a short distance from Dearborn, MI, home to one of the largest concentrations of Muslims and Arab Americans in the U.S. (Howell & Jamal, 2008).

At the time of writing, the Muslim students at Michigan are supported by one male, full-time chaplain, and one part-time, woman chaplain. The chaplain positions are funded by the Felicity Foundation, a foundation founded and maintained by Muslim alum of U-M to support Muslim students at Michigan and Wayne State University. The Foundation operates separately from the University. The Felicity chaplains host daily group prayers, a weekly Friday prayer service, an annual retreat, and a number of other activities throughout the year. Felicity also supports an off-campus residence for Muslim men and is working on acquiring a similar space for women.

In addition to the Michigan Muslim Student Union, there are several other Muslim student organizations at Michigan, including the Muslim Business Association, the Muslim Graduate Student Association, the Muslim Medical Students Association, and the Muslim Law Student Association among others. The leaders of each of these groups are members of the Muslim Coalition, which meets bi-weekly to discuss possible collaborations and address any issues or concerns that arise.

For this study, I interviewed fourteen MMSU students. The group included seven men and seven women, all are students of color, and all identified as Muslim prior to coming to college. Several students indicated that they chose to attend Michigan for many of the common reasons that lead students to select a particular college; because they were attracted to its reputation and strengths in a particular program, the cost of attendance, proximity to home, and/or they had family or friends who were graduates or currently attending. However, it was

also important to many of the MMSU students I interviewed that Michigan had a large and well-connected Muslim population, and, as Amina put it, “historically, [Michigan’s] MMSU has been very strong.” Students appreciated that they were attending a campus where, as Amina said, “You have a very strong Muslim community in the suburbs around Ann Arbor, and in Detroit.” According to Rima, “Michigan is the Arab and Muslim capital...of the U.S.” These factors Fox, believed, have helped to make the MMSU “one of the largest student organizations on campus.”

The following sections describe MMSU students’ remarks in three areas: (1) what being a Muslim means, (2) what it is like being a Muslim at Michigan, including how this status influences their social and academic lives, and (3) the ways in which their identities influence how these students understand and negotiate their Muslim identity at Michigan.

What Being Muslim Means to MMSU Students

All of the students interviewed indicated that they grew up in a Muslim family, and that being Muslim is an important part of their identity. Several participants described their faith as something that grounded them, or as Annie put it, gave them a “sense of balance” and “comfort.” Many also discussed how Islam helped connect them to others. Amina found that Islam is “a very powerful mechanism not just to connect to God, but also to connect with people around me, to myself, and get to know myself better in the religion.” Many students discussed how their faith provides them with some guidelines to help them to live a life of good character. For Hermione, “being Muslim means, first and foremost, being a good person.” Fox explained that Islam provides him with “a certain set of ethics and morals...that creates our moral compass...how we should behave and what we should do.” He continued, “obviously being a Muslim means having excellent character and someone who is a model for society.”

Jamal viewed his faith as having two aspects that go hand in hand: “the belief aspect of it and then the acting upon those beliefs aspect of it.” For him, Islam meant “really believing in God and believing in all that He has spoken of in the Qur’an” and “[abiding by] the five tenants of Islam¹⁶.” Like Hermione and Fox, Jamal believed that “acting upon” his faith meant having good character:

In Arabic, we have a word called *Akhlaq* which...I guess the loose translation would be manners, but I think it encompasses more than that. Actually, we follow the Prophet Muhammad, [and] we try to really emulate all his actions and try to be the best people that we can be...I make the best effort that I can to try to emulate those actions in my everyday interactions whether that means being kind to whoever, like anyone and everyone that I interact with, to smile...[I] try to be generous, just trying to emulate positive characteristics. So even something as small as gossip, we believe that gossip or backbiting is a sin, so [we try] to veer away from those kinds of things.

Students recognized that it was not always easy to live in alignment with their faith in college, but viewed trying as an important spiritual discipline.

Another aspect of Islam that was frequently cited as important by the participants was a call to advocate for social justice. Omaria explained that her passion for social justice is rooted in her faith, “When I see an injustice, [I think] to myself...my religion tells you to care about humanity and care about this, and it’s your duty to show people that passion, that love.” It frustrated Fox when people think of Islamic religious observance they only focus on the practice

¹⁶These are often referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam and, in brief, they include: (1) *Shahada*: professing belief in one God and that Muhammad is his prophet, (2) *Salat*: the daily prayer, which should be recited five times a day, (3) *Zakat*: giving to the poor or needy, (4) *Saum*: or fasting during Ramadan, and (5) *Hajj*: making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one’s lifetime.

of praying throughout the day or fasting during Ramadan. Instead, he argued, a Muslim is also “someone who...serves other people [and] by serving other people you also serve God...You shouldn’t [turn] away from society and [only focus] on God, that’s not being Muslim. Being Muslim [involves] reaching out to society and helping that greater community come closer.” With this in mind, Fox explained that he wakes up every day and asks, “What are some things I could do in order to build our relationship not only [with] God, but with other people in order to serve?”

Many students discussed having a strong connection to other Muslim students. Talal found that his relationships with other Muslims were closer than those he had with his non-Muslim friends:

I can’t imagine myself not being Muslim, or imagine myself being any other religion. [Being Muslim is] just a part of me. And I think...being [Muslim is more than] an identity, it’s also a community aspect. Like, I have friends that are Muslim and I think I just have a level of connection with them that I can’t get with people who are not Muslim...I think there is an understanding on a fundamental level about the way [Muslims] live our lives and the way we view the world which is a little bit different.

Annie recognized that there are some people who identify as “culturally Muslim” just as some Jewish people identify as “culturally Jewish,” and may not practice Islam, but still identify as a Muslim. However, Annie observed that this status was uncommon in the U.S. “just because the community is so tight-knit, because there’s so few [other Muslims] and so it’s basically all or nothing. You’re either practicing or you’re not.” Harvey described his friends in MMSU as “very diverse [because] there’s Arabs, then there’s Pakistanis, there’s Indians, there’s white people,

there's like twenty different identities going on in there." All in all, he said it was an "American group of guys" who are tied together by their "overarching" Muslim identity.

Michigan's Influence on MMSU Students' Faith Presentation and Engagement

Like their counterparts in the other religious groups interviewed for this study, the Muslim participants thought a lot about how they engaged with Michigan's secular campus environment. Generally, participants agreed that being Muslim at Michigan came with a number of challenges and they were often forced to cope with Islamophobia. However, students also described feeling supported by other students in MMSU and in the broader Muslim community at the University, and actively sought out safe spaces where they could reliably interact with other Muslims. In this section, I divide MMSU's students' discussion of their experiences on campus into three parts: 1) the social and community experience, 2) the academic experience, and 3) omnipresent islamophobia.

The social and community experience

For the students who grew up in predominately white non-Muslim communities, Michigan's supportive and large Muslim community was a welcome change. Nasim described his experience of coming to Michigan after growing up in a largely white community:

I grew up in more white-American areas. Where I live, I'm the only Middle-Eastern person that I've ever met. I've never gone to school with another Middle-Eastern person, or Muslim that I know of. So, I was used to that life, but when I came here it was definitely a change for sure, being around Muslims all the time. I really enjoyed that because, I don't want to make it sound like I like being with – I do like being with people who are like me, but I like diversity as well. It's interesting and it's definitely welcoming

to have more people like me that I can talk about this stuff with, and knowing that they've gone through similar experiences. It's really comforting.

Like Nasim, Omaria “grew up with only whites” and she suspected that she was “the only Arab, the only Muslim, the only hijabi” that the white people in her hometown had met. She remembered feeling excited at the prospect of joining Michigan’s Muslim community. When she arrived on campus, her roommates were current and former members of the MMSU student leadership board, so she soon found herself connected to the wider MMSU community. Rima grew up in the U.S. Bible Belt where “there’s not a lot of Muslims.” Seeing another Muslim in her hometown was reason for excitement: “If you see [another Muslim] at the mall you’re waving like, ‘Hi, nice to meet you’... [At Michigan] there’s so many more [Muslims] than I’m used to.” Since being at Michigan, encountering other Muslim students and seeing other Muslim women wearing a hijab “normalized it and everything.” Now when Rima sees another Muslim she thinks, “Oh okay, another Muslim...that’s not a big thing.”

For students from predominantly Muslim communities, the transition to Michigan and new minority status caused them to reflect on their Muslim identity in new ways. Jamal explained that where he is from “everyone is Muslim,” so he never had to explain his religious practices to others because “everyone knows what you are doing.” He continued, “You always can pray at the nearest *masjid*¹⁷...so it was never the case that I had to go out of my way to go to the bathroom and do the ritual cleansing like we do.” Because everyone in his hometown was Muslim, Jamal observed that “no one ever really challenged [his] faith or no one really asked any questions...[or] had deep conversations about other faiths.”

¹⁷Arabic word for mosque

After arriving on campus, Jamal had to adjust to the decreased resources available to support his religious practices and often had to explain his faith to others. In this new environment, he found that the practice of washing before prayer in campus bathrooms impacted the way he thought about his faith:

Once I arrived on campus, I had to explain what I was doing, like these movements that I was doing when I was praying...Before you pray you have to go wash...so that can come off as a strange thing to do if you are in a bathroom because you might be washing your hands up to your elbows or your face or your feet, so sometimes that can get you some stares. And I think that...experience made me more comfortable in myself...If someone comes up to me and asks, I will gladly explain to them what I'm doing and I...view it as an opportunity to tell others about my faith.

Overall, being at Michigan led Jamal to realize how “salient [his] Muslim identity is” and helped him to “learn to really appreciate [his Muslim faith].”

The religious practices of the Muslim community at Michigan are far from homogeneous. Omaria and Fox found that meeting Muslims who engaged with their faith differently led them to reflect on their own religious practices. Fox described Michigan's Muslim community as diverse because “you get Muslims from all over the place and you see [and] hear some ideas that may not be too common or little foreign from other Muslims who kind of came from a different community.” Omaria's family was her primary example of what it was like to live as a Muslim in America, so encountering other Muslims at Michigan who observed the faith differently was a challenge. The different patterns of observance held by her new Muslim friends led Omaria to reflect on what religious practices she considered essential, a question that the familiarity of her home life had allowed her to avoid.

The transition from high school to college caused many of the students interviewed to think about their faith practices in new ways. Dameer described the experience of being Muslim at Michigan as “definitely a discipline thing.” He continued, “My parents are aren’t here to tell me, ‘Oh you have to pray,’ or ‘You have to read the Qur’an,’ or ‘You have to do the right thing.’ No one is watching you, but [being Muslim is] part of who I am.” Though college afforded him some new freedoms, Dameer continued to eat halal meat and pray regularly. Overall, he found that the transition to college helped him to take ownership of his faith: “It’s been a really big thing from high school to college is that [I’ve had to be] more independent, like I have had to [decide how to practice my religion] myself, no one is going to tell me if I want to do it. I don’t have to do it if I don’t want to.”

Jamal regretted that for a period he “prioritized school and prayer kind of took a back seat.” He only prayed at the “end of the day and...had to combine [the other daily prayers] and that’s very looked down upon to say the least.” Overtime, Jamal was able to successfully integrate his prayer practices with the rest of his college life: “I guess one transition that has happened through the course of my college career is really prioritizing my prayers and really making sure that I’m devoting enough time to Islam in the midst of all that’s going on around here with classes and extracurricular [activities].”

The MMSU students interviewed appreciated that there were many places they could go to find support from other Muslim students and practice their faith in community. Shortly after Rima arrived on campus, a Muslim friend showed her the various spots on and around campus where Muslim students would gather, “like where the Muslim corner of the library was.” Annie often ran into “other people from the MMSU [in the] reflection rooms spread throughout campus that many Muslim students use to pray.” She added that these rooms were a “nice space to get to

know one another.” In addition to the reflection rooms, there were a number of places on campus where students could reliably interact with other Muslims, both in and outside of MMSU events. Annie observed that her pre-med classes were “all full of Muslims” and she found herself frequently studying and sitting with her Muslim peers. She joked that so many Muslim students ran in to each other in pre-med classes, so that they did not feel compelled to go to MMSU events in order to connect with other Muslims.

The most frequently mentioned gathering place was Liberty Place¹⁸, an off-campus apartment complex where large numbers of Muslim students lived. Participants often smiled recalling their experiences living in Liberty Place with the robust Muslim community that calls it home. Students knew that they could call on the other Muslim students in Liberty Place for academic, emotional and religious support, and they could easily find others to pray or share a meal with without having to leave the building. To illustrate the feeling of trust between Muslim Liberty Place residents, Omaria shared a story of a time when she invited another Liberty Place resident whom she did not know to enter her home while she was away to borrow some salt. For Omaria, Liberty Place’s robust Muslim community allowed for a feeling of safety that was unlike other places on campus.

Living in Liberty Place gave students what Ramy called a “double dose” of the Michigan Muslim community. Liberty Place is so popular many students chose to skip living in the dorms all together. Ramy obliged when his parents advised him to live in Liberty Place his first year, though he remains curious what the University residence hall experience would have been like. He believes that the Liberty Place community helped to “ease the transition” to college because he “met a lot of Muslim kids and it was this whole new environment of being in a Muslim

¹⁸ a pseudonym

community.” Hermione was similarly advised by her parents to live in Liberty Place. She explained that her parents appreciated that Liberty Place was close to campus and wanted their daughter to avoid the prevalence of sex in the residence halls: “The only reason [Muslim parents] want us [living in Liberty Place] is because it’s so close to campus, and it’s the next best thing to a dorm, but they don’t want us living in a dorm because they think we’re all going to go fuck every guy.”

The students interviewed developed a range of strategies for integrating their faith practices with the social expectations of college life. Most of the participants interviewed indicated that they did not drink. One of the first things Dameer did when he arrived at college was to avoid spending time with his non-Muslim peers who drank and went to parties regularly. He explained that “Muslims are advised not to drink no matter what age,” but this practice could cause some “inner conflicts” for Muslim students because “one of the bigger things in college, you see, is drinking, it’s truly prominent with lot of college kids.” Dameer noticed that sometimes his Muslim friends decided to take advantage of the “freedom” college provides and “when their friends are drinking they might get into it as well.” He continued, “Islam like tries to guide you to make the right choices, but...conflicts happen when some kids really want to do something.” Harvey noticed that a lot of his Muslim friends would be enticed by the drinking and partying culture, and then find themselves asking, “Wait, do I really want to do this?...I grew up Muslim... [and] this is not what I was taught. What am I doing?”

Several of the students interviewed were aware that their decision not to drink or participate in the parties that are a large part of student life at Michigan, and their selective dating choices distinguished them from their non-Muslim peers. Dameer explained that his faith instructed that “you can like someone, but...you shouldn’t act on it. You should be patient, talk it

through, take your time and wait.” Dameer recognized that having that patience in romantic or sexual relationships would be a challenge for many of his non-Muslim peers: “[It can be] hard for [many undergraduates to have] the patience and self-control, and [Islam] really gives you the self-control that you need to get through these things.” Dameer added that if he was “even kind of close” to a tailgate or party he “just didn’t like the feeling.” However, when he was with other Muslims, he “felt a lot more comfortable.” Fox appreciated that he did not have to spend his time worrying about “finding a girlfriend and doing some inappropriate stuff with them” or spending his time “drinking, which is prohibited in Islam.” He was aware that dating and drinking took up a lot of non-Muslim peers’ time, so not doing those things allowed Fox to “speed [up his] academic life.”

MMSU students were aware that their beliefs around drinking and dating were not the only commitments that occasionally put them out of step with others in the campus community. Jamal has a position with student life for the University where he is “tasked with being a resource for a certain number of [resident hall students].” He took this responsibility “very seriously” and enjoyed being a mentor to first-year students. However, Jamal recognized that the University expected him to be a resource to students with a range of identities, including LGBTQ students. Jamal explained that it was initially a challenge for him to support the LGBTQ students in his care: “In Islam like we believe that homosexuality is a sin” and he sought “to [hold] on to those beliefs, but at the same time [be] a good person regardless of whatever identity that someone holds, being kind and treating them like any other person...[and] I have been kind of struggling with just finding that balance.” Ultimately, he continued,

The understanding that I have taken is [that] I am totally against anyone bullying someone or talking down to anyone, but I guess I just won’t personally advocate for

someone else, if it's like homosexuality, for example, that's where I will draw the line. I will definitely be [your] friend, I will treat you as any other person, but I just won't advocate for that specific right... That's something that I have kind of had to come to terms with in the course of my college career and just making sure that I hold on to those beliefs, at the same time being like a constructive citizen, being a good friend and just maintaining those beliefs in this type of environment.

Like many of his MMSU peers, Jamal sought to find a kind of "balance" between being true to his faith while also adapting to the broader college environment.

The academic experience

Students found that their Muslim identity came up in their courses in a number of different ways. Fox took several classes on Islam and observed that sometimes these classes could feel like a kind of "intellectual warfare" where "you get thrown in a lot of ideas" and are challenged to think about how those ideas fit in with your faith. Before taking classes on Islam he recommended "[being] grounded in your faith" in order to engage the course material while remaining settled in your religious practice. Sometimes, Fox added, you have to "save the stuff that you believe truly in [for] yourself." In other words, he found it important to sort through what he was learning in his classes and decide what ideas he was going to accept for the sake of the course, even if it did not fit in with his religious beliefs. He did not expect his religious belief and coursework to always be compatible. For example, Fox explained that growing up he was taught that the Prophet was illiterate until he learned to read the Qur'an, however, he had a professor suggest that "[the Prophet] knew how to read throughout his entire life... and that he participated in idol worship, [but Muslims believe] that he did not participate in that."

Fox found that he was often regularly challenged to consider two kinds of knowledge, “spiritual knowledge [and] academic knowledge, [and] a lot of times the two pieces don’t really match.” He recognized that he looks to the Qur’an as a “deep sacred text,” whereas “western academics...follow western manuscripts and western historian[s].” Fox anticipated that these approaches to the study of Islam led to understandable differences in their conclusions.

Sometimes hearing a professor espouse an interpretation of the Qur’an that was different from his own was difficult, and required that he remain “well-tempered” and consider “what would the Prophet do?”

Rima’s Syrian and Muslim identity came up often in her courses. She explained, “obviously [the] hijab is an outward expression that I am Muslim...it’s not like I go, ‘Hey, I’m Muslim.’ I feel like that’s already obvious.” She added that she regularly felt compelled to speak up for other Muslim and Arab students, and often found herself saying in class, “Okay, guys, as a Syrian, as an Arab, as a Muslim, here’s what I think.”

In Fall 2016, the humanitarian crisis in Syria was often in the news, and a frequent topic in Rima’s international studies and politics courses. Rima found these discussions “almost emotionally exhausting,” because she felt pressure “to take this very objective approach to something that’s so personal.” It was especially hard to listen to her peers “saying stuff that [is not] that informed...and you have to just sit there and just be like, ‘Okay.... Let it go. Let this go.’” Rima decided to keep her Syrian identity private, and dealt with her frustration quietly. In an Arabic language course, Rima again realized that she was the only Arab person in the room. To her frustration, her peers would try to “read” her and said things like, “Oh, hey. You’re probably an Arab...You’re the [text]book...Speak Arabic to us!”

Not all of the class conversations that touched upon Rima's Syrian and Muslim identity were negative. Rima remembered discussing some of the various arguments used around the world to defend or oppose a Muslim woman's freedom to wear her hijab in an international studies course. Having grown up in a conservative and largely Islamophobic community in the southern U.S., Rima quietly geared herself up to defend the hijab. To her surprise, she listened as one by one her peers defended a person's right to wear a hijab. She remembered thinking, "Wait! These people are defending [the hijab] for me?! I didn't know that was possible. I was like, 'Oh my God!...I don't have to do any work here!'" Towards the end of the class, a student raised his hand and suggested that the hijab is discussed too often in classes, saying, "This is a liberal place. This is all we talk about." Frustrated that the conversation had taken a turn, Rima responded,

I came from a very conservative place. I came from a very red state, red school. We didn't talk about this at all and when we did talk about it, it was in a very negative light. So, for me, personally this is my first experience. This is my first positive experience talking about the hijab. And for you to go and say that you're talking about it too much, like I'm sorry...I understand that you've talked about it a lot, but there are still some people like me who haven't talked about it at all. Even when they've talked about it, it's always been in [a] negative light.

Despite the dismissive comment by one male student, Rima walked away from the class thinking that overall it was a "pretty positive experience."

Class discussions were not the only ways in which the academic life of the University engaged with Islam. The University calendar is not conducive to celebrating Muslim holidays. In response to hearing friends complain about how December final exams often encroach on time

spent with family over Christmas, Jasmin reminded them that she “had to take an exam on Eid.” She often chided her friends, “you guys get Christmas...[and] I took an exam on my Christmas.” Though she was accustomed to having her holidays interrupted, the academic calendar remains a constant reminder that the University is not accommodating to her religious tradition.

MMSU students appreciated that Michigan’s American Studies Department was home to the Arab and Muslim American Studies minor. Many MMSU students indicated that they had taken the program’s courses and spoke fondly of their relationships with Arab and Muslim American Studies faculty. However, concerns remained regarding how Michigan’s departments and schools approached Islam and the experiences of Muslims. Dameer observed that though the University engages with Islam periodically, Islamic scholars are not often consulted or included in those events. He heard of an upcoming event on gender and sexuality in Islam and noticed that “there is no Islamic scholar” on the panel. Dameer discussed his disappointment with other Muslim students on Facebook, and they agreed that they “just want some other point of view expressed.” To Dameer, this event was one of many examples where the University passed on an opportunity to connect with Muslim students and collaborate on an event.

Omnipresent Islamophobia

Though many MMSU students found comfort and community with other Muslim students, the broader campus community and University administration were not as reliably supportive. MMSU students sometimes felt that Michigan was even outright hostile towards Muslim students. Participants recalled several experiences of Islamophobia on campus, and their frequent disappointment with the administration’s response.

In April 2015, Michigan administrators advertised showing the film *American Sniper* as part of a free late-night movie series for students (Kinrey, 2015). Concerned about anti-Muslim

sentiment in the film, several students, including numerous Muslim students, signed a petition asking Michigan to reconsider its decision to host the film. As discussion around the movie grew, U-M's popular new football coach Jim Harbaugh offered his support of the movie over Twitter, "Michigan Football will watch 'American Sniper'! Proud of Chris Kyle¹⁹ & Proud to be an American & if that offends anybody then so be it!" (Kinery, 2015). Muslim students reported experiencing a number of racist remarks and threats in the wake of the controversy (Premack, 2015).

Omara sighed recalling the *American Sniper* incident. After originally deciding to cancel the showing, University administrators seemed to respond to pressure to show the film and decided to screen *American Sniper* in another location. They also offered the *Paddington*²⁰ movie as an option for students to be shown at the same time. Several Muslim student organizations' public objection to the film led some Muslim students to receive violent online messages, which according to Omara, included death threats. The administration's decision to screen the film despite Muslim students' concerns was a painful blow. This experience undermined the support Omara had hoped she could rely on from the University:

They took [*American Sniper*] away, and then people attacked, and they brought it back, and [I] was like, 'Hold up! what about the people that are getting death threats now? Does that not matter?'...All for a movie...And it's really weird because [U-M is] supposed to be a liberal campus, and I'm just like, okay interesting.

¹⁹ The military sniper on whom the film is based.

²⁰ A film about an animated bear set primarily in London – a stark contrast to the content of *American Sniper*.

The wavering of University staff and the football coach's comments over Twitter added fuel to an already painful conversation. "I still haven't been to a football game. I'm still struggling," Omaria added.

Jamal recalled thinking about the fact that movies like *American Sniper* that "[portray] Islam in a very negative light" can "invoke very strong emotions among the viewers and that... translates into very real effects." This was of special concern because of what Jamal called "the Trump phenomenon" and the ensuing Islamophobia. Jamal had several conversations with non-Muslim students in his residence hall who did not understand his concerns over the film:

The kids that were in my hall didn't really have any prior experience with any Muslims or whatever so I was really glad to have that opportunity to talk to them to just show them... okay I'm a Muslim, I'm in the same shoes as you, I'm studying for exams, just trying to get through college.

Like other students, Jamal wished to go through college without the University screening films that showcased an identity he holds in a negative light, and it saddened him to think this basic request was unmet.

In the months surrounding the 2016 presidential election, there was a rash of Islamophobic instances on campus. From its inception, Donald Trump's presidential campaign regularly attacked Muslims. His website advertised that if elected he would seek "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on" (Khan, 2016). This rhetoric was repeatedly reflected in acts of hate and discrimination on campuses around the country, including Michigan. In March 2016, the words "Stop Islam," "Trump 2016," and "Build a Wall," referring to Trump's desire to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border, were scrawled in chalk on the Diag, a large, heavily trafficked

quadrangle in the center of campus (St. John, 2016b). The campus paper, *The Michigan Daily*, reported that students who saw the messages asked for assistance removing them, but were told by a Division of Public Safety and Security officer that “not much could be done because it is after hours” (St. John, 2016b). Concerned students began to wash off the chalk messages themselves (St. John, 2016b). In the early fall term, there were several days when racist and Islamophobic flyers were found posted in prominent places on campus (Biglin, 2016a).

In the week following Trump’s win, numerous instances of Islamophobia were reported. A Muslim woman told police she was approached by a man who threatened to light her on fire unless she removed her hijab (Penrod, 2016).²¹ This incident was reported to have taken place near Liberty Place, the same off campus residence that is home to a large proportion of Muslim students. A few days later, a Muslim woman was approached by two men who yelled at her for being in America, attacked her religion, and pushed her down a hill (Biglin, 2016b). During this same period, the Islamic Center of Ann Arbor received a letter filled with a litany of vile and racist language, including calls for violence against Muslims. The letter concluded by praising then President-elect Trump as the “new Sheriff in town” (Khan, 2016). The same letter was sent to several mosques across the country in the weeks following the election (Khan, 2016). The combination of these instances led many Muslim students, as Sofia put it, to feel “very targeted...on their campus.”

The weeks following the election were also marked by several activities and conversations with the administration designed to combat Islamophobia and address the concerns of the Muslim community. The Monday following the election, the Muslim student

²¹ In late December 2016, the Ann Arbor Police released a report stating that their investigation into this incident led them to conclude that the alleged crime had not occurred (Cohn, 2016). At the time of my interviews with many of the MMSU students this outcome was not known.

organizations, including MMSU, held a group Isha²² on the Diag. Muslim students prayed while allies and supporters gathered in a circle around them. Despite the chilly fall weather, over 300 Muslim students and allies attended the prayer (St. John, 2016a). In order to highlight the presence of Muslims on campus and to show solidarity with Muslim women who often bear the brunt of Islamophobia due to wearing their hijab, many of the Muslim men present chose to wear a kufi²³, a traditional Islamic skullcap.

Many of the Muslim students interviewed were heartened by this show of support from the wider Michigan community. Sofia explained that she thought the prayer in the Diag was “very necessary because I think it was very uplifting for many of the Muslim students on campus,” she added that the large numbers of allies present “shows that this campus is very supportive.” This experience supported her belief that Michigan is “a very liberal school” and that “most people on this campus...are very like open [and]...don’t have negative associations or feelings [towards Muslims].”

These instances of Islamophobia surrounding the 2016 election were a frequent topic of conversation during my interviews and focus groups with MMSU students. The Michigan Muslim community quickly organized to respond to these incidents. All of the women interviewed were part of what Hermione described as a Muslim “sisterhood” Facebook group and text chain. She recalled that it was much more active after the election, and regularly flooded with messages of shock, concern and support.

Sofia is part of a group called the Muslim Coalition that “is meant to be [an] umbrella Muslim organization, [whose goal] isn’t necessarily holding events or...fostering

²² The fifth and last of the daily Islamic prayers.

²³ Many other traditions and cultures also wear a kufi. For example, the kufi is a traditional hat for West African men, regardless of religious tradition.

religious...practice.” Instead, she continued, the Coalition seeks to make “sure that all of the different Muslim [student organizations] are very interconnected, [that] they know what’s happening with each other.” In the wake of increased Islamophobic activity on campus and in the Ann Arbor community, the Coalition quickly mobilized and had “an emergency meeting...to address some of the issues that have come up after the election.” The group was particularly frustrated that students were not quickly informed of increasing instances of hate and harassment against Muslim students in the wake of the election, and often had to wait several hours to receive an email or text “crime alert” from the University Police. Sofia explained that the Coalition also objected to the language of the notifications:

The incident [when a woman wearing a hijab was threatened with being set on fire] was categorized as intimidation, but it really was not intimidation, it was...assault. And same with the other, the second one that came out, [where a woman was shoved,] I think it was [described in the crime alert as] ethnic intimidation or something like that, but literally the person was pushed down a hill. That’s assault; that is not intimidation.

When discussing these incidents in a group discussion, Jazmin added that she believed that the U-M Department of Public Safety should have classified them “hate crimes.” Omaria similarly found the University’s language surrounding these instances and delay in reporting concerning, and a sign that “the administration could be more supportive of Muslim students.” The Coalition was in communication with the U-M Department of Public Safety and Security and the Ann Arbor Police Department, and worked to make sure incidents, as Sophia emphasized, get “reported in a timely manner” and that the language of the notification does not downplay the severity of what occurred.

In addition to communicating with the administration, the Coalition sought to solicit ideas and input from the wider Muslim community and educate the campus community regarding the concerns of Muslim students. At the time of my interview with Sophia, she was working with the Coalition to organize town hall for Muslim students. The purpose of the town hall, she explained, “is just to make sure that everyone is on the same page, [specifically Muslim] women and the various Muslim student organizations. [Muslim women] can discuss things that they have been facing...just so the guys are aware of what’s happening.” Muslim women who wear a hijab, as Sofia put it, “just stand out more than like a guy walking on the street...So I think that the situation [hijabi women] face is very unique and that’s something that people who don’t [wear a hijab] understand.” Though Sofia did not wear a hijab, she recognized that it was important for hijabi women to have the opportunity to voice their concerns to “a brother in the organization who...might not understand...what [hijabi women have] been facing” and explain to Muslim men how they can best provide support. Unfortunately, Sofia added, there is a “lack of communication between the sisters and the brothers a lot of the times;” so opportunities, like the town hall, were needed to help Muslim men hear the concerns of Muslim women on campus. Sofia added that the town hall also sought to “[make] sure that everyone knows what’s happening [on campus], the best way to deal with it,” and the resources available.

In order to connect with the wider campus community in the wake of the presidential election, several Muslim student organizations held a Friday prayer that anyone was welcome to attend. Sofia explained that the University President was expected to attend along with staff and students from other campus religious organizations. Sofia added that the open Friday prayer was part of an effort to make the University community aware that “we do have a Muslim community on this campus and we are not a threatening organization. [We want to make] people more aware

of what it means to a Muslim on this campus.” Unfortunately, no matter how many events were organized, Sofia knew that Islamophobia is “definitely not something that’s going to disappear overnight. It’s something that we are going to have to continue addressing throughout this year.”

Concern over increased Islamophobia on campus influenced numerous aspects of campus life for the students interviewed. Omaria and Hermione explained that they had developed a fear of walking home alone at night given the various attacks and heightened Islamophobia, and expressed that fear to others within the Muslim community. Hermione explained that she has made a point to no longer wear headphones walking at night in order to be more aware of her surroundings, a decision which saddened and frustrated her: “You shouldn’t have to be afraid.” The concerns expressed by Omaria and Hermione led Muslim student organizations to organize a “buddy system” so students would not have to walk home alone. Anyone in the group could simply send a text message to the group and a student would show up to walk them home.

Earlier in the academic year, several Muslim women organized and performed in an event they called the Hijabi Monologues. Loosely based on the structure Eve Ensler’s play *The Vagina Monologues*, hijabi women spoke about their experiences in short monologues. A sign of this topic’s popularity, the 200+ person capacity room was quickly filled with members of the University community eager to hear the stories of the presenting women. Thinking about the monologue, Tara recalled the number of times that she has been asked questions like, “Why don’t Muslims condemn ISIS?” Constantly having to swat away questions like that and refute negative assumptions about the experiences of Muslim women was frustrating and exhausting.

Sofia often found herself explaining to her peers why she abstains from alcohol: “People usually ask me or offer me alcohol and then I usually have to say no, and then that leads to a whole explanation of it.” However, she had grown cautious of these conversations because it

exposed her Muslim faith; and “especially recently” given the political climate following the 2016 election she was “not especially eager to tell people [she is Muslim], because [she is] not sure what they’ll think of it.”

This worry about how other students would perceive Sofia’s Muslim identity impacted her experiences in class. In one of Sofia’s social science classes, she was tasked with a project on distilleries. Sofia knew little about this industry, and found herself pretending that she was familiar with various brands to avoid standing out among her peers:

So, the rest of my group, I don’t think they know that I don’t actually drink alcohol, but whenever we’re talking about the companies within the distillery industry, they are asking me about, ‘Which one of these companies has the most premium brands?’ ‘Does this company have premium brands?’ I just have to pretend I know what they are, even though I really just don’t know what they are.

Sofia was especially hesitant to share her faith with the group, because she knew that one group member voted for Trump, and was unsure how this peer would respond:

I just don’t really know where [the student who voted for Trump’s] mind is, and I just don’t want that to influence anything, especially when it’s in a school setting. So, I try not to broach the subject or bring it to light about the fact that I am [Muslim], because I just don’t know what the sentiment is.”

Given the heightened Islamophobia in the wake of the 2016 election, what might to other students look like a typical class project, was a significant source of stress and concern for Sofia. Talking about her decision not to drink was about much more than her knowledge of distilleries; instead, it was linked to broader concerns about her personal safety and the safety of Muslims at Michigan.

Not knowing if her peers held Islamophobic views, Sofia said was the “scariest” aspects of the post-2016 election climate. She knew that some her peers voted for Trump and wondered what that suggested about their beliefs and attitudes towards Muslims:

There are a lot of people I feel like that I know who did vote for Trump, knowing that he said certain things, and so it just makes me wonder. I can’t assume that they think the same things, but I don’t know how much they care or how much that’s influenced them. So, I don’t really know if I want to reveal [that I am Muslim], because I don’t know where you stand or what you think, which is something that I don’t think I’ve really felt before, because, before I kind of just assumed that everyone was on my side, but now I just don’t think I can assume that anymore.

Even if her peers did not make Islamophobic comments, Sofia worried they privately held prejudicial views:

They might know that something might sound offensive, so they probably won’t say it, but they might be thinking it, and now I just feel like I don’t really know anymore, especially because of the recent things that have happened. So, I think that’s the part that makes me most hesitant.

The trust that Sofia once had in the support of her peers had eroded in recent months leaving her “on guard” and hesitant to disclose her Muslim identity.

The feeling of being “on guard” was on the minds of many of the MMSU students interviewed. Hermione described herself as feeling more “hesitant” to talk about her faith than she was before. In one group discussion, Muslim women discussed the fact that some carried pepper spray and others were considering getting their own despite the fact that it is discouraged by campus police. Jazmin avoided answering questions about her religious affiliation whenever

possible, because “it doesn’t help. If anything, it could turn someone away.” She even began to think about when she shared her name with others, because she believed it exposed her Muslim heritage. Choking back tears, Annie told me that after the presidential election and hearing the various of attacks, she made a point to always ask a friend to stand outside of the reflection rooms because she was concerned about her safety while she prayed. Though Islamophobia was not unfamiliar to MMSU students and their families even before Trump came on the scene, the election’s impact on these students’ lives was palpable.

The Intersection of Islam and Other Aspects of Identity for MMSU Students

All of the study participants were asked to name identities other than Islam that were meaningful to them, and how those identities impacted their experience as a Muslim. In response, all mentioned their race and/or ethnicity as important. Often, they would then explain that their ethnicity and/or race was more or less important to them than their identity as a Muslim. Some discussed the ways that gender shapes their experiences of Islam. Many Muslim women observed that the practice of wearing the hijab means that Muslim women are often seen as ambassadors for the faith. Muslim women who did not wear the hijab were aware that their experience at Michigan was very different from their Muslim women peers who did wear the veil.

Gender & religious visibility

Like the students in the other groups I spoke with, gender played a very important role in how MMSU students thought about their faith and interacted with other Muslims. The three participants who wore a hijab, Rima, Omaria and Amina, each discussed the impact of wearing the hijab on their campus experience. Amina was proud of her identity as a Muslim woman and

her choice to wear a hijab. She explained that her gender is deeply connected to how she conceives of and practices her faith:

In Islam, women are intrinsically linked to mercy, and that's something that's very important to me. [One of the ways that] I practice [my] faith is practicing mercy to myself on some days, or with other people, and always seeking out [opportunities to offer mercy to others].

In wearing the hijab, Amina recognized that she was a “standard bearer” of her faith because hijabi women “are a lot more visible than [Muslim] guys,” they are often called upon to educate others about Islam, and carry the public perception of the broader Muslim community “on their backs.” The responsibility of visibility was often frustrating for Amina: “I don't want everything I do [to] reflect on my religion. I also have to acknowledge that it does.”

Despite the challenges it sometimes presented, Amina remained committed to wearing the hijab as a part of her faith practice. She explained that a former teacher helped her see the hijab as something that helps her to be “known” by God, and provides the foundation for a “special relationship” with God. This idea helped her to center herself as she negotiated the numerous expectations “from within the Muslim community, [and] from [outside] the Muslim community” that are put upon hijabi women.

Amina observed that Muslim men “are encouraged to be very loud or speak up,” whereas Muslim women are expected to be “quiet” or a “shy hijabi.” As a teenager, she observed that others were often startled upon realizing that she did not fit this stereotype: “After introducing myself and all the small talk and things, people [would say], ‘Wow! You're actually funny,’ or, ‘You're so much cooler than I thought you would be.’ And I'm like, ‘Why [didn't] you think I was going to be cool?’” Amina knew that she was one of many Muslim women who defied these

stereotypes, and noticed that “especially here at the University, where activism is so important, a lot of the Muslim women [she] look[s] up to [are] on the front lines,” despite getting “so much flak” for being vocal with their concerns. Ultimately, Amina believed that it is important for the University community to recognize that “Muslim women aren’t monolithic” and “there are multiple ways to do this faith, to act on it and to express it.”

Rima was similarly proud of her choice to wear a hijab, and saw it as a combination of personal and religious expression. She began wearing the head scarf in high school “as a dare,” but continued because she views doing so as “an act of faith and that was recommended by God” and she just “feel[s] that it’s better.” She appreciated that the hijab seemed to neutralize her body, so that others see her “for what [she says] and for what [she does], [rather] than exactly how [she chooses] to dress.” Rima explained that she supports “sexual empowerment and all that,” and was aware that some would see her choice to wear the hijab and dress modestly as a sign of opposition. However, for Rima the hijab is an expression of the fact that she is “generally a private person,” who sees sexuality as a “private thing” and the hijab is “just a further extension of that privacy.” Expanding on what this privacy meant to her, she felt that wearing the hijab was “almost like creating like your own zone...like your own cloak.” Though this cloak provided a feeling of comfort, rampant Islamophobia towards hijabi women exposed Rima to discrimination. As she put it, as a hijabi woman, “You face discrimination. You face words. You face death,” and as the first person to graduate from her high school who wore a hijab, she also faced a lot of questions. Yet, she was grateful that the hijab has deepened her own sense of religious identity and pride.

Though the hijab impacted how Rima interacted with others and stood out in her community, she was aware that “before wearing the hijab, I obviously looked different” and

“never really had the choice whether or not” to fully assimilate into her largely white community. Her identity as a Muslim and a Syrian are identities she “can’t put on and take off.” Instead, she accepted that “just by virtue of the environment - in the community [she] lived – [being Muslim and Syrian was her primary] identity.”

Omara viewed her hijab as something that connected her to other hijabi women and allowed her access to a rich community of support. She explained this connection this way:

If you wear a hijab, you know you can go [to other hijabi women] and they will be there for you. They’ll drop everything for you and it’s beautiful. You have this bonded family...no matter if you’ve never met them or they are not part of MMSU. You just know that when something happens, they are there for you. They are there and they will always be there for you.

The power of this community was activated in the weeks after the presidential election and in the wake of the series of reported instances of discrimination against Muslim students: “When those incidents that happened, everybody was pouring in and it’s like, ‘What can we do? What can we do to defend ourselves?’ Not defend ourselves, but to make ourselves safe. It’s something that I honestly think it’s a bond that you can’t break no matter what.” Omara added that though it would be nice to have greater support from the University administration, “at the end of the day, we have each other.”

The Muslim women interviewed who did not wear a hijab were aware that their experience on campus was very different than their hijabi peers. Jazmin referred to herself as an “invisible Muslim, because [when] people look at [her] and they don’t know that [she’s] Muslim.” She began using the term “invisible Muslim” when she noticed how members of her family were treated differently by airport security. Her father who “is a brown man” and “very

visibly Muslim” and aunt who “wears a type of abaya²⁴” are regularly singled out by airport security officials for additional screenings. Yet, she noticed that less visibly Muslim members of her family more frequently traveled uninterrupted through security. Jazmin viewed her ability to “pass as a non-Muslim” as “a very big privilege,” because “with all the hate crimes happening recently it’s mostly against people who are very, very visibly Muslim, like women wearing hijabs, [or sometimes even] men wearing [a Sikh] turban that [are] not even Muslim.”

Whenever Jazmin’s peers discovered that she was Muslim, she regularly found herself confronted with a barrage of questions about Muslims generally and her individual choices regarding religious practice. Sometimes these questions would be about Islamic practice: “Like when Eid comes around...one of my friends [asked] me, ‘What are you celebrating Eid for?’ and I was like, ‘I don’t even know. I just know that like this is an important holiday and I was supposed to be with my family.’” She was also often asked “microaggression-type questions” by her peers, like why she chose not to wear a hijab. Occasionally, these questions became more aggressive. For example, Jazmin recalled several instances when she was asked why Muslims had not condemned any terrorist attacks committed by other Muslims: “[My peers would ask,] ‘why haven’t any of the Muslims condemned [terrorist attacks]?’ And I was like, ‘Are you kidding me?!...Why aren’t you condemning the KKK?...Why would I need to do this?’...Sometimes I look at [my peers’ questions]...like, ‘Why would you ask me that?’” Jazmin sought to remain calm as she answered, “Yes, we have been condemning [terrorism] our whole lives.” Despite her frustration with these questions, she believed that “you can’t blame [her peers]” because “they come from such a place of ignorance...they genuinely want to know.”

²⁴ A loose, modest robe-style dress popular in portions of the Muslim world.

Several women talked about the close connection between their gender and racial, ethnic and religious identities. Jazmin viewed her race and religion as strongly connected. This connection became especially clear after enrolling in a course that focused on social justice themes. She found it liberating to talk with other women of color in the class about “how [her] religion intersections with [her] race,” because “a lot of [her] experiences with [her] race have been connected to [her] religion.” Jazmin noticed that others would make assumptions about her religion or ethnicity depending on whether she shared that she is Muslim or if they learned she is Indian:

I’ve had this conversation with so many people where people will say, ‘Oh, you’re Indian, so you must be Hindu,’ and I’d be like, ‘No, I’m Muslim my family is Muslim. We’ve been always been Muslim.’ And they are like, ‘Oh, so you’re from Pakistan,’ and I was like, ‘Nope, I just told you I was Indian.’ And they are like, ‘But, that means you are Hindu.’ I’ve had this circular argument with people so much. And a lot of times people don’t seem to understand that Indians can be Muslim as well, and there’s more Muslims in India than there are Christians in the United States. It’s a very significant population.

Many of Jazmin’s non-Muslim peers assumed that as a Muslim woman she was oppressed in her religious tradition. When her peers would ask about the challenges of being a Muslim woman, she explained she did not believe that Islam was responsible for discrimination against women around the world, instead countries become oppressive because of the choices of those in power, primarily men, not because of the religion of their citizens.

Hermione indicated that being Muslim is “definitely [her] strongest identity,” because “Islam is [her] way of life,” however, she added that she is also passionate about being a

Pakistani woman. When asked how these different identities fit together, Hermione said: “Being Pakistani is just what my traditions and cultures are, and stuff like that, how I celebrate and how I have fun with my family. But, being Muslim shapes the way I think and shapes what I do, and it’s like when I am living my life, what I am doing.” Though she had experienced first-hand that “being a brown girl isn’t easy” and that being “a woman in general” is “not a walk in the park,” she tried not to allow herself to feel that she was in any way lesser than white men. Hermione took comfort in the words of the Indian-American actress and comedian, Mindy Kaling, which Hermione paraphrased as, “I’ve never really felt like I am lesser than other people because I am a person of color, because I was raised with the privilege of a white man.”²⁵ She explained that this quote was meaningful to her because “that’s low-key how I feel too.” When she is asked by friends how she feels if Islamophobic, racist and sexist comments are directed her way, she explained that she responds saying, “I am fine, because I literally think of myself like a white man. There is honestly very little someone could say to me to make me feel shitty.” She added that being a Muslim has given her a “really high feeling of self-worth and strength,” and views her faith as a privilege that provides her with confidence and resources to address any challenges that come her way. Hermione described how her relationship with her various identities has changed over time:

When I was a little Pakistani girl, 14, post-puberty, [I] still had such a bad moustache. That girl definitely had such low self-esteem. Someone could say something to her and she’d burst into tears, but now, since I’ve put the worth that Islam places on women [on

²⁵ I suspect the Kaling quote she was referring to was this: “I have a personality defect where I sort of refuse to see myself as an underdog...It’s because of my parents. They raised me with the entitlement of a tall, blond, white man” (Marotta Marotta, 2015).

me that] makes me feel really good about myself. Now, I feel like I am a much stronger person.

In other words, though some might see being a Muslim Pakistani woman as a combination of identities that would leave Hermione ripe for discrimination, she saw those very identities as her greatest source of strength and resilience.

When Hermione arrived at Michigan she “definitely didn’t feel like [she] fit in” among the Muslim women on campus because she did not wear a hijab. She added that wearing a hijab is not common amongst Pakistani Muslims, like Hermione, because they “just don’t tend to be [hijabi] and it’s a normal cultural thing [not to wear a hijab]...but definitely more people here are Arab and more people wear hijabs.” Overtime, she noticed that many non-hijabi women were actively involved with the Michigan Muslim community. She appreciated that the former MMSU president “was a Pakistani non-hijab wearing girl” and believed that,

[Watching her as president] definitely opened up a lot of people’s opinions, because they were like, ‘You don’t have to be a burka wearing Arab girl to be MMSU president. You don’t have to be all the way to the one end of the spectrum...Okay, but that girl is going to every single prayer. That girl is taking part and doing so much for charity. She is such a good person. So, you can’t judge anyone.’

Hermione and many of the other women interviewed, appreciated the diversity within the Michigan Muslim community and the fact that there appeared to be room for lots of different expressions of Islam to be welcomed.

Both the men and women interviewed recognized that sometimes they struggled to communicate to one another about their experiences. Many traditional Muslim activities are segregated by gender and men and women often pray and worship separately. Annie observed

that sometimes Muslim men and women acted differently when they were around one another than they would in other areas of college life. She explained, “My Muslim friends are half guys and half girls, so when we’re studying for class they’ll give each other high fives or pat each other on the back; but then when you go to an MMSU event [the men and women] separate.” This practice became especially apparent for Annie when she was representing the MMSU at a new student week event: “I don’t have a problem hugging guys. My friend...came up to me during [an orientation event] and he wanted to like hug me...I was like, but I’m in front of the president of the MMSU. I couldn’t get him to not hug me, so I was like okay, whatever, I will just be the heathen here.”

Hijabi women typically do not remove their hijab in front of men who are not their family, but are permitted to do so when in the company of other women. As mentioned earlier, some Muslim women felt that Muslim men do not always understand, as Sofia put it, “what [hijabi women have] been facing.” The women interviewed felt that Muslim men sometimes stumbled when trying to figure out the best way to offer support to Muslim women. Abed recognized that his experience of being a Muslim is far different from women who wear a hijab. He explained that though it is true that some Muslim men wear a kufi from time to time, and that the kufi likely communicates to others that he is Muslim, it is not the same experience as a woman who wears a hijab: “My close family believes the hijab is an obligation and therefore, it holds much more value and is much more a representative symbol of Islam than anything that a male would wear.” He continued to explain that though kufis are “generally thought of to be representative of Islam, they are not,” and are more accurately described as “cultural garb.” It is easier to remove or change “garb” according to one’s preferences, than it is to change how and when a woman wears her hijab.

The importance of race and/or ethnicity in Muslim students' identification and connection

Students emphasized that they viewed and experienced their Muslim identity as closely connected to their race and/or ethnicity. They acknowledged that their experience of being a Muslim is deeply connected to other parts of their identity that varied in their degree of salience at different points in their lives. For some students, being Muslim was the most central part of their identity. Dameer explained, "For me, being a Muslim is...the main part of who I am [because] whether one of my friends is white or black or Arab, when he is Muslim I feel like there is a sense of kinship...there is something [we] share that's kind of special." Like Dameer, Fox said his "biggest identity" was being Muslim. He was aware that for some of his peers, their primary identity was their ethnicity, but that was not the case for him. Fox described himself as a "Muslim Indian;" he appreciated his Indian identity, but viewed it as something that "kind of comes after being Muslim." He explained that he "didn't really have much connection with India" and though he "can definitely connect with other Indians," it was not the same as the type of relationships he had with other Muslims, even if those Muslims were of a different ethnicity.

When I asked what identities, other than Islam, were important to the students interviewed, several highlighted their ethnicity. Like Fox, a few were careful to note whether their Muslim identity or ethnicity was more central to their understanding of themselves. Nasim identified as "Iranian, Persian, whatever you want to call it." Though his faith is important to him, he identified more strongly with being Iranian:

Even though I consider my religion very important to me I feel there's some kind of connection with Iranians. I don't know if it's just me, but I feel like it's other Iranians too. Whenever you see another one you always say 'hi', you always have that bond...I think that's definitely been instilled [in me] by my parents because they hold [their]

Iranian [identity] over [their] Muslim [identity]. They consider themselves Iranian Muslim, not Muslim Iranians, that's definitely been passed down to me.

Unlike Fox, who described himself as Muslim first than Indian, Nasim felt a stronger relationship with his ethnicity than religion. However, both agreed that the two aspects of identity were deeply connected.

Omaria recognized that being a woman is a significant part of her identity, but noted that “at the end of the day, the way I see the world [is as a] Muslim and [a] Palestinian, and to me [these identities are] interchangeable.” She sometimes experienced pressure from her Muslim and Palestinian peers to focus on one part of her identity over another, but found that impossible. Instead, she preferred to go “through life thinking with the mindset [of] a Muslim and a Palestinian, nothing else.” This was not an easy set of identities to hold, because though being Muslim was not easy, Omaria felt that “being Palestinian on this campus is a lot worse than being Muslim.” When I asked why she feels this way, she explained that though there is a lot of “Islamophobic rhetoric” on campus, the Palestinian advocacy student group, or Michigan for a Free Palestine (MFP)²⁶ gets “attacked a lot more directly,” and MFP “[doesn't] have the support that MMSU does.”

Omaria recalled that MFP had held a demonstration on the Diag leading up to the group's annual campaign to petition the student government to support a resolution encouraging the University to divest from companies that work with the Israeli government. However, unknown to the organizers, the demonstration was scheduled during Rosh Hashanah when the majority of Michigan's Jewish students were attending religious services. Omaria explained that the fact MFP's event coincided with the Jewish holiday led MFP to be “attacked.” MFP's members

²⁶ A pseudonym.

responded saying, “Hold up! We are not attacking the Jewish religion, we’re attacking oppression and the government. It was really [about the Israeli] government, it was really about that. There was no correlation [between the protest and our feelings about the Jewish faith] and they can’t say we’re anti-Semitic.” Omaria had observed that the University administration was at least minimally supportive of Muslim students when they pointed out Islamophobia on campus, but she felt no support or empathy for the concerns of Palestinian students.

Omaria said that sometimes it was a challenge to convince her MMSU peers to support Palestinian causes and that she sometimes has to plead with them to attend events. MFP held an event where Palestinian students shared their experiences on campus and described what Palestine means to them. It frustrated Omaria that she had to plead with many MMSU members to show up in support of their Palestinian peers, and understand why they should care about Palestine even if they do not have family from the region. Though she shared a Muslim faith with her MMSU peers, she knew that unless they were Palestinian as well, they would not understand her passion for MFP and concern for Palestine:

[MMSU students] just don’t understand. I’m Palestinian, so Palestinian issues are really huge...I keep telling them, ‘You guys understand it’s not your struggle, it’s their struggle, and you guys have to understand you won’t ever understand what they’re going through.

You won’t understand what Palestinians go through.’

It saddened Omaria that she was unable to convince her MMSU peers to engage more actively in MFP and other causes that impacted marginalized people. She explained that she took it upon herself to encourage the MMSU board to engage in social justice and collaborate on events with other groups that represent marginalized students. Since Omaria has been involved in MSA, the group held a teach-in on the Black Lives Matter movement, and discussed the experiences of

black Muslims, and they had been discussing organizing an event in support of Native American students.

Overall, MMSU students understood their race and/or ethnicity and their Muslim identity as deeply interrelated. They had varying opinions how they thought about those aspects of identity in relationship to one another, some choosing to focus on their Muslim identity as primary, others their ethnicity or race. Omaria objected to the prioritizing of one aspect of her identity over another, and viewed her combination of identities as integrated with her activism and connected her to other marginalized groups.

Conclusion

The MMSU students' expectations from the University were few, but were often unmet. The most consistent concern from MMSU students was the desire to spend their time on campus without experiencing discrimination perpetuated by the University administration, faculty or graduate instructors. For example, Jamal explained that he, like other Michigan students was "just trying to get through college," and it would help if the University did not show Islamophobic films along the way. Additionally, they also wished that their courses would not put them in situations where they would be forced to share their Islamic identity if they did not wish to, or have to defend their religious beliefs. Rima described being thrilled when her classmates did not put her in the position of having to defend the hijab or ask her to speak for all Muslim and Arab people. Sofia would have preferred that instead of asking students to do a project on distilleries, a subject which she knew little because she did not drink, her professor would have chosen a different industry for them to examine – one that was further removed from her religious practice.

In the weeks and months surrounding the 2016 presidential election, MMSU students were both disappointed and frustrated with what they perceived as Michigan's tepid concern for their safety and well-being. The delay in reporting the numerous acts of discrimination and violence towards Muslim students to the broader campus, and choosing to classify these events as acts of "intimidation" rather than assaults and hate crimes, reinforced many MMSU students' belief that the University Administration was not their ally.

In the face of what they perceived as the apathy of the Michigan administration, MMSU students used the Muslim Coalition and within-group networks, like the sisterhood text chain and Facebook group, to leverage their collective power with the University while addressing the concerns of their community. Highly organized, the Coalition was able to quickly attempt to address the needs of their community and share their concerns with the administration. Omaria summed up the MMSU students' belief in the power of their community this way: "at the end of the day, we have each other" and that is "a bond that you can't break no matter what."

Without the support of the University, MMSU students relied on others within the Muslim community to help them find a sense of safety and security on campus. Students maintained several places on campus where they could reliably connect with other Muslim students, such as Liberty Place and the Muslim table in the library. The Muslim women whom I interviewed were acutely concerned about their safety, and worried about discussing faith with others and disclosing their Muslim identity if it was not already apparent on their bodies by veiling. Annie was too frightened to use any of the reflection rooms to pray on her own, so asked friends to stand watch outside. Muslim students organized a volunteer "buddy system" that other Muslims, especially women, could call upon if they wanted someone to accompany them on a late-night walk home. In a group discussion of all Muslim women, several women disclosed that

they regularly carried pepper spray, and those who did not said they were considering doing the same.

Many MMSU students expressed frustration at the limited support the University provided to Muslim students, however, Omaria observed that even less was offered to Palestinian students like herself and many other of her MMSU peers. In other words, to Omaria, Michigan appeared to pick and choose which aspects of her and other students' identities with which it engaged and supported. For Omaria, Michigan was an especially unreliable ally in her desire to feel included and safe on campus.

MMSU students relied on their faith to help them find support and safety when it appeared to be lacking in the broader campus environment, or when coping with some of the general challenges of college life. Omaria called her father before significant exams and ask him to read portions of the Qur'an aloud. When Dameer found himself upset over grades, he turned to his MMSU friends for encouragement and a reminder of the support their faith provides: "Sometimes [when] I am really upset, if I didn't get good grades or anything, my friends from MMSU will be like, 'Whatever happens, happens for the best' or...'You are supposed to do your part as much as you can, and God will do His part, and if it's not supposed to happen it won't.'" If his MMSU friends were not around, he looked for encouragement and wisdom from the Qur'an and other Islamic theological writings. Dameer suspected that his Christian peers similarly looked to "their own sayings" and scripture when they needed support. Like their peers in the other groups in this study, the MMSU students' faith was a constant source of support throughout their time in college.

CHAPTER VI

“Vital to my Life”: A Predominantly Students of Color Christian Group

Unlike the other campus groups discussed, Ignite has no dedicated campus staff and, at the time of writing, did not have funding other than the few hundred dollars they could access by applying to Michigan’s Central Student Government’s general fund for student organizations. The bulk of Ignite’s activities centered around a weeknight worship service led by a pastor of a historically black Southeastern Michigan church. With the help of a student assistant from another university campus, the pastor traveled to several colleges in the region, preaching and meeting with students. Due to his travel and worship schedule, the pastor had only limited availability to connect with Michigan students, so the majority of the day-to-day work of running the group was left to Ignite’s student leadership board. The student board was responsible for coordinating with the University to reserve rooms, leading group recruitment efforts, and organizing social events. For the other groups in the study, all of these activities were taken care of in partnership with the group’s professional staff.

I interviewed eight students who were involved in Ignite. All of the interviewees identified as black women. The fact that only women participated in the study is representative of the participation of women in the group as a whole. The students’ estimation of the ratio of men to women in the group highlights the predominance of women’s participation. For example, Tiffany suggested Ignite was “90% women, 10% men,” and Christina went even further and

proposed that it was closer to “95% women, 5% men. If that.” Given this ratio, it is perhaps not surprising that women have composed the majority, and often the entire, Ignite leadership board for as far back as the students I interviewed could remember.

All of the participants identified as Christian prior to coming to U-M. None of the students chose Michigan specifically for its Christian community, but relied upon many of the more traditional questions that shape college choice, such as financial aid and cost of attendance, strength of a program of interest, and proximity to family. Many students knew that they wanted to be involved in a college Christian organization prior to arriving on campus, but assumed that because Michigan is a large institution it would likely have a student faith organization that suited their preferences.

The following sections describe students’ remarks in three areas: (1) what being Christian means to them, (2) what it is like being a Christian student at Michigan, including how this status influences their social and academic lives, and (3) the ways in which their intersecting identities influence how these students understand and negotiate their Christian identity.

What Being Christian Means to Ignite Students

Ignite students described their Christianity as rooted in a love for God and desire to follow Jesus’ teachings to the best of their ability. For Christina, being Christian meant “having love for God and Christ, and just knowing that He died for us, for our sins, and having love for people.” She sought to live out her faith through “[showing] love to people and just [being] a good person.” Kayla explained that “being a Christian means being intentional about living according to the word of God.” This involved reading the Bible and seeking to apply the lessons you learn to your life in your actions with others. Violet declared that loving others is central to her understanding of her faith:

I think [being a Christian] means being loving to other people. That's the word I always think of, loving. With love, I think it comes all those other characteristics that you're supposed to be: Caring, selfless, not judgmental or jealous. I think it all comes from love. The way that Jesus gave his life for us, that was His ultimate sacrifice, [and a sign of] His love for us.

To express her faith commitments, Violet endeavored to be as “selfless as possible most of the time and conduct [herself] in a way that is beneficial to [others] and just trying to put other people before [herself] as much as possible.” She added that she sought to be “conscious of [her] actions and thoughts towards the people [she] care[s] most about,” and was “always analyzing what more [she] could do” to live in line with her Christian values.

Many participants discussed the importance of being consistent in their faith practice, and not only being pious when they were around others; but, as Madison put it, following Jesus “whether in private or in public.” Participants were aware that not all people who used the label Christians sought to be as unswerving in their practice. To avoid being lumped in with differently observant Christians, Nia did not like to use the term “Christian” to describe herself, but preferred “believer”:

Sometimes when you hear the word Christian, a lot of people lot of get...negative connotations about the word [and] about who a Christian is. To me, [being a believer is...] a way of life, it's the way that you interact with people, the way you treat people...and that you're helping other people to find their relationship with God.

Kayla was similarly careful to distinguish herself from others who may use the Christian label, but do not share the same values: “I feel like my faith causes me to be responsible, not only for myself, but for the souls of others. Everyone knows I'm a Christian, they all feel free to come to

talk to me because I'm not a judgmental or a condemning type of Christian; I'm just open and honest." She added that she believes that there are a lot of people who call themselves Christian who will "only love you if you are a Christian or fit a certain mold," and it was important to her to "[love] people, no matter what."

Whatever words Ignite students used to describe their faith, all participants indicated that it is central to their life. For example, Kayla explained that her faith was a core part of her identity:

[My faith] means a lot because it's who I am...I think it's important and it's vital to my life and livelihood. I believe that it is what I was called to do, and it just seems like everything is easy that way, it's less stressful for sure. I just have a lot of faith; I don't really worry about things [since] I decided to give God full control.

For Kayla and other Ignite students, their faith served as an anchor throughout their time at Michigan through helping to put any challenges in perspective.

Ignite students' faith connected them to the teachings of God and Jesus and to a broader community of black Christians. Madison explained that for her and many other African-Americans, involvement in church is a significant community activity: "I think, personally as far as being African-American, [being a Christian] is just something that is kind of like black or white. Either you are in the church, or you're not. My experience is like my whole family, everybody is in the church. It's just something that's kind of expected of you as well." All of the Ignite students interviewed had grown up in the black church, so the community Ignite provided was soothingly familiar.

Each of the Ignite students I spoke with said that they took comfort in the black church environment Ignite provided. However, Kayla explained that though she liked being in a

worshipping community with other black Christians, she hoped that someday Ignite “will grow beyond just African American students” and “find a way to be more inclusive of other races that are also Christian.” When asked if there was something that Ignite could be doing to change how it reached out to students, Kayla said that she did not believe that Ignite sought out to exclusively attract black Christians, but it likely feels “safer to just have others who share the African-American identity. It’s just safer to be with people who you assume are Christians too.” She continued to draw a parallel between Ignite’s racial makeup and that of many other campus Christian student organizations: “It’s definitely probably just a comfort zone thing...like other Christian groups that are predominantly white or Asian.” Other students did not mention the same desire to change the demographics of Ignite’s members, but shared Kayla’s belief that Ignite provided a “comfort zone” for black Christians.

Given the relationship between race and faith for Ignite students, many naturally sought out a predominantly black Christian community upon arriving on campus. Students described being attracted to Ignite by the pastor’s engaging and relatable sermons, and the opportunity to be in a community with other black Christians. They emphasized the fact that being involved in Ignite provided them with a comfortable and supportive place to retreat to in the midst of the responsibilities of student life and, more significantly, respite within Michigan’s predominantly white campus environment. Ciara appreciated that Ignite is a “safe space for [her] to share [her] thoughts.” Madison explained that being in a group with other members who shared her faith helped her develop a closeness with her peers in the group that was not available to students in non-faith based student organizations:

When you have your faith in something or someone, in Jesus in this case...you get to see peoples’ lowest moments. You get to see their highest moments. You get to see the

journey and the improvements that they have made. I just feel it's something stronger...versus just the average [student organization] on campus.

The combination of sharing both a racial and faith identity supported Ignite students in creating strong bonds and providing a community where students felt cared for and safe.

Michigan's Influence on Ignite Students' Faith Presentation and Engagement

Ignite students believed it was generally easy to be a Christian at Michigan and that Christians had a good reputation on campus. Tiffany felt that there were lots of Bible study opportunities available, and "if you don't want to go party, you can find something to do." In the group discussion, Hannah, Violet and Ciara shared the belief that their experience as Michigan students was not significantly different from their non-religious peers or those who ascribe to another faith. Violet explained that she did not believe the University was aware of the experiences of religious students or sought to influence them in any way: "The University doesn't go by and say, 'Hey, all the Christian students here, all the Muslim students here.'...I don't feel like they go out of their way to make a distinction between us like that." Ciara pointed out that she did not remember the University asking about her religious affiliation when she arrived on campus, or in any of the admissions materials. Students also agreed that to the University, as Ciara put it, Ignite was "literally just another group" among the many student groups that populated the campus. Accordingly, Ignite was not treated in any way that suggested it was singled out for discrimination or unique treatment. Overall, Ignite students perceived Michigan as neither interested nor involved in their religious lives.

Michigan's lack of engagement in their religious lives did not preclude Ignite students from believing that there were some campus experiences that were unique to Christian students. Students' comments on the relationship between their faith and life on campus generally fell into

one of three categories: 1) negotiating the campus partying culture, 2) the relationship between their faith commitments and demanding academic schedule, and 3) the limits of the resources Michigan provided for religious student organizations. The following three sections discuss students' comments in these areas in greater detail.

Campus partying culture

Several participants explained that by choosing not to drink or do drugs and abstaining from sex before marriage they were setting themselves apart from the broader campus partying and drinking culture. In doing so, they acknowledged that they were not participating in what was a large part of campus life for many of their peers. Nia sought to “separate” herself from the pressure to drink and smoke that pervades college life. She recognized that this was “one of the things that makes [her] different” from other undergraduates, and was comforted by the fact that “the Bible says, ‘We can’t be like the rest.’” Instead, Nia’s focus was on “praying and studying the word, just aligning your life [with God and Jesus, and] not trying to be like everybody else.”

Due to the fact that many participants avoided the campus partying culture, they believed that Christian students were perceived as dull. Madison suspected her peers think that Christians only like to have “‘clean fun’ which is ‘boring fun.’” To counter this stereotype, she felt pressure to “be a lot more welcoming and just more jovial when it comes to interacting with people that are strangers.”

Participants recognized that being independent from the broader campus partying culture required some discipline and independence that may be hard for some students. When asked what advice she would give Christian students arriving on campus, Tiffany explained that incoming students would need to learn to negotiate two groups of friends: “You’re going to have friends outside of your Christian group that [are] not going to do the same things as your

Christian group [friends].” She added that it is important Christian students to choose whether or how they want to engage with Michigan’s partying culture. She was careful to clarify that she did not mean to suggest that Christians cannot have fun: “You can have fun. Nowhere in the Bible [does it say that] you can’t have fun, but you still need to be accountable for your actions.” Tiffany believed it was important for Christian students to be aware of the dominant partying culture and make sure they engaged with it in ways that aligned with their faith commitments.

Academic life

Ignite students spoke extensively about the relationship between their faith life and academic demands. Most of their comments focused on the ways in which they used their faith as a tool to cope with academic challenges and setbacks. Madison explained that her faith helped her to handle “the stress and pressure” that is a part of academic life at Michigan. She found it was “very easy to get caught up in what everyone else is doing,” and relied on her “relationship with God, beliefs and Christianity” to put the stressors of college life in perspective and appreciate “the growth that [she’s] made on [her] own.” She added that she regularly asked for “discernment” and to “hear God’s voice” when she was faced with large decisions. When Madison finds that the stress of her academic life threatens to overwhelm, she takes time to “reflect on those moments and say, ‘I shouldn’t have let myself get that worked up,’ or ‘That was something that God would have wanted me to do.’” She took comfort in “being able to see [her] progress [and] shortcomings” while always “aiming to behave [in accordance with her faith].”

Madison recalled one instance where a professor began a class with the admonition that a large number of students would fail. The course was key to Madison’s major, so she “pushed [herself], still tried and gave it [her] very all.” She recalled that when she felt most frustrated by the course, her faith would help to say to herself, “Come on, keep going.” Ultimately, she passed

the class even though she did not believe her exam scores throughout the term warranted a passing grade. She explained that this experience felt like “a testament of faith and the whole concept that God’s already given you the victory.” Madison added that she felt that God was saying to her, “You already were going to pass the class. I didn’t allow you to come this far [only to have you fail].” She also took comfort in the fact that had she failed it would be because “God’s got something else planned.” Madison used her faith to help her make meaning out of academic successes and challenges, and had a faith narrative prepared to provide support regardless of the outcome.

Despite the support that Ignite students’ faith provided to their academic life, the two were not always easily compatible. Nia felt that her identities as a student and as a Christian do not always “intermingle.” The responsibilities of being a student can be all-consuming, so in order to ensure that she makes time for her faith Nia has to “put God in [her] schedule.” Several students echoed this sentiment, and described constantly having to balance their faith life and coursework. As Ciara put it, “You can only go to Bible study so many times a week, without it cutting into your actual schoolwork.” Hannah agreed, adding that it was a constant struggle to “find the time” to “participate in religious [organizations] or study the Bible...and keep that relationship [with your faith] strong.”

Students indicated that they would rarely bring up their faith unprompted, but would do so if they were asked or it was relevant to the conversation at hand. Both Nia and Hannah recalled taking classes focused on social identities and, as Nia put it, “the things that make us who we are.” During one class period, Nia was paired up with one of the course facilitators and told him about her Christian faith and how meaningful it was to her life. He responded by

sharing his own story about being a Christian. Knowing that he shared this identity helped Nia to feel more “comfortable” talking about her faith with others.

As part of class activity, Hannah remembered being asked to talk about identities that are meaningful to her in several courses and often chose to talk about her Christian faith:

A lot of times [the instructor will] say, is there...an identity that influences your decisions a lot. A lot of times...I'll say being a Christian influences the way that I go about doing things...because it's a part of who I am. You can't hide something that's ingrained deeply in who you are.

Kayla echoed Hannah's willingness to talk about her faith both in and outside the classroom. Kayla observed that “everybody knows [she's] a Christian” because she is not afraid to bring it up: “It seems to always come up in conversation. If it doesn't come up, if someone's asking me about advice or we're just having a conversation with my male or female friends, and a lot of conversations yield advice, so mine is always, have faith and pray.”

Violet recalled that during a discussion on scientific ethics, a professor proposed a range of hypothetical scenarios and asked how students would respond. One of the professor's prompts was, “What if you got your test back and you actually got a 9 out of 100 when everybody got recorded as a 90?...How many people would report this?” Violet was the only one in her class to raise her hand and declare, “Yes, I'd say something.” The professor asked her to elaborate on why she believed she would make this choice, and Violet explained, “because it doesn't sit well with my values, that's lying and I'm aware of what's happened [and I received the wrong score]. It's deceitful [not to point out the error]...[Those are] my Christian values.” The professor went on to talk about a code of scientific ethics, and Violet remembered using the time to think further about her own code: “I feel like Christianity is my code, my personal code for life. [The

professor] was talking about [the sciences], what you can do and what you can't do, your guidelines, and I feel like Christianity, those are my guidelines that I [use to] go through life.”

Nia also remembered an instance where she chose to share her faith in class. A professor asked students to talk about identities that they are “not ashamed of” and they were instructed to stand in different places in the room according to which aspect of identity they chose to discuss. Nia found herself alone in the designated religion section of the room. When it came her turn to speak about where she had chosen to stand she said, “Okay, well since I’m the only person standing here I might as well go ahead and discuss why I’m standing here... This is me taking a stand that I’m not ashamed of my religion [and] being a Christian.” Her classmates clapped in support of her declaration. Reflecting on that moment, Nia believed that “a lot of people are afraid to stand up and not be ashamed of their religion,” so she used that class activity as an opportunity to share her pride for her faith.

Not all Ignite students had such positive experiences of discussing their faith in class and some worried about how their peers and instructors perceived Christian students. Though Kayla “[didn’t] feel like Christian is a marginalized identity” on campus, she found it difficult to bring up in classes for her social sciences major. When someone mentioned their Christian faith in class, Kayla noticed that sometimes her peers would make disparaging remarks:

I figured out [that in some classes Christians did not feel welcome by the] things that people [would] say after Christians would speak. It was like someone had to always [offer a] rebuttal and say something. Not in a rude way, but...you can tell they were just trying to start a debate or something. I’m trying to think [of a particular instance of this] that just made me so mad, but I cannot think of what happened because I tried to just block it out.

Worried about her peers' view of her, Kayla sometimes she held her tongue and avoided bringing up her faith in class discussions:

I didn't really speak up a lot, honestly, for my faith...just because I didn't want to offend anyone. That's not really good, but I just felt like this is a learning experience for me. So, I was going to sit back and just observe, because I wouldn't want to say anything to offend anyone...I grew up believing [that] we don't argue about the Bible and we don't have to prove anything to anyone. It's just like as it is.

Kayla added that if it were true that "Christians were the majority" at Michigan, they were not often hugely represented in her courses. Kayla remembered participating in numerous class discussions that left her with the strong feeling that many of her peers had negative perceptions of Christianity. To cope with this feeling of isolation, she found herself seeking out other Christians in her classes for support and camaraderie.

Kayla acknowledged that not all of her experiences discussing Christianity in the classroom were negative. At one point, she struggled with "really [feeling] isolated as a Christian" and was especially anxious about sharing her faith with others. Soon, she found herself in a class where she was paired with a partner and they were asked to "[write] down [their] identities and...what [their] purpose in life was." Kayla wrote about several of her goals and her belief that her purpose was "being one with God and...for Christ, or just something along those lines." She was nervous about sharing this with her partner, but to her surprise it went better than expected:

When I got with my partner, we had to share out loud our purpose. I went first and I said everything, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ part. Then my partner went and he [spoke about his Christian faith. I explained to him that I also wrote about being a Christian, but]

I just didn't feel comfortable sharing it because of the stigma. We were about to cry and he was like, 'Don't ever do that. It's okay, be bold.'

This interaction was an "eye opener" for Kayla, and inspired her to be more open about her faith with others.

Participants discussed feeling a connection with their peers of different faiths and curiosity about their beliefs. In the group discussion, Nia observed that her student peers "don't really understand [religions other than Judaism and Christianity, and] when they look at people practicing other religions they are like, 'What's going on?'" Hannah added that Christianity is "pretty popular" on campus and "people are good with Jewish students and support them;" however, there is a lot of "uncertainty" around how their peers feel about Islam.

The Ignite students interviewed expressed concern when they heard about instances of religious discrimination against their peers of any tradition. In February 2017, the prayer rugs in the undergraduate library reflection room, a place that many Muslim students used for prayer, were vandalized. It was reported that several of the rugs were covered in urine (Ryan, 2017). Hearing this, Nia's heart went out to her Muslim peers:

Although I wasn't a part of the religion who uses the prayer mats or use that space, as a Christian or as a believer...I felt for them in the same moment because it's like, this is really something that goes on. Although our religions aren't exactly the same, we don't have the same core belief, same way of praying, we all still want the same thing.

She thought about how sad she would have been if it had been a church or a prayer space that she used that was vandalized. Though Nia did not believe that she knew the specific "struggle" of her Muslim peers, she felt empathy for the harm this incident likely caused.

Ciara shared Nia's empathy and interest in learning about students of other faiths. Sharing a room with a Muslim peer during a study abroad trip helped Ciara to better connect with Muslim students: "[My roommate would] pray in the room. It was fine. I'd help her get her prayer stuff, sometimes...She was] the sweetest person I've met to date." This roommate "broke" Ciara's "stereotypes of Islam" and was a "wake-of call" leading her to avoid "judging people, based off of what they believe in."

Students explained that they were moved when professors acknowledged when instances of racial or religious discrimination occurred on campus and engaged them in class. As I discussed in the chapter describing the experiences of students in the Muslim Student Group, the months surrounding the 2016 presidential election were marked with a number of racist and discriminatory incidents on campus. My interviews with members of Ignite in February 2017, coincided with a series of racist and anti-Semitic emails sent to engineering and computer science students (St. John & Rankin, 2017). Ciara walked into one of her science classes shortly after word of these emails had spread throughout campus, and the professor began by stating: "I don't care about what color your skin is. I don't care about this. I don't care what God you pray to. We're all human beings, fundamentally." The professor went on to spend "20 minutes" explaining that other faculty should not "skirt around issues" and be more open to talking about discrimination and oppression. He concluded by sharing his family's experience of anti-Semitism. The professor's open acknowledgment of race and religion startled Ciara: "I feel like that was the first-time race, or religion, or gender was ever addressed in a classroom setting, for me. He's the only professor that's ever done that." Ciara appreciated the professor's willingness to bring up these topics in class and referred to him as one of her "favorite professors."

University support for religious student organizations

Ignite students were frustrated that as a student organization they do not receive much support from the University. As mentioned earlier, Ignite does not receive external funding or staff support (aside from a weekly visiting preacher). This sets Ignite apart from the other groups in this study, who benefit from thousands in outside funding that supports staff and group activities.²⁷ Without external funding or staff resources, Ignite students are reliant on the University for the few hundred dollars many student groups receive from the student government to advertise, hold events, and find space to gather. In order to get University funding for Ignite, group leaders learned that they had be careful in how they described the group's functions. Nia explained that the University does not fund "praise and worship" activities, so it is necessary to portray the group in a way that de-emphasized its Christian mission. Violet said that she and other members of the executive board learned to describe Ignite's activities as either educational or "entertainment, not praise and worship," and sermons have to be referred to as "more of a speech." Nia laughed adding, "to make it work" Ignite's events are referred to as "academic religious speech."

The funding process frustrated many Ignite members who felt compelled to lie to obtain necessary funding. Ciara believed that they were given little choice but to go "against [their] Christian values by bending the truth to get funding." Tiffany explained her irritation with this process this way:

²⁷ I want to be clear here that I am not saying the other groups in this study are flush with cash. None have excessive resources, and staff often work long hours for little pay. One religious group staff member and I joked that their job demanded full-time work, but only offered part-time pay. However, there is a noteworthy difference between having even minimal outside funding and none.

You just can't blatantly say this is a religious Christian [organization] and we need money to pay for this. You have to be like, this is benefiting the students because we have a free space and everything like that, and you shouldn't have to do all of that. You should just be able to say what type of [organization] you are and get the money.

Instead of being direct in their request for the funds needed to keep their group afloat the students had to, as Violet put it, use "other synonyms for the words that we have. Where there's a sermon it's a speech, or it's a lecture. [Ignite has to use] the vocabulary that fits [Michigan's] needs."

Though the participants appreciated that Michigan generally let Ignite and other religious groups run their organizations as they saw fit, they were disappointed that the University did not take a greater role in letting students know about the many religious student organizations available. Tiffany was aware that for many students, being a part of a Christian organization is an important part of their student experience. She lamented that many students were likely unaware of the campus religious organizations available for them to participate:

[Michigan doesn't] really advertise that they have religious [organizations] on campus, they just say diversity and blah blah blah. [Religious organizations] can be a determining factor for students...Even though it's a public university and it's not a Christian university or any type of religious university, [you can] tell your students that you have a safe space for them to go. [If Michigan did let students know about the Christian groups available] they'll probably will pick [U-M] over a Christian school because they want to have it all, like be able to do certain things, but still have...a safe space for them to go for their religion.

Tiffany recognized that Michigan has many qualities that make it attractive to Christian students even though it is not explicitly a religious campus. However, she also believed it was important for the University to let students know that religious groups were available, because they would likely be a “safe space” for many.

The Intersection of Christianity and Other Aspects of Identity for Ignite Students

Like the participants in each of the other groups, Ignite students were asked to name identities other than their faith that were meaningful to them, and how the identities they name shape their experience as a Christian at Michigan. All of the Ignite students spoke about their identities as black women as fundamentally important both to their experience as Christians and their time on the campus more broadly. As discussed previously, many Ignite students indicated that they intentionally looked for a campus religious community comprised primarily of black members and anticipated that the style of worship would feel familiar.

Madison took comfort in being involved in a black Christian group because it allowed her to connect with her peers who shared her race and faith, and these relationships are especially important on a largely white campus, like Michigan:

I think with [Ignite] being an [organization] on a PWI²⁸ campus, I would say that it’s even more fulfilling because you find yourself and your community. Your community twice, with your Christian family, but these are also people that look like you and can relate to your daily experiences, and just get you on a different level.

Madison noted that Ignite did not set out to be a “black-only” group, instead “they just happen to have mostly black members...but definitely have and are open to anyone that comes.” When

²⁸ Predominantly white institution. In 2018, approximately 55 percent of Michigan students identify as white and 4 percent identify as black (University of Michigan Office of the Registrar, 2018).

non-black students visit Ignite's services or events, Madison observed that "they really enjoy it, but you can tell it's a different experience for them." However, she believed that black Ignite participants are able to better "relate to the songs that we're singing because they're the songs that [they] sang, at home. You know, things that [they] were raised on doing." She added, that "black Christian churches...[have] a different environment, kind of different nature" compared to "other Christian churches." Madison described some of the factors that make black Christian churches unique: "A little louder with the sermons, louder with the music, more theatrical just in general and just that kind of familiarity and understanding."

The connection between race and religion was so strong for many participants, they believed that they were often assumed to be Christians because of their race; because, as Ciara put it, "a lot of Africans are very religious." Raised in the black church, Kayla grew up learning to "view other African-Americans as Christian." Christina agreed with Kaya and Ciara, adding, "It's cliché, but [if] you're African-American that means you're Christian...Mostly, all the African-American people that I know are Christian, and if they're not, they're Muslim."

Though Ignite members believed there was a strong relationship between their black and Christian identities, their race most constantly impacted their experiences at Michigan. Nia explained that "being black...plays a more permanent role in [her] day to day interactions," than her identity as a Christian. Although she perceived her race as playing a larger role in her everyday experiences than her faith, the two aspects of her identity are "interconnected in the way that [she] respond[s] to a lot of things": "They either propel me to do something, or they stop me from saying things, or stop me from doing things that wouldn't be Christian-like or believer-like. They intertwine and play that relationship within each other." For example, Nia recalled working on a class group project tasked with discussing urban poverty. She mentioned

that she was from the Detroit area, and her white male discussion partner “[implied] that [she] had a child or because [she] came from Detroit that [she] was impoverished.” Frustrated, Nia relied on her faith to help her respond:

In that moment, two different reactions were going on in my head. I could have easily snipped into him and said a couple of things, but on the other hand, I was like, ‘Lord, help me not to be the person that he wants me to be.’ I feel like he was trying to get a reaction.

Nia believes that “relying on God” helps to keep her grounded when she experiences discrimination, and not “let [her] emotion[s] get the best of [her].”

Tiffany shared Nia’s reliance on her faith to help her decide when and how to respond to experiences of discrimination as an African-American and as a woman:

Being a Christian [anchors my experiences along with] being a woman and being African-American. Just knowing...when to hold your tongue on certain things when you’re outnumbered because I am black. Some people feel threatened that I am black. Being Christian, [you have] God’s guidance and telling you, ‘No, you don’t need to say that right there.’

Both Nia and Tiffany used their faith as a filter to help them decide how to respond to discrimination. Often this meant that their faith helped them to temper their frustration and decide what language to use in response to a confrontation.

Pride in their identity as an African-American woman was a strong theme throughout the students’ comments. Kayla described herself as “a proud African-American woman.” Nia stated, “I’m an African-American woman and a lot of time that makes a lot of difference in the way that I go about my life, in the way that I interact with people.” Christina explained that “being an

African-American is meaningful...mainly because of the struggles that [African-Americans] have to go through and always overcoming them.” She added that being a woman meant that there were additional challenges to overcome. Madison offered a similar description of the influence of her identity as an African-American woman on her experiences: “Being an African-American female...[has] a major role in my life and the experiences that I have with people.”

All of the participants maintained that there is a strong relationship between their identity as a black woman and their Christian identity, and described feeling a camaraderie with others who shared the same combination of identities. Nia believed that being a black Christian woman on one hand made her “unique,” but on the other hand, did not “because [she has] quite a few friends who have the same identities.” With those friends, her shared identities gave her “common ground.” Madison similarly believed that being an African-American Christian woman meant that she had a unique experience of Christianity:

As a female, as a Christian, there are certain aspects of Christianity that stand out like being submissive and...maybe like a little more heavily involved in the church than the average man, but not necessarily in like a true leadership role, but more so like a serving role. I don’t have any problem with submission. I don’t think it’s like a negative connotation at all, but just that role is something that’s very profound as far as being a female African-American Christian.

Madison believed it was her responsibility to be actively involved with the church in a “serving role” and care for her faith community. For Madison, this kind of service meant that she needed to work diligently to support male leadership in the church. Of course, the absence of men and male leadership in Ignite, meant that women had to take on many of those roles themselves.

Women comprised the vast majority of Ignite’s participants and student leadership, and participants expressed disappointment that more men were not actively involved in the group. Christina remembered hearing that “women mostly are religious,” so the lack of men in Ignite is no surprise. However, she observed that the number of male participants in the group tends to ebb and flow based on who is in leadership: “We had a male in our [executive board a few years ago]. He was in a fraternity, so he asked his fraternity brothers to come.” She was unsure why more men did not make the decision to show up on their own: “I know [men who] are religious...is it they don’t want to outwardly show it? I don’t know. I don’t get it.” Participants enjoyed being actively involved in Ignite, and appreciated the additional closeness and support that being on the leadership board provided. Yet, they lamented that more Ignite members did not wish to take on such roles and the absence of men in the group at large and among the leadership was particularly disappointing.

In a group discussion, students shared a range of opinions about whether anything other than strict heterosexuality was considered a sin. Nia found that talking about LGBTQ people and identities was often “a touchy subject.” She recalled an experience where she had gotten to know a professor whom she had suspected was gay and married to a man, and described what it was like when she eventually had her suspicions confirmed:

[A friend and I] were in [the professor’s] office and [the professor] was like, ‘Yes, so and so is my husband blah blah blah.’ I held back. I didn’t say anything because...I didn’t feel right confronting him like that. But...with my good friends I always say, ‘Being gay or a homosexual or whatever is a sin like any other, and I’m not going to condemn you more for that, but at the same time I’m not going to support that.’ It’s such a touchy

subject and it has so much support lately that it's hard to decide when's the right time...to take this head-on. [The professor] just said it...and I was like, 'Okay, whatever.'

Alternatively, Hannah explained that she saw herself as more of a "liberal Christian because [she's] open to more than what a really conservative Christian would be open to." After hearing Nia's story in the group discussion, Hannah said that learning her professor was gay would not have "bothered" her: "[After hearing a professor disclose that he was married to a man] I just would have been like, Okay...I support it, let's go for it...It just wouldn't have bothered me." In our individual follow up interview, Hannah disclosed that she was well aware that there were many Christians, like Nia, who held different opinions and at times she has worried that she might be perceived as "too liberal for another Christian's liking, and they might feel like [she's] not really a Christian because [she's] too liberal about things."

Overall, Ignite students recognized that there was a close relationship between the various aspects of their identities and took great comfort in being a part of a faith community in college that allowed them to connect with other black students. Though it frustrated many Ignite members that more men were not involved in worship and group leadership, they took great pride in their leadership in their faith community and the religious home they helped support for other black Michigan students. Like the other groups in this study, Ignite was not religiously or ideologically homogeneous, and participants had different views regarding gay and lesbian relationships and marriage equality. These differences did not appear to threaten the cohesion of the group or the relationship between group members, but instead were seen as simply a part of the fabric and diversity within Ignite.

Conclusion

Ignite students spoke extensively about the fact that their Christian faith was, as Kayla put it, “vital” to their lives. Their faith helped them to address a range of challenges on campus, to cope and respond to discrimination, find community with other black women, and served as a source of joy throughout their college life. The centrality and influence of faith in the lives of black women in college and beyond is well documented in the literature (e.g. Bacchus & Holley, 2008; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Mattis, 2002; Reed & Neville, 2014). This finding is also likely part of the reason that even as religious participation has declined among some identity groups, the black women remain highly committed to religious belief and participation (Cox & Diamant, 2018).

The chance to connect with other black Christian students was a significant part of the attraction of Ignite for many participants. As Madison put it, the combination of shared racial and religious identities made Ignite “your community twice, with your Christian family, but these are also people that look like you and can relate to your daily experiences, and just get you on a different level.” Ignite students saw their gender, race and religious identity as deeply integrated and often discussed multiple at the same time.

In addition to their strong connection with others who shared their racial and religious identities, Ignite students described feeling a kinship with students of other religious traditions, and were curious about their beliefs. They provided several examples where they eagerly reached across religious differences to find connection and community. In expressing concern for Muslim students after hearing about the library prayer rugs being vandalized, Nia described the reasons for her sadness this way: “Although our religions aren't exactly the same, we don't have the same core belief, same way of praying, we all still want the same thing.” Ciara admitted that

she was hesitant to live with a Muslim roommate, but would help her with her religious practice through assisting to get out her “prayer stuff.” Ultimately, she developed a rich friendship with this roommate, and saw the experience as a reminder to avoid “judging people, based off of what they believe in.” This desire to connect with students across religious traditions, especially students from often marginalized religious traditions, like Islam, was a consistent theme in my interviews with Ignite students.

Unlike their Christian peers in Haven, Ignite students did not see Michigan as particularly hostile to Christian groups or religious organizations more broadly. Instead, they perceived the University to be indifferent towards religious groups, and were, in many ways, appreciative of this indifference. An abundance of literature has shown that black college students often experience PWIs as hostile places where discrimination is abundant (Kakouti, 2016). Outside the watchful and often harmful eye of the broader University community, Ignite activities acted as a kind of retreat within the broader campus environment.

The majority of the interaction between Ignite and the University was around funding – one of the most frustrating aspects of running the organization. The students interviewed were aware that the University had a number of policies that impacted the funding of religious organizations. Aware of the need for at least a small amount of funds to sustain the group, Ignite students devised creative ways of describing the group’s activities that allowed them to avoid being elevated from the funding pool and secure the necessary resources. The funding process served as an annual reminder that religious groups operated independently from the University. While in many respects that independence was treasured by Ignite members, they were disappointed that Michigan did not see the value in religious student organizations and required that they jump through hoops to obtain even minimal funding. Ignite students also appreciated

when faculty would stand up for the needs of religious students and speak against religious discrimination against any religious group, and believed that this should be standard practice. To many Ignite students, the University's limited engagement and support of religious students and student organizations was a missed opportunity to support and celebrate an important campus resource that could be leveraged to attract students to Michigan over a religious institution.

CHAPTER VII

“Put Both Feet on that Tightrope”: A Predominantly Modern Orthodox Jewish Group

A large number of Jewish students call U-M home. According to Hillel International, Michigan has one of the largest Jewish populations of any college in the country; 17 percent of Michigan’s undergraduates and 11 percent of graduate students identify as Jewish (Hillel International: College Guide). The Jewish Student Union works to encourage Jewish students’ connection to Israel and invite them to consider ways that they can integrate Orthodox Jewish practices in their lives. The JSU staff are aware that many Jewish students may be initially turned off by the strict expectations of the Chabad and Orthodox communities, so they created a range of opportunities for engagement with Jewish practice. Like Hillel, the largest Jewish organization on Michigan’s campus, the JSU holds weekly Shabbat dinners and has its own building complete with meeting and classroom spaces and a kosher kitchen.

Though the JSU does not explicitly identify with a branch of Judaism, the majority of the JSU participants interviewed identify as Modern Orthodox. The distinctions within the Orthodox branches of Judaism are nuanced, but generally what makes Modern Orthodox Jewish people distinct is not strong differences in belief, but their position that it is possible to integrate Jewish practices and dress with the demands of modern life and a willingness to adapt traditions to operate in the modern world (Robinson, 2016). For example, like many of their Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox counterparts, many Modern Orthodox Jewish students interviewed strictly keep

the Sabbath, including avoiding using their phones and working, and only eat kosher meals, however they often dress in ways that make them indistinguishable from their peers.

Aside from hosting a weekly Shabbat dinner, JSU activities center on subsidized trips to Israel and other international trips to encourage students to learn about Jewish history, and a several weeks long course in Jewish religion and culture called the Jewish Leadership Symposium²⁹ (JLS). The JLS course is taught by two JSU's staff rabbis³⁰ and occasional outside speakers. During the course, students meet for two hours each week for ten weeks and are taught about the Torah, Jewish thought, practices and customs and are encouraged to participate in Shabbatons, coordinated overnight trips to celebrate Shabbat with members of Detroit's Jewish community. The hope is that by the end of the course students will develop a deeper appreciation of their Jewish heritage and identity. Students must apply to participate in a JLS course and are offered a stipend of a few hundred dollars in exchange for their participation. The funding for the staff and various programs comes from outside Jewish organizations, donations from parents, alum and members of the Southeast Michigan Jewish community.

For this study, I interviewed eight undergraduate students who were involved in JSU. The group included five men and three women, all of whom are white. All identified as Jewish prior to coming to U-M, and most indicated that the strength of Michigan's Jewish community influenced their college choice. For example, Jill knew that there were colleges with more robust Orthodox communities, but she was attracted to Michigan both because it is home to a large Orthodox community, and she would be challenged to go outside of her Orthodox "bubble" and

²⁹ A pseudonym

³⁰ Like the staff of the other religious organizations on Michigan's campus, JSU staff are not funded by the University and are instead funded by Jewish individuals and organizations. However, religious group staff are permitted to have a U-M ID card and email address, and have some access to reserve University spaces.

meet non-Jewish students. All of the participants also considered many of the more traditional questions that shape college choice, as well, such as financial aid and cost of attendance, strength of a program of interest and proximity to family.

The following sections describe the students' remarks in three areas: (1) what being Jewish means to them, (2) what is it like being a Jewish student at Michigan, including how this status influences their social and academic lives, and (3) the ways in which their intersecting identities influence how these students understand and negotiate their Jewish identity.

What Being Jewish Means to JSU Students

All of the students interviewed grew up in a Jewish family, identified as Jewish from a young age and attended Jewish Day School at various points. Abby and Aaron separately joked that they identified as Jewish “out of the womb.” As children, participants learned to treasure their connection to the broader Jewish community. Though Aaron enjoyed participating in High Holy Days services, Shabbat dinners and other components of the “religious aspect” of Judaism, his connection to Judaism was “mostly about the culture and being part of the community.” Aaron appreciated that whenever he meets his Jewish classmates they “automatically [have something] in common that sets [them] apart.” With other Jewish students, Aaron observed, there are lots of things you can “immediately” talk about, “whereas with someone else, maybe you’d have to search for something.” Jill explained her connection to other Jewish people this way: “It’s also just like a nation, the Jewish people – No matter what group you’re apart of with race or ethnicity or anything, people stereotype you based on that. I think it’s just having something in common with other people, so you’re grouped together no matter if you want to be or not.” Jill found something really powerful in developing relationships with other Jewish students at Michigan and across the globe.

Participants indicated that there were many things they valued about being Jewish. Dean explained that he was drawn to the fact that within Judaism “there’s a big push for doing the right thing and an integrity component.” He had noticed that many of the things he learned in Judaism were similar to lessons he was taught in ethics and philosophy courses:

Like a Chinese idea that I think is pretty synonymous with Daoism, is love with distinctions, which literally says you should love your family the most and then other people. There’s a similar idea in Judaism, I think it’s [in] Leviticus or something [that says] you should prioritize your family most of all, then if it’s a stranger that you would interact with later then over something. That might not necessarily come off as [about justice] but it makes sense to me. That’s something that I would never have thought of if I wasn’t Jewish.

Dean added that he was also drawn to the idea within Judaism that he should “[leave] the world better than when [he] came into it.” Dean recognized that the aspects of Judaism he is drawn to will likely change over time, but the weekly practice of celebrating Shabbat is something he expects to continue:

“I do know...celebrating Shabbat once a week, that’s an important thing ritualistically that almost governs my week. I can say, ‘Alright, I’m done with work let me go light the Shabbat candles, and drink a glass of wine with my family.’ That’s a big thing that can even dictate how I live in the future.”

Jewish rituals and practices, like Shabbat, served to center Dean’s week and provide some stability even as his environment changed.

A strong relationship to Israel was an important part of the Jewish identity of many students interviewed. Dean indicated that he felt the strongest connection to the “Israel side of

Judaism” and that he “struggle[s] with a lot of the more religious components of it.” This connection came after a trip to Israel in high school, where he was moved by the idea that despite the many differences between Jewish belief and practice across the globe “the one unifying factor was that Israel’s the homeland.”

Several participants had travelled to Israel in the past and indicated that visiting had helped solidify their connection to Judaism. Gabe worked in Israel for a year, Jacob spent a year and a half studying in Israel, Jill took a gap year to live in Israel, and many others had been on Birthright Israel³¹ trips or traveled with JSU. After returning from a Birthright trip, Aaron began to ask his Jewish peers when they went to Israel as a get-to-know-you question. Jill appreciated that each year about “11 or 12” students arrive at Michigan who did a gap-year in Israel studying, working or serving in the military. She was able to quickly connect with other gap year

³¹ Birthright Israel is an educational organization that sponsors free trips to Israel for young adults, ages 18-22, who can demonstrate a Jewish heritage. Birthright Israel considers students to be eligible if they “identify as Jewish and are recognized as such by their local community or by one of the recognized denominations of Judaism. Applicants must also have at least one Jewish birth parent, or have completed Jewish conversion through a recognized Jewish denomination” (Birthright Israel, n.d.b). According to the Birthright Israel Foundation, they have sponsored over 650,000 students (Birthright Israel Foundation, n.d.c). It was founded in 1999 by a group of Jewish philanthropists to “address the growing divide between young Jewish adults in the Diaspora and the land and people of Israel” (Birthright Israel Foundation, n.d.d). Today, the funding comes from a combination of individual donors, Jewish organizations and the Israeli government (Birthright Israel, n.d.a).

Birthright Israel has been the subject of a range of criticism. The activist organization Jewish Voice for Peace, which seeks, among other goals, to end the “Israeli occupation of West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem,” contests the idea that Israel is the “birthright” of Jewish people writing: “[Birthright Israel] promote[s] the idea that young Jews from all over the world should feel like the land and State of Israel belongs to us and is our homeland. But while all Jews worldwide are handed this free trip, and, furthermore, automatic citizenship if they choose to immigrate to Israel, Palestinians are barred from returning to the homes and villages where their ancestors lived for centuries” (Jewish Voice for Peace, n.d.). As a part of their efforts, they ask Birthright-eligible Jewish students to take a pledge that they will not attend a Birthright trip “while Palestinian refugees are barred from returning to their homes” (Jewish Voice for Peace, n.d.).

students, and found that many were part the small group who ate almost exclusively on the Hillel kosher meal plan. Jill enjoyed getting the chance to share a meal and bond with these students over their shared religious commitment and appreciation for Israel. Many of these students also lived in the same residence hall because they were able to get what Jill called a “rabbi’s note” and request to live near Hillel to make it easier for them to access Hillel and the other Jewish organizations (the majority of which are concentrated in one area of campus) for meals and religious observances.

Michigan’s Influence on JSU Students’ Faith Presentation and Engagement

Overall, many students indicated that, as Jacob put it, it is “pretty easy being Jewish in general on this campus.” They reported benefiting from a large and robust campus Jewish community, and possessed a great deal of pride in their faith. However, they recognized that it is not always easy to be an observant Jewish person at U-M, noting that the academic calendar often conflicts with Jewish holidays and remaining observant including keeping Shabbat can be difficult with the demands of a social life and a challenging course load. Students’ comments on their experience being Jewish at Michigan generally fell into two categories: 1) how they located themselves within Michigan’s greater Jewish community, and 2) the campus community at large. Accordingly, the following sections describe students’ experiences within these two campus communities.

Locating themselves within U-M’s Jewish community

Many of the students interviewed were eager to find a Jewish community in college and actively sought one out upon arriving on campus. Abby found the first few days at Michigan to be “a really scary and transformative time.” Anxious about college life, she recalled finding comfort in meeting other Jewish students and discovering they were “all so open and

welcoming.” Abby added that her friendships with other Jewish students remain central to her Michigan social life: “[My peers in the Jewish community] are the people that I’ve spent my whole life, my whole year with. It shows you that wherever you go, you always have a community. Especially in Michigan, it’s a small [Jewish] community everyone’s very close and open.”

Like Abby, several participants indicated they valued being connected to U-M’s Jewish community, and found that it grounded their time at Michigan. For many of her first-year residence hall peers, meeting Rebecca was “the first time that they actually met a Jew.” Coming from a large Jewish community, this new environment was the “biggest culture shock” for Rebecca. She had attended small, largely Jewish, elementary and high schools, and she remembered feeling shocked learning about some of the activities, like drinking, partying and having sex, that her peers engaged in while in large public high schools. Her peers’ high school experiences were so different from Rebecca’s that to her they sounded like “another world almost.” During the transition to Michigan Rebecca felt “a lot hit you at once” and was grateful that she “always had the Jewish community to fall back on.”

Dean observed that there are “just so many” Jewish students at Michigan that he “find[s] them everywhere.” He remembered his surprise attending Shabbat dinner at Hillel for the first time and seeing that “there’s 500 kids” sharing a meal. Dean soon realized that it was extremely easy to develop like-minded Jewish friends, because there are numerous activities occurring within the Jewish community that allow him to connect with other Jewish students.

Similarly, Jacob appreciated that there are many ways to connect with Michigan’s Jewish community. Most of Jacob’s college friends are “similar-minded people in that way when it comes to Judaism and religion.” In addition to Shabbat dinner and weekend prayer services,

Jacob participated in weekday prayers at Hillel and enjoyed running into his Jewish peers throughout the week. Most of his weekend was structured around his faith, and having largely Jewish friends meant that his friendships were not interrupted by his Jewish practice, but were nurtured through a shared faith commitment.

Within this broader Michigan Jewish community, there was “a broad spectrum of observance and Jewish interest” and Gabe appreciated that “wherever you fall in the spectrum [it’s] all right, you do you.” This openness to a range of Jewish observance in Michigan’s broader Jewish community was not something that Gabe had experienced growing up, and he found it to be a welcome change. Jacob appreciated being involved in the larger Jewish community, but lamented that the “observant Jewish community might be a little small,” because outside of a minority of students, most did not approach their Jewish identity in the same way he did.

Though participants perceived Michigan’s Jewish community as large, diverse and welcoming, they described challenges in adapting to variations in their peers’ beliefs about Judaism and observance practices. Some participants noted that it was often easier to talk to their non-Jewish peers about their faith, than other Jewish students. Jacob explained:

I think it’s definitely easier to talk to non-Jews about Judaism than to talk to Jews because when you talk to a non-Jew, often times it’s interesting to them, they find it fascinating. It’s like another religion and they’re very respectful, if anything they just want to learn more about your culture, your traditions.

However, Jewish students who are not “very observant” had made a conscious decision not to be and “they’re fine with it.” When speaking to a “non-observant Jew,” Jacob suspected that learning about how he observes may make them “feel less of themselves because like, ‘Oh, I’m

not keeping Shabbat but this guy is, he is still doing fine in school.” Other participants echoed Jacob’s observations, but added that positive conversations about Jewish observance with some curious Jewish peers are not unusual.

All of the women interviewed shared efforts to invite their non-Jewish and less engaged Jewish peers to Shabbat dinner and events at Hillel and JSU. Abby took it upon herself to try to encourage her differently observant Jewish friends to celebrate Shabbat. She organized what her friends called “Jew parties” that involved “just the Orthodox community and a few more people.” At these parties, she invited her Jewish sorority friends who are less involved in the Jewish community and tried “to get them to come to Hillel and stuff.” Abby observed that “a lot just stopped going [to Hillel and/or Shabbat] after the first few weeks,” but was heartened that one of her friends said that she too wants to keep Shabbat. Rebecca enjoyed inviting others to Shabbat, other Jewish services and activities, and appreciated that their reactions were often very positive. Her guests would often text her afterwards and say, “‘Thank you!’ or ‘That was so amazing... This food is so great. I can’t believe it’s free.’”

Jill observed that among Jewish students, “how Jewish they are” is a frequent topic of conversation, and she often encouraged others to become more observant. Despite being in a Jewish sorority, Jill believed that she was the only one in her house who “practices anything.” Like Abby, Jill often found herself engaged in conversations with Jewish friends who “are not religious.” It frustrated Jill that despite what she perceived as her sorority sisters’ lack of interest in Judaism, she often heard them discussing their plan to “marry Jewish boys.” When this topic came up, Jill asked herself: “What does that mean? What does it matter if a person’s Jewish or not if you’re not practicing anything differently anyway?” She has yet to have gotten an answer from her sorority sisters that “really satisfies” her, instead, “they’re just like, ‘I just want a

Jewish boy. I don't really know what it means to be Jewish, but there's some kind of connection there.” This response exasperates Jill, because “if you're not practicing then what differentiates you from anyone else?”

Rebecca felt that her “way of life is the right way of life” and by teaching and sharing her Jewish practices with her less observant peers, she was “bringing them closer” to how she practices and that is ultimately “the goal that we are all trying to get to.” Rebecca treasured the “Jewish time” she had while observing and preparing for Shabbat, and sought to integrate her faith throughout her week. She was in the practice of saying blessings of gratitude throughout her day. Though she often recites these blessings privately, occasionally she'll say them aloud with another Jewish student who may not know the blessing. At the end of the blessing, Rebecca explained, “they'll just respond Amin, like Amen, so they can kind of be counted in the blessing also.” Rebecca observed that “less religious people love” hearing her offer blessings, and her less religious Jewish peers look up to her and ask to be taught various blessings. Saying blessings throughout the day is such a part of Rebecca's practice that friends who are not very observant themselves sometimes remind her to say particular blessings: “Sometimes if I forget, [my friends will] remind me. They're like, ‘Oh, did you say a Bracha³²?’ And I was like, ‘Thank you for reminding me!’” Her non-Jewish friends know that Rebecca keeps Shabbat, “so there's no cell phones, no computers, no nothing,” and they know to make plans with her “like what time and where to meet” before she turns her phone off.

Given U-M's large Jewish community, participants appreciated that there were several Jewish organizations in which they could participate, and found that JSU was a good fit for them for a range of reasons. Rebecca liked that JSU attracted “religious people,” and she took comfort

³² A blessing before eating or drinking.

in “learning and being around people that are similar.” Dean was initially attracted to JSU by the JLS program. The JSU rabbis had set up a table on the U-M Diag and he soon found himself striking up a conversation. Hearing about the JLS program, Dean recalled thinking: “Oh, I can get money for doing this? I like to talk about Judaism; that sounds cool. I’ll also get paid. What’s the worst thing that happens if I don’t go? I never see them again.” He decided to give it a try and ended up making “thirty-nine new friends” with his JLS classmates, and was surprised to find the rabbis to be approachable and friendly. Dean came to appreciate the rabbis’ gentle nudging to get more involved in Jewish activities. He recalled an evening when a JLS class conflicted with a presidential debate. Dean explained to the rabbis, “‘I want to watch the debate, sorry.’ They’re like, ‘Yes, I want to watch the debate too. I just have to do this.’” He admired the seriousness with which the rabbis took their religious commitments and chose to attend the JLS class over watching the debate.

The biggest take-away from the JLS course for Dean was how to “apply your Judaism” to “real life situations.” He knew that the JSU rabbis encouraged students to be more Orthodox, and appreciated their “one step at a time” approach. He explained the “baby steps” strategy of the JLS program this way:

It’s all about baby steps to get better, because at the end of the day [the JSU rabbis] recognize the majority of people that walk in there are not going to be Orthodox after going through their program, but what they do see is...if they can help you become even an ounce more religious...that’s a win.

As an example of this approach in action, Dean described how the rabbis discussed avoiding electronics and electricity on Shabbat: “If you just put your phone away while you’re out with friends, if you don’t consciously turn on lights or use your phone or do anything like that, that’s

you making one step forward.” At the end of the JLS program, Dean was given a special light to use on Shabbat that can be covered instead of being turned off. He now uses that light regularly on Shabbat and sees the light as “one little reminder that I’m doing a good thing.”

Aaron’s first entry to JSU was also through the JLS program. Like Dean, Aaron was attracted by the chance to get paid, meet other people and learn more about his Jewish identity. However, the biggest draw for Aaron was because a “really cute girl” that he had started talking with invited him to join the class. He wrote one of the JSU rabbis as soon as he found out she was in the course and said, “put me in this thing.” On the first day of the class, he met two of the JSU rabbis and found them to be “the coolest guys, great hearts, really dedicated to the students and to improving [students’] lives and showing [students] how important Judaism is to them and how impactful it can be to [students] too.” Aaron soon found that once you are a part of JSU, “it’s so easy to just stay there.” His favorite part of the JLS program was the two “Shabbatons, which is where you stay with the [metro Detroit] Jewish community” and observe Shabbat with a family. For these overnights, Aaron and his JLS classmates would stay with host families, not use any electronics and “treat the Shabbat how it’s supposed to be.”

Though participants valued their time involved in JSU, many recognized that not all had the same experience. Dean recalled bringing a Jewish friend to a JSU event whose mother had converted to Judaism when she was very young. Dean introduced his friend to the JSU rabbis and she said, “I’ve always thought of myself as Jewish,” and one of the rabbis responded, “Well, you’re not really Jewish.”³³ Dean could tell right away that the rabbi’s words hurt his friend’s feelings. He noted that while he has had “nothing but the most positive experiences [at JSU]...seeing that some people don’t is tricky.”

³³ Judaism considered to be passed down matrilineally at birth in many Jewish communities, especially Orthodox communities.

Aaron knew that some of his peers outside of JSU perceived it as an organization seeking to “brainwash” Jewish students to ascribe to a particular kind of Judaism, but he “[didn’t] really get that vibe.” Aaron was aware that one of JSU’s goals was to “have Jewish men meet Jewish women.” He described how this pressure manifests itself in the group: “The rabbi will go like, ‘You haven’t met Shelby?’ or whatever. Like, ‘Meet Sophie.’ I’m like, ‘Okay.’” This pressure amused Aaron, but he knew that some people involved in JSU had non-Jewish girlfriends and when they brought them to JSU events “the rabbis will be like, ‘Well, she seems great, but Lauren over here looks very cute.’”

For many of the student participants, both JSU and Hillel were an important part of their Jewish experience at Michigan. Often, they would have a second Shabbat dinner at JSU, after enjoying one at Hillel. Jacob put the relationship between these two Shabbat dinners this way: “We go to Hillel and then depending on how good Hillel is, maybe we spend an hour at Hillel, maybe we only spend 20 minutes, and then we could go to JSU.” Aaron described this process of bouncing between JSU and Hillel on Friday nights as “double dipping,” and added, “it’s like the best time of my life.” The difference in size between Hillel and JSU is significant. Jacob observed that on a given Shabbat dinner “there could be 500 people” or more at Hillel, whereas at JSU there are “50 people there [or] maybe it’s a little less.” Hillel provided the opportunity to see lots of different people, whereas JSU felt smaller and more intimate, and the presence of the rabbi’s wife and young children running around gave dinner a homey feel.

Participants recognized that there were some tensions between Hillel and JSU. Aaron explained that the relationship between the two groups is “like non-existent.” When asked to describe this tension in more detail, Gabe observed that “some rabbis won’t attend certain services or won’t go to certain buildings that have certain services because of the differences in

ideologies of what Judaism is or how [it should] be practiced or things like that.” He thought part of the conflict was about the fact that “the JSU rabbis won’t attend church services at Hillel because they allow women rabbis or women to lead services.” These tensions saddened Gabe because they left him with a feeling that operating within JSU and Hillel was the idea that “my Judaism is acceptable to us, but your Judaism is not acceptable to us.” This disconnect between the two groups upset him because connections between Jewish people are particularly important in “secular America”:

I feel in this secular America that we all live in if we want to maintain our Judaism, we need to find a way to bridge the gap between communities and find a way to accept Jews, however they choose to practice and for whatever Judaism means to them. To do anything less than that is problematic to me.

Aaron enjoyed connecting with the rabbis and the smaller Jewish community at JSU. He viewed Hillel as “just social,” whereas “JSU has a larger impact on the religious identities of the students.” He perceived the JSU rabbis and staff as encouraging students “to adopt more religious values...whereas Hillel won’t encourage [Jewish students] to [be more religious] – just, ‘You do your thing, and we’ll give you support.’” Though he was familiar with many Jewish prayers and rituals, Aaron liked that JSU often assumed that many students in attendance were less familiar and the rabbis would say things like, “Hey, I know you usually don’t pray, but we’re going to do prayers before Shabbat and after Shabbat and try to follow along.” Like Dean, Aaron appreciated that he was given a “Shabbat lamp” at the end of JLS that he could use as he continued to take “small steps” towards being more diligent about observing Shabbat.

Jacob did not enjoy Hillel as much as JSU because he perceived Hillel as “not as interested in the Orthodox kids as they are with some other people and groups.” When asked

why he believes that is the case, Jacob explained that Hillel had not seemed interested in receiving additional support needed from outside Orthodox Jewish groups to allow them to hire an Orthodox rabbi. He described the current Orthodox Rabbi as “a really nice man, but he’s older. I think he’s near 70. He’s not exactly someone that you relate to as much.” Jacob also noticed that there is a stereotype within the broader Jewish community that Orthodox Jews “don’t have much depth,” and he often felt excluded from Hillel activities because many Orthodox Jewish students are Republican and Hillel is a “very much like a liberal place.”

Though it was important for all of the students interviewed to feel connected to the Jewish community, some felt the need to balance their relationship with other Jewish students with the broader Michigan community. Aaron specifically chose a “majority Jewish” fraternity over one that was explicitly Jewish because he wanted to “branch out.” Even though he had not met all of the members of Michigan’s various exclusively Jewish fraternities, he felt like he “already knew all the kids,” because “[he] already know[s] so many Jewish kids” and he wanted to meet “kids that are more different.” His connection to other Jewish students was so strong that “on a certain level [he felt] so similar to all the other Jewish kids...even though [they’re all] very different,” so meeting new people required going outside the Jewish community.

Locating themselves in the campus community at large

Many participants thought a lot about how to maintain their Jewish practices while in college. In the group discussion, Jill drew a distinction between her experience being Jewish and her experience being religious at Michigan: “I would say being Jewish doesn’t really affect me, it’s more being religious...I take time out of my life to devote to Judaism [and that] is what slows down the rest of my life.” Many college students go out and party on Friday and Saturdays, and keeping Shabbat and “being religious” impacted how participants engaged in

many of the social expectations of college life. Though participants agreed that most faculty are understanding, they all shared stories of having to speak to professors or graduate instructors about course requirements conflicting with their observance of their faith. All of this meant that participants were constantly making choices regarding how they wanted to integrate their religious practices with their college life, and how, and under what circumstances, they wanted to share their Jewish identity with others.

During Jill's gap year in Israel she met a lot of people who "had never been exposed to anything outside the Jewish community" and it was a really "pro-Jewish, pro-Israel" environment, so coming to Michigan was a "huge change." Keeping Shabbat or kosher in Israel was simply built into her week, but at Michigan it was "definitely harder":

[I] go out on a Saturday with my friends, and they all use their phones. I'm not going to use my phone on Shabbat. That's challenging for sure. When everyone else is on [their phone], I'm like, I want my friends to see cool pictures of me too, but I don't have any pictures.

Adapting to this new environment required that Jill got "used to not being in the same boat as everyone else" and become "okay with that." She knew that "a lot of people that come from such a religious background and come to a place like this, they lose [their religious practices] right away, or they are like, 'I'll come back to it after college when I'm back in my Orthodox bubble.'" Jill believed that sticking with one's religious practice requires you to "be really strong...[and] just continue doing what you're doing despite that fact that everyone around you is not."

Jacob found that leaving home, Jewish Day School, his studies in Israel, and the structure those environments provided, has meant that he has to decide for himself how to integrate his

Jewish practices into his daily life. He described approaching various practices as a “checklist”: “[Since being at Michigan, observing Jewish practices] becomes almost like a checklist. Did I do this tonight? Did I do that today?...It becomes sort of dry as time goes on, but I try to do that every day though.” Like many of his JSU peers, Jacob felt that keeping Shabbat and maintaining other Jewish practices were harder at some points of the term than others. However, Jacob noticed that the longer he is on campus, the easier it is to “fit in” Jewish practices.

Isaac explained that compromise is a significant component of his Jewish experience at Michigan. Not necessarily compromise in the sense of always having to pick and choose which aspects of Jewish practice to follow, but “when you’re a Jew [not] living [in] Israel...but living in the diaspora, there are a lot of things that you compromise on and it’s not always easy to stay a hundred percent Jewish because there are so many other influences on you.” He continued to describe the impact of this “compromise” on his life:

What I mean by compromise is, I want to keep Shabbat because keeping Shabbat – not using my phone on Shabbat, not doing work on Shabbat, not driving on Shabbat, not spending money on Shabbat is awesome. It makes my week so much better because I have 24 hours where I can just relax, sleep, eat food, hang out with my friends...and just not worry about [the fast pace of] life, not worry about school work or tests, this or that or status or whatever. Just relax.

Like the other participants, Isaac is committed to his Jewish practices and enjoyed participating in the Jewish community, but understood that keeping up his religious observance meant making choices regarding how one was going to engage in college life.

Gabe found that since being at Michigan he regularly reevaluated his practices to decide what about them he finds meaningful. For example, though he continues to eat kosher meat he often reflects upon that decision:

I'm keeping kosher meat and only eating meat when I go to Hillel, but then, why don't I eat other meat? What's really keeping me from eating non-kosher meat? Why do I care? Students that I know, that [I am] friends with...don't care and they may have had a similar background or not a similar background...They're still good people and they don't eat kosher. Why does it really matter and why does it really matter to me, is really the question. It's still something I'm grappling with.

Gabe had empathy for his friends who made different choices in their religious practice, and being around them regularly inspired him to reflect on his own priorities.

Abby was raised in a home where “Judaism is always seen as a positive thing” and despite what her non-Jewish peers may think, she did not see maintaining her Jewish practices as a chore. She acknowledged, that “sometimes, yes, it's annoying if I'm not going to go out on a Friday night and all my friends are going out.” She explained that her first semester was especially challenging. After joining a sorority at the beginning of her first year, Abby struggled to balance the pressures to party while keeping Shabbat and catching up on school work missed because of the numerous Jewish holidays in the fall term. Despite social and academic pressures, Abby was dedicated to keeping her Jewish practices as an important part of her life, and regularly reminded herself “that you have to be strong and focused on what you want.”

Rebecca wrote two Hebrew letters on the corner of her papers in notebooks, on classroom assignments and “on the corner of everything” that signify Baruch Hashem, which means bless God or thank God. For Rebecca, it was important to thank God that “[she has a] paper and pen to

write with and am about to get an education.” These notations do not go unnoticed, and instructors have circled the letters on assignments: “They’re like, ‘What is this?’ Sometimes they’ll just ignore it. It’s on every single paper.” Writing Baruch Hashem on her papers was one way Rebecca integrated her faith throughout her college life, despite knowing that it might result in some befuddlement from unknowing instructors.

JSU students were eager to develop creative ways to stay connected to their faith within the demands of college life. They reported that their non-Jewish or differently observant Jewish peers were generally supportive and understanding of their religious practices. Rebecca’s first-year roommate “identified as half Jewish and Christian, like [growing up she had a] Christmas tree and a Menorah same time.” Despite differences, the two of them “got along really well” and Rebecca appreciated that her roommate was “very understanding” of her “beliefs and values.” Together they worked out a “whole system for Shabbat” to allow them to communicate while avoiding technology: “We had like a whiteboard outside our door. She would write me notes and let me know things because I couldn’t text her.”

Jill noticed that her peers were often surprised that she was able to remain observant and participate in typical college activities at the same time. A large number of undergraduates engaged in football game days, by tailgating, attending and watching the games. Football games always fall on Saturdays, when Jill does not carry her phone. Realizing this, her peers would sometimes ask, “How are you here right now? You keep Shabbat and you don’t have your phone on you. What if you get lost?” Jill would explain, “I can still go out and not have my phone on me.” Adding that observant Jewish students like herself are “regular people [who are] like everyone else.”

Most participants came to Michigan from families and communities where it was relatively easy to blend religious observance with other aspects of life. However, arriving at Michigan held a mirror up to their practices, and students began to see themselves as different from their peers in ways that were unfamiliar to many. Often JSU students adapted by recognizing that they would occasionally have to “compromise” (Isaac) or “reevaluate” (Gabe) their religious observance from time to time. Surrounding themselves with a community of similarly observant Jewish peers helped to buffer the impact of their choices from their social life. Though JSU students viewed conflicts between course requirements and their religious practices as inevitable, they often felt at a disadvantage from their peers who did not have to choose between studying and participating in Shabbat, High Holy Days services or other observances.

Negotiating Jewish holidays and observance and the fast pace of the academic term was a challenge for many participants. Jill found that navigating conflicts between her coursework and Jewish practices was often extremely difficult. She has had multiple professors hold exam review sessions on Saturdays, and has had multiple Friday final exams scheduled – all of which required conversations with faculty in order to receive accommodations. Abby described experiencing similar conflicts and the consequences of those conflicts on her coursework:

[If you have to miss class or a review session] you’re missing the information [and] at the end of the day, [faculty and/or graduate instructors are] not going to sit there and go over the information with you. So, even though [faculty and/or graduate instructors are] understanding about [missing class for a holiday] you’re still at a disadvantage.

When asked what Michigan could be doing to better support Jewish students, participants discussed the constant challenge of negotiating the academic term schedule and wished that there

was greater flexibility in the University calendar. Jacob said that when he shares course conflicts with classmates or professors, he often has to answer a number of follow up questions and explain that Shabbat does not only mean that he has a conflict on Friday night, but “it’s sundown Friday to sundown Saturday.” Even in classes where the majority of students are Jewish, JSU students found that professors were not always accommodating. Jill was enrolled in a language course with a large number of Jewish students. Despite the large proportion of Jewish students, the professor offered limited flexibility for students requesting time away from class for Jewish holidays. Jacob enrolled in a class with a similarly high percentage of Jewish students. When the issue of an exam conflicting with Jewish holidays arose, the professor provided students the opportunity to vote on the timing of the exam. Jacob was saddened that the majority of his Jewish peers voted to schedule the exam during a Jewish holiday.

The demands of the academic term and college life required that students develop strategies for talking about their Jewish identity with others who may have different identities. Abby recalled a number of instances when friends invited her to study on a Saturday and she would respond saying something like, “Oh, I’m so sorry, I can’t, I’m Jewish.” Jill often talked about her Jewish identity when she was engaged in meal planning with non-Jewish friends. When Jill’s friends would invite her to go to the dining hall, and Jill would explain, “Actually I don’t eat at the dining hall, I have to go to Hillel [because I keep kosher].” Jill added that her Jewish identity is “something that affects [her] life and therefore, it affects [her] relationship with other people.”

Other participants shared the experience of being what Jacob referred to as a “spokesperson” for Judaism in classes with large numbers of non-Jewish people. In the group discussion, Jacob observed that “once people know you are Jewish often times, especially if you

are in a group with a lot of non-Jews, you become *the Jew*, like the spokesperson, the one with all the information.” Jacob continued to explain what it is like to be identified as the token Jewish student in his courses:

Anytime anything involving Judaism or Israel comes up in my class, everyone just turns to me and just like looks at me. I’m like, ‘What?’ Like a couple of days ago my teacher was talking about, ‘Yeah, this person, they made a video about their camp in Israel,’ and the entire class just looked at me like, ‘That’s you, Jacob, you went and camped in Israel.’ I was like, ‘Yes, I did. Thank you for reminding me.’

A participant in the same group discussion, Abby nodded in agreement adding, “They expected that I knew everything [about Judaism, and that] my knowledge [of] Judaism was inside and out. Endless. They’d ask me questions, then I’d have to do research and I ended up learning some things.” Though Abby and Jacob appreciated that they were often, as Jacob put it, “forced to learn more,” being seen as a representative of Judaism and Jewish people meant that they often took on the role of an informal instructor, and the expectations for accuracy that role entails. In other words, once they became “the Jew” they were not permitted simply to be students in the course, but had to take on multiple roles and additional responsibility.

JSU students described having to be a “spokesperson” even in classes with other Jewish students, because they were assumed to know more about the faith. Jill explained this experience this way:

I was in a class where...there were a lot of different people, but there was this solid group of Jews...[who] identify as Jewish but don’t really practice anything. When there came a question about Israel or something that not everyone would know the answer to, they look to the observant Jew for the answer.

When asked what it was like to be seen as an expert on Judaism, Jill found it “empowering” and Rebecca agreed saying, “I’m proud of it.” Jill added that when she shares her knowledge she feels “like [she is] enabling other people to be more in touch with their Judaism.”

Feeling pride in talking about their Jewish faith with non-Jewish peers, is notably different from the feelings JSU students described when talking about Judaism with other Jewish students. As discussed earlier, Jacob found that it is “definitely easier to talk to non-Jews about Judaism than to talk to Jews.” JSU students were aware that many of their Jewish peers approached observances differently, and in talking about their faith they risked devolving into a conversation about what constitutes appropriate religious piety. JSU students observed that this risk was diminished in speaking with their non-Jewish peers about their faith and replaced by a general curiosity about Jewish beliefs and practices.

Though it can occasionally be challenging to feel the “weight,” as Rebecca put it, of representing the Jewish people to non-Jewish peers, JSU students reported appreciating being an ambassador of sorts for their faith. Jacob recalled an experience where he was asked about Purim³⁴ and enjoying having the chance to share his knowledge with others:

When Purim came up, I was asked, ‘What’s all about that Purim stuff?’ Like, ‘Well, let me tell you.’...and they are like, ‘Nice, cool, now I learned something.’ It was an easy thing. I knew the information already. Yes, having this Jewish knowledge and being noticed as the person who has Jewish knowledge allows you to become an informal teacher, like amongst friend groups.

Rebecca similarly relished her status as an “informal teacher” stating:

³⁴ Purim is a Jewish holiday that commemorates when the Jewish people were saved from Haman, a high-ranking Persian official, who was planning to murder Jewish people. This story is told in the Book of Esther. There are a number of components of the Purim celebration, the most well-known of which includes dressing in costume and wearing masks.

It's amazing how many people want to learn more...like my junior year, the amount that people want to become involved with Hillel, come to Davening³⁵, learn about keeping Kosher and the laws of Shabbat is so nice. People keep coming and looking for you for guidance. It's special.

Like Rebecca and Jacob, Abby took pride in her ability to answer questions about her faith. She often invited Jewish and non-Jewish friends to Shabbat dinner and enjoyed serving as a kind of tour guide for the meal:

Like for Friday night dinner, [my friends] were all really confused about what everything was. I think I answered maybe 100 questions of different things, [such as] why can't the men touch you³⁶, what's Kiddush³⁷, what's Hamotzi³⁸, why we are washing our hands³⁹; like all different answers, what do people normally do, what's the norm? All different things. It feels good when you can answer.

She continued adding that it is a pleasure to share her faith with others: "like you love [Judaism] so much because it's like this privilege that we feel like is, then we are proud to tell other people about it."

Though participants reported that Michigan was largely an accepting and supportive environment, it was not immune from fostering Jewish stereotypes and other anti-Semitic ideas.

³⁵ Reciting of Jewish prayer.

³⁶ The prohibition against men and women who are not family members touching is drawn from various passages in Leviticus. Orthodox Jewish people abide by this prohibition in a number of different ways, and with varying degrees of strictness. Abby chose to honor this practice by not touching men when she was participating in Jewish traditions. The practice of avoiding touch between men and women is generally not followed by members of the Conservative or Reform Jewish traditions.

³⁷ A blessing of the wine.

³⁸ A blessing of the bread.

³⁹ Hebrew scriptures contain a number of references to the importance of bathing or washing before certain activities. In reference to these scriptures there is often a ritualistic washing before many meals, including Shabbat dinner.

In the group discussion, both Jacob and Jill discussed negotiating the stereotype that Jewish people are “richer or more entitled” (Jill) and “affluent” (Jacob). Jacob recalled seeing a picture of a high rent off-campus apartment building in a satirical student publication with the caption, “This is where you will find 90 percent of the Jewish community.”

While JSU students generally enjoyed talking about their Jewish identity with non-Jewish students, several expressed concerns about the impact of Jewish stereotypes. Knowing that many of her Michigan peers have never met a Jewish person, Rebecca felt like it was her “duty to represent the Jewish people” and she often felt “a weight of representing [her] Jewish identity.” She worried that Jewish people do not always have “the best rep,” and that in “some sense that [Jewish people are] looked down upon.” When asked to talk about this “rep” in more detail, Rebecca recalled a class conversation about prevalent stereotypes for different religious groups. One of her non-Jewish classmates mentioned that there is a stereotype that Jewish people are “sly businessmen,” “always in control of money,” “cliquey” and that Jewish people tend to think they are “better than other people.” Though Rebecca believed that “it’s human nature for everybody to have stereotypes,” hearing them from a peer was hurtful. She took it upon herself to counter those stereotypes: “[I want to] show people that we don’t think that we’re better, and we love being with other people. We’re inclusive, we just want to be nice to everybody, help everybody out. We don’t try and be conniving and sly with money.” In an effort to improve her peers’ impression of Jewish students, Rebecca tried to be especially “nice” and “friendly.” She hoped that if her peers learn she is Jewish, her behavior will lead them to think that Jewish people are “not too bad” and realize that “we’re not all like that” and do not reflect any negative stereotypes.

When discussing stereotypes and the pressures to balance faith and college life in a group discussion, Aaron added that he felt that not all stereotypes were negative. He recalled hearing that many non-Jewish students believe that Jewish students hold a disproportionately high percentage of leadership positions in student organizations. He did not dispute this stereotype, and believed that most of the student group leaders on campus “seem like they’re Jews.”

Agreeing with Aaron’s observation, Jacob believed that he was taught from an early age to get involved and “use your skills for good things,” and suspected that this was a trait he shared with other Jewish students. Other students in the group discussion mentioned that they believed that being a part of the Jewish community helped them to gain leadership skills. Many also felt that if Michigan had a larger observant population, perhaps they would not have been challenged to become leaders in the same way. Abby described this tension this way: “when deciding which school to go to, you have to think about yourself. Would you rather be part of a big [observant] community and be one of [many observant] people? Or, would you rather go [to one with a smaller observant community] and be a leader? If you can’t be a leader, then you can’t really be anything.”

In response to the range of stereotypes, participants thought carefully about when they shared their Jewish identity with others. Jacob explained that he did not want to be seen as “the Jew, that is like stirring trouble or being controversial.” Instead, if others are going to identify him as Jewish “then [he wants] to be doing something, that [as a] Jew [he] will be proud to be doing.” Rebecca and Abby agreed, and Rebecca added that she worried about being seen as “brag[ging]” about her Jewish identity, saying, “I don’t want people to look at me like, ‘She thinks she’s better than us because she is Jewish.’ Then, I’ll just not mention that I’m Jewish.”

Even though the participants' Jewish identity was a very important part of their lives, it mattered to them not to be known by others exclusively as "the Jew" (Jacob).

Jacob took great care in how he shared his Jewish identity when speaking with women, because he worried about being prejudged as "really religious" because that label "comes with so many stereotypes and connotations." He continued to explain the range of factors that impact his decision to share his faith with others:

I guess if I'm trying to impress someone – Sometimes being Jewish is impressive, but other times, I don't want to be known as, 'Oh, you're a little Orthodox boy.'... Sometimes it will be a really big disadvantage, 'Oh, you're Jewish, it means that you're this and you're this and you're this.'

Though Jacob regularly wore a kippah⁴⁰ he laughed saying that, "whenever I go out to parties and stuff, I don't wear my kippah mostly because I don't want to lose it." When wearing the kippah, Jewish men are easily identifiable as Jewish to their Jewish and non-Jewish peers alike. So, removing his kippah both prevented Jacob from risking losing it while at parties, and allowed him to evade being instantly identified as Jewish and dodge label of "little Orthodox boy" that he desperately sought to avoid.

Isaac also preferred not to wear his kippah when he was "flirting with people":

Really there's a lot of stuff that I do that I probably shouldn't be doing until I'm married.

That's one [place where] I choose to not really observe that law... I don't want to be wearing a kippah doing nefarious deeds because I can show people like, 'I didn't know

⁴⁰ The Hebrew word for a small, brimless cap worn by many Jewish men (yarmulke is the Yiddish word for the same object). The cap is traditionally worn in the synagogue, but many Orthodox Jewish men wear them all the time.

that Jews could do that, but I guess they can because this guy's wearing a kippah and he's hooking up with that girl.'

Like Jacob, Isaac did not want the first impression his peers had of him to be that he is "really religious" because he wears a kippah. He used the analogy of a "business card" to explain what is like interacting with others at a party while wearing the kippah: "[The kippah is] kind of like a business card, 'Hi, here's all the things I observe. Here's all the things you're getting into. Do you still want to go through with this?'" In other words, he did not want his peers or women he was flirting with to be turned away by assumptions about his religious observance.

Rebecca empathized with Jacob and Isaac's concern adding that "it's really hard on this campus...to balance our Jewish life and our identity within the social norms of Michigan." Rebecca sought to identify as "a normal, regular college kid." She of course wanted to "embrace" her Jewish identity, but also felt compelled to consider, "what do you want your label to be? What do you want to be known as?" Rebecca found it challenging to balance navigating the labels applied to Jewish students along with managing coursework and other aspects of college life. In the group discussion, she explained that negotiating this balance was like walking a kind of "tightrope":

I'm always walking this tightrope of one foot in each row. I'm the Jewish Orthodox girl who is religious and keeps Shabbat and kosher or whatever. I'm also the girl who goes out, parties, has fun with guys, and does whatever. It's really hard to make that balance and find your main identity...[It's a challenge] to put both feet on that tightrope, instead of constantly balancing back and forth. So, it's a struggle [to balance one's Jewish identity and college life], but we make it work.

Jacob nodded saying, “That’s the thing about tightrope, if you want to get across, you don’t walk straight across. That you have a big pole and you lean to one side and to the other side and you balance that.”

Students were eager to show their peers that their religious observance did not inhibit their participation in college life, and constantly reevaluated their approach to the “tightrope.” Jill knew that not all observant Jewish students would make the choice to go to football games and party like she does, but she wanted “to show, I can do it and still be able religious.” Abby concurred, adding:

Do we want to just be these Jewish students that are attending college and the only thing that we’re really getting is our classes and the education? Or, do we want to also [have access to the] social environment within the college itself? Because we all feel we want to be able to manage these two roles...that’s what you have to do.

She explained that she wanted her Judaism to not be something she sees as a “negative thing,” so she is careful to ensure that it does not interfere with the fact that she wants to also have “fun.”

JSU students negotiated numerous tensions in their time at Michigan. Their Judaism was a great source of pride, and they appeared to even appreciate that their minority status within the University allowed them regular opportunities to talk about their faith with non-Jewish peers. Yet, they were also aware that there were negative stereotypes that came with their Jewish identity, that they sought desperately to avoid. Despite the many requirements of Jewish observance, many JSU students hoped to participate in their classes and college social life in ways that were similar to their less observant or non-Jewish peers. Jacob’s relationship with his kippah highlights this tension. While he took it off before parties, and avoided talking about his faith with women he was interested in initially, he disclosed that he first felt “empowered” to

wear his kippah at Michigan. He knew there were few observant Jewish students on campus, and wanted to be seen as a proud leader in the community. It was important to many JSU students to be leaders in their faith, but also to have the flexibility to share it as they feel comfortable.

The Intersection of Judaism and Other Aspects of Identity for JSU Students

All of the Jewish participants, like their peers in the other groups, were asked to identify identities other than their faith that were meaningful to them. Like their counterparts in the predominantly white Christian group, many mentioned a range of activities and preferences. For example, both Jacob and Aaron named their hometowns as consequential, and shared their appreciation for sports and music as core parts of their identities. Dean discussed being a naturally competitive person and a “free thinker.” However, unlike their white Christian counterparts, several students mentioned specific aspects of their ethnicity or upbringing that shapes how they engage with Judaism. Abby shared that her parents are from Eastern Europe and Africa, and these backgrounds influenced her family’s traditions and experience of Judaism. Gabe spoke about identifying as Modern Orthodox, his connection to Israel, and his family’s history, specifically their migration through parts of Africa and Europe.

Students’ comments on the impact of their identities on the campus experience generally fell into two categories. First, JSU students had different perspectives on their relationship to other white students. Second, those interviewed had different approaches to sharing and representing their faith to others.

JSU students’ relationship to whiteness

The JSU students I interviewed were aware that there were many ongoing conversations on campus about the experiences of students with marginalized identities, and disagreed about whether their Jewish identity meant they shared the privileges afforded to white students. In a

group discussion, JSU students offered examples when discussions of race, ethnicity and marginalization have arisen in the classroom and how they viewed those conversations. Aaron recalled participating in a discussion in one of his humanities classes about “how white men have dominated society.” He remembered being eager to separate himself from the white men they were discussing: “Actually, I’m not just a white guy, I’m a Jewish guy and I’m no longer a perpetrator of having done all these terrible things throughout [history].” Aaron continued saying that he believed that being Jewish gave him “minority status” and that “[he] feel[s] less guilty when people know [he’s] Jewish” and is “not just some white guy.”

Most of the other participants in the group discussion argued that it was inappropriate for Aaron to claim that his Jewish identity and his experiences as a Jewish man made him similar to other marginalized people. Isaac, for example, believed that while in the past it may have been reasonable to include Jewish students in a discussion of the experiences of marginalized students, this was “certainly” not the case at Michigan. He explained, “I don’t think anyone looks at a Jew and says, ‘Wow, you’re a minority.’ Like, ‘You’re being persecuted.’” Though Isaac acknowledged that “there’s a lot of anti-Semitism that exists in the world, especially over the past 250 years” and that Jewish people remain a minority “in terms of population demographics,” they are not “a minority in terms of status.” He added that a large number of Jewish people are “upper-middle class to upper class.” With this in mind, Isaac concluded that he is not sure “if saying I am Jewish in class would give [him] minority status and take away the privilege that [he has]” but rather that it might instead add to the privilege that his peers believe him to hold. He imagined his peers’ response: “Oh, let me guess. You’re a white, Jewish guy. Great, not only do you have status in society regardless, but you also have money and connections.”

Isaac added that he believes that his experience as a Jewish man does not really have “the same effect of, let’s say, the male who’s a black male.” The experience of being a black man, he explained, “grants him a whole another world” of knowledge. For that reason, Isaac believed that in “the modern world being Jewish isn’t a thing to go, like, ‘I empathize with you. You’ve gone through so much.’” Referencing past atrocities against Jewish people, he contended that in the past when “a lot of the Holocaust survivors were still in the workplace, maybe that would have been a thing.” However today, he argued, saying “‘I’m Jewish,’ the only thing [he guessed] people could empathize with is, ‘Oh, you have extra laws and then your grandparents were in the Holocaust.’” This, Isaac said, did not give the Jewish people the same experience of marginalization in today’s world as his black peers, or as he put it, “Jews are a minority, but they’re not a marginalized minority. They’re definitely [on] the forefront of almost every society they’re a part of.”

In follow-up individual interviews, other members of the same group discussion shared that they agreed with Isaac. Abby explained that she did not “necessarily agree with Aaron because I just think that by nature people feel that the Jews are more privileged right now.” Jill found that most of her peers do not see the fact that she is Jewish as particularly unique on Michigan’s campus: “I really don’t think people care if you’re Jewish. I think that there are so many Jews on this campus, like a disproportionate amount...It really doesn’t change my position in the classroom for just being Jewish.” Jill agreed that the large number of Jewish students on U-M’s campus affected Jewish students’ ability to claim minority status.

The opposition to Aaron’s statements about the Jewish experience of marginalization revealed the stereotypes that many JSU students described negotiating throughout their time in college, namely that Jewish people have access to wealth, privilege and are disproportionately

represented in leadership positions. The same stereotypes that JSU students described as shaping when and how they shared their Jewish identity with others, suggested that they accessed many of the privileges of whiteness despite being a religious minority.

Gendered expectations in JSU

The men and women interviewed recognized that engaged with Judaism differently depending on their gender. Aaron acknowledged that his experiences in Judaism was different from those of Jewish women:

Obviously, I don't know what it feels to be a woman so I can't really speak to that...In Judaism there's a big difference between men and women...In Judaism, while there's a lot of equality, there's very distinct lines between the roles of male and female. It's an ancient religion, it's been around since the beginning of time.

The interviews revealed notable differences between how the men and women interviewed approached how they presented their faith to others, and when they were willing to make exceptions to their faith practices.

The three women interviewed felt a strong responsibility to represent their faith to others, support the broader observant community, and abide by religious expectations around sex and relationships. Rebecca felt that adhering to the "rules" that her faith had around sex distinguished her peers:

Premarital sex is a big 'no' in Judaism. If you're holding that rule or having that rule, it definitely allows me to separate myself more from boys. I don't do a lot of the things that my friends do because of my Jewish values. If I wasn't as religious maybe I would be doing these things, but because I want to respect [the faith], I don't do that stuff. Yes, I feel like I respect myself a lot more as a modern Orthodox woman.

She added that she knew that not all of her JSU peers thought about sex in the same way: “Not everybody’s the same, there’s so much variation – you could be religious like keep Shabbat, keep kosher but have sex, or don’t have sex, kiss, or not – There’s a whole spectrum.” Rebecca viewed herself as a minority among her college peers for avoiding sex, and she took pride in maintaining the discipline this required.

Learning what it meant to respect her religious commitments and still engage in the campus partying and relationship culture was not without challenge. During her first year, Rebecca met a Jewish peer at a party and he came back to her dorm room. It quickly became clear that they had different expectations of what would come next. She remembered him declaring, “I thought we were going to have sex or whatever.” Rebecca was shocked that he believed that sex was “normal” and, not interested, she exclaimed, “No. I’m a Jew.” She assumed that this explanation would be sufficient to get him to desist: “That was my sentence, my cue. I thought he would understand too, because he was Jewish.” However, he persisted calling her religious objections “so weird.” Troubled, Rebecca found it difficult to convince him to leave: “I was trying to kick him out because I don’t need this kid. He was giving me a hard time about it and my hall mate came down. She forced him to get out by yelling at him and kicking him down the stairs.” The experience was upsetting, but she was proud of the fact that she asserted her values: “My foot’s down, I’m standing up. My values and identity are more important than this kid.” Despite this experience, she described herself as “friends” with this peer, and explained, “He says he doesn’t remember that night, but who knows? He’s a nice kid. He didn’t mean harm, but just is a little crazy.” Because Rebecca’s faith identity highly influenced her choices around sex and relationships, she anticipated, in at least one case wrongly, that her male Jewish peers would understand and respect those choices.

It is striking that Rebecca felt compelled to forgive this male peer despite the harm he caused and his efforts to ignore her wishes. This event had a strong impact on Rebecca, yet it is one that he claims to not remember. The differences the impact of this experience on these two students highlights the incongruities in the power they each hold in the relationship. He can simply forget the event and go on with his life expecting Rebecca to remain his friend. While, for Rebecca, this experience, remains a core part of how she understands the relationship between her faith and her sexuality, and how she communicates her wishes to others.

Many of the men interviewed were far more flexible in their adherence to religious expectations around sex and relationships, and acknowledged that they would hide or minimize their Jewish identity when at parties or with women. As discussed earlier, both Isaac and Jacob removed their kippah when flirting with women to avoid being seen as the “Orthodox boy.” Both were concerned that their kippah would communicate that they were Orthodox and thus not interested in flirting or sex. They believed that leaving the kippah off left them free to engage with women how they wished without others knowing, as Isaac put it, that they “choose to not really observe that law.”

The women interviewed bemoaned that the fact that their male peers were not always as committed to maintaining their faith practices. Jill, Rebecca and Abby all shared examples of times that they have invited other Jewish students to join them for prayers, Shabbat dinner, and instances where they encouraged other Jewish students to reflect on their religious practices and to consider ways to increase their engagement. Jill lamented the fact that she knew several students who came to college “super strong” in their Judaism but that their faith faded away over time; she wished that the campus rabbis more consistently encouraged students to keep up their participation. This lack of participation by many Jewish students was especially an issue when

trying to get a minyan⁴¹ for services. Jill explained the challenge of recruiting enough men for a minyan:

Even now, they're struggling to gather enough boys to make a minyan. There will be boys walking by, and the rabbi [will] ask them if they're coming. They're like, 'We're just going to go for a second. Maybe we'll come back', and he's like, 'Okay. Sure, do your thing'. You need that rabbi, his job is to [say], 'Come on. We need you [for] just five minutes.' Just get them to be excited or get them interested at all.

Jill believed that if the Orthodox community were a little larger, or had more enthusiastic rabbis and additional male Jewish student leaders, it would not be as much of a struggle to get students to participate. Jill sought to do her part by encouraging her peers to come to Shabbat dinners and other events at Hillel or JSU.

While all of the women interviewed shared instances of encouraging other Jewish peers to reflect on their faith engagement, the men interviewed did not recall having similar conversations. When asked about whether he ever feels compelled to be a part of the minyan, Aaron explained: "No, I don't feel any responsibility to show up at Hillel for the morning prayers." Isaac recognized that men played an important role in the creation of a minyan, and he made a "concerted effort" and has "actually gone a couple times." He continued, "I was there this morning. Because sometimes they really need people to come so you show up because as a male, it's important for me to be there because I count towards the minyan and I help the community, and I do that." Isaac recognized his important role in the minyan and viewed his attendance as a "help" to the community. Whereas, Jill and the other women interviewed felt they had to rely on the willingness of Isaac and other Jewish men's desire to "help" the

⁴¹ A minyan is the quorum of ten Jewish adults required for particular religious services. In some more Orthodox strains of Judaism, only men are counted as part of a minyan.

community in order to have the appropriate quorum for services. In other words, though the men interviewed believed that assisting in forming the minyan was worthy of prayers, women's attendance and the efforts of women to encourage men to attend was ignored.

Conclusion

The JSU students found that the experience of being a Jewish student at Michigan involved making frequent choices regarding how they wanted to integrate their Jewish identity with their University life. Many recognized that there is no hard and fast rule for how to remain true to one's Jewish identity in college, and that there are many opinions regarding the best way to keep Shabbat, date, talk about Judaism with others, and so on. Isaac described his experience of negotiating his faith in college this way:

There's no clear, distinct rule for every single scenario. For every conversation I have with a non-Jew about Judaism, there's the positive one, there's a negative one. Same with Jews, there's positive ones, there's negative ones. Maybe the percentages are more positive than negative but there's always both. There's times I'm very proud of being Jewish, times when it's really frustrating. Times where my teachers really work well with it, times that they don't.

Maintaining one's faith while at Michigan required walking on the "tightrope" that Rebecca described. Students believed that the requirements of being an observant Jewish student demanded making regular choices about the relationship between faith and college life in ways that their less-observant or non-observant Jewish peers did not experience. Rebecca believed that, "being Jewish is not difficult if you're not religious...[you are] just blended in with everybody else...but as an Orthodox Jew you have many more obligations to follow or rules that does not allow you to completely secularize and blend with everybody else."

Though JSU students generally agreed that it was not particularly challenging to be a Jewish student at Michigan, they were constantly reminded that University life did not easily make room for their religious practice. The academic calendar and the expectations of faculty regularly often meant that JSU students had to approach instructors early in the term, disclose their Jewish faith and ask for accommodations. They reported that professors and graduate instructors were happy to make adjustments for missed classes and exams. Though course adjustments were appreciated, JSU students were aware that they often missed valuable material. Some extra class supports, like Saturday study sessions with a graduate instructor, would always be out of reach. In order for JSU students to feel truly included on campus, their religious observance would have to be taken in to consideration in the construction of course schedules and the academic calendar more broadly.

There were a few other areas of campus and University life that impacted JSU students' feeling of inclusion. Like their peers in other religious groups, JSU students struggled to negotiate negative stereotypes against their religious tradition and looked forward to a time when such views would be a thing of the past. Additionally, JSU student constantly had to contend with the fact that the majority of campus social activities take place while they are observing Shabbat. Though the students interviewed did not expect the University to move football games to Sunday, for example, the scheduling of such activities impacted their ability to participate in many of the significant social events of college life to the same degree as their peers.

JSU students in this study had varying opinions regarding how they fit in with the broader conversations around campus about the degree of privilege and oppression afforded to particular identity combinations. With the exception of Aaron, most agreed that their Jewish

identity did not deny them the privileges afforded white students. As Isaac put it, “I don’t think anyone looks at a Jew and says, ‘Wow, you’re a minority.’ Like, ‘You’re being persecuted.’”

Though JSU students were generally aware of their white privilege, they ascribed some of the privileges they received to their Jewish identity independent of their whiteness. JSU students agreed that they benefitted from positive perceptions of Jewish people. These included the perception that Jewish students held the majority of student leadership positions on campus, and that Jewish students were disproportionally taught from a young age to apply their ingenuity or, as Jacob put it, “use your skills for good things.” Though the JSU students were aware of their white privilege in some aspects of their time in college, they were quick to suggest that their Jewishness was the primary variable that impacted their ability to take on leadership roles across campus, and the reason for their success in applying their ingenuity. However, Jewish students’ success in obtaining leadership roles on campus is also at least partially attributable to their white privilege. Additionally, JSU students’ ability to freely express their desire to “use [their] skills for good things” was made easier by the fact that they did not have to contend with significant racial or religious discrimination. Put another way, according to the definition of identity that I use throughout this dissertation, it is not possible to delineate where the privileges of whiteness end and what the students interviewed perceive as the skills or traits unique to Jewishness begin. They would not have been able to enjoy these articulated benefits of their Jewish identity to the same degree if they were not also white.

CHAPTER VIII

Cross-Group Analysis

This chapter is a cross-case analysis of the four groups comprising this study. Before delving into an analysis of the relationships among the four groups, I return to the discussion of religion and identity offered at the beginning of this dissertation. I conceptualize religion as aspect of identity that is constantly negotiated and defined by its environment in different ways. I understand identity through an intersectional lens: how a person understands and experiences their religious identity is deeply linked to other aspects of identity. Like religion, identity is something that is constantly shaped through interaction between individuals and their environment. I explained this negotiation concisely on page 6:

Identity can be understood as being comprised of three parts: 1) it is individually chosen based on how one understands and perceives of oneself (Goffman, 1963); 2) it is socially negotiated as individuals figure out how and what parts of their identities they wish to share with others (Goffman, 1959; 1963; Hames-García, 2011); and 3) it is culturally defined (Goffman, 1959; 1963; Hames-García, 2011), meaning what an institution values in their students' identities influences how those students understand and present themselves.

A student's religious identity is linked to and shaped by the simultaneous experience their race, class, gender, etc., and how those experiences are shaped by their environment and interactions with others.

This understanding of religion, identity and religious identity is important because my data reveal that the participants' gender, race and/or ethnicity and its relationship to students' religious identity shaped how they interacted in their campus world at all times. They used their understanding of their race/ethnicity and gender to help them make sense of, and engage with, people in their environment and various circumstances and settings they encountered. Additionally, participants' choices regarding how they presented their religious identity at Michigan were influenced by their simultaneous experience of other aspects of their identity.

Keeping this understanding of religion, identity and religious identity in mind, four key themes arise from the data. First, participants actively used their faith to help them navigate college life. Each of the religious groups in this study relied upon particular codes of conduct (e.g. abstaining from alcohol, drugs and sex before marriage), that guided their choices in a range of social situations, and provided a kind of litmus test to indicate religious piety. Their religious lives often operated as a filter to help them to assess their experiences and find support in times of challenge. For example, across the groups, students discussed the ways their faith helped them to address academic setbacks.

The second and third themes identify the ways in which other aspects of the students' identities, namely their gender and race and/or ethnicity, shaped their experiences of being a religious student at Michigan and how they used those other aspects of identity to engage with each other and the campus at large. The second theme is that the participants' gender had a significant influence on how they interacted with their peers in their same religious group. In each of the four groups in this study, there were distinct expectations for male and female group members that shaped how they related to fellow group members.

The third theme from the data is that participants' racial and/or ethnic identities helped

them to organize and understand their external world, or the world outside their respective student group. The salience of race and ethnicity varied across groups, with the two groups composed primarily of people of color, Ignite and MMSU, were much more aware of their racial and/or ethnic identity and its influence on their experiences than most of their Haven and JSU counterparts. Still, to varying degrees, all understood that race was part of their group cohesion, what separated them from other religious groups on campus, and impacted how they related to the campus more broadly.

I am not suggesting that participants only considered their race, ethnicity and gender as impacting one aspect of their lives, either their relationships with peers within their religious group or the campus community outside their religious group. Indeed, all of these aspects of identity impact countless aspects of their campus experience. Asserting otherwise would run counter to the intersectional understanding of identity that is at the heart of this dissertation. Instead, the data show the trends that arose in how students thought about the relationship between their race, ethnicity, gender and religious identity and their relationship to each other and the campus environment at large.

The fourth theme that arose is that all of the groups had different and some shared understandings of what was required to help them to feel as much a part of the academic and social aspects of university life as their differently religious or non-religious peers. Across the groups, students wished to feel included in campus life. Their expectations for what such inclusion required reflect the degree of privilege and oppression afforded to their religious identity and their categorical identities. Students perceived the University as at best silent or indifferent towards, and at worst objecting or interfering with, religious communities on campus.

Faith as a Tool to Help Navigate College Life

Students continually used their faith to help them understand and engage with their coursework, chose friends, make decisions regarding dating relationships and sexuality, select where to live, which campus spaces to frequent, and make a range of other choices that touched nearly every aspect of college life. Students do not leave their faith outside the classroom or campus. For many – including those in this study – faith is a constant that helps them navigate the world around them and can occasionally make the voyage rocky. Each of the four groups had its own experiences negotiating the college environment. However, one experience the groups had in common was that each used their faith as a lens to inform decisions about how to engage in campus life and to interpret their time on campus. In addition, participants across the four groups made choices about when and how to share their faith with others in part due to an awareness of the various stigmas they perceived people on campus – largely fellow students and their instructors – applied to their religious group.

The white Christian members of Haven relied heavily on particular codes of conduct to make choices about their own behavior and assess that of others. This required that Haven members align their “attitude and character” (Jared) in ways that allowed them to avoid the temptation of sin, and remain true to their Christian beliefs and commitments. Derek described the sins of college life that he was to avoid as drinking, sex, doing drugs and “stuff like that.” He and other Haven members were quick to acknowledge that avoiding these temptations in college can be “kind of tough.” Succumbing to these enticements, in addition to holding particular political and social views that many Haven members believed were antithetical to Christian belief (i.e. supporting abortion and marriage equality), were grounds for questioning a peer’s fidelity to their purported Christian faith.

Because participants believed that Michigan is a “pretty liberal” (Laura) campus where many regularly engage in sex, drinking and drugs, Haven members suspected that there were “probably very, very few” (Eileen) “true believers” (Jason) on campus. To cope with their perceived minority status, Haven students developed a range of tactics to explain their choices and beliefs to their non-religious or differently religious peers. These tactics often involved choosing to be selective when disclosing their faith to others, and many Haven members had stock responses at the ready if they needed to decline an invitation to drink or party with friends.

Haven participants viewed the University administration and many instructors with antagonistic skepticism. Haven students observed that religion was something “you really can’t touch upon or talk about” (Mark) in class or with faculty, and found that positive interactions with faculty or classmates who disclosed their Christian faith were minimal. They named several classroom experiences that supported their belief that faculty and other students were often hostile towards Christian students. Often these memories revolved around times where students felt that the instructor would casually dismiss Christian belief offhand, or swear using God’s or Jesus’ name seemingly without a second thought.

Like their Haven classmates, the black women from Ignite whom I interviewed also relied upon codes of conduct to help them interpret the college environment and make choices regarding where and how they involved themselves in campus life. These codes included being “caring, selfless, not judgmental or jealous” (Violet) and abstaining from drinking, drugs and sex before marriage. Like participants across the groups in this study, Ignite members recognized that by not participating in the campus culture of drinking, they would be separating themselves from many of their peers. However, they were careful to point out that did not mean they could not have fun; rather, they needed to find their own way to make sure that they socialized in ways

that were in alignment with their values.

Ignite participants regularly turned to their faith when faced with significant decisions. For example, Madison explained that she often looked to God for “discernment,” to help her find clarity and calm in the midst of stress, and to make meaning out of academic challenges and successes. When faced with a given challenge or proposition, Ignite students relied on their faith to help them decide how to respond. For example, when Violet was asked by a professor what she would do if a higher grade was incorrectly recorded in her academic record, she named her faith as her reason for why she would come forward with the truth even if it meant receiving a lower grade. Nia similarly saw her faith as a core part of her identity. When deciding how to talk about meaningful identities as part of a class exercise, she looked to her faith for the courage to speak the truth about her spiritual beliefs. In these and other experiences Ignite students shared, their faith served as a filter through which to view their experiences and help them to respond in a way that was in alignment with their values.

The participants from the JSU entered the University knowing that remaining observant would at times be a challenge. Upon arriving at a University with so many non-Jewish students, JSU students generally enjoyed their new status as ambassador and educator to their non-Jewish peers. Rebecca was aware that for many of her friends meeting her was “the first time that they actually met a Jew.” Rebecca’s new friends seemed to enjoy learning about Judaism from her, and she was curious about the ways their high school experiences, including experimentation with drinking, parting and sex, differed from her own attending predominantly Jewish schools. As much as she was interested in her friends’ stories, she was grateful that she “always had the Jewish community to fall back on” when she began aching for a familiar environment. The positive experiences that Rebecca and other JSU students described when discussing their faith

on campus contrasts with that of other groups, who did not always experience such a positive reception of their religious views. For example, Haven participants discussed worrying about being dismissed as unintelligent for their faith, and experiences of Islamophobia led MMSU students to hesitate before sharing their religious identity with others.

Having a robust Jewish community to “fall back on” was an important resource for many JSU participants as they adapted to life at Michigan. Though not all of the JSU students observed their faith in the same way, they shared the experience of having to approach a faculty member, often early in the term, to let him or her know that they would need to miss several days of class to observe Jewish holidays. Though they reported that most faculty were understanding, missing classes and review sessions meant that they were at an academic disadvantage compared to their classmates who could attend all course activities.

JSU participants also described the difficulties of engaging in many of the prominent social and academic activities at Michigan while adhering to Jewish practices. The necessity to avoid technology on Shabbat was a challenge that came up often. For example, Jill learned how to get around without her phone during Saturday football games, but was saddened that she did not have countless pictures of those experiences like many of her friends. These photos were not trivial to Jill, but a significant part of the college experience and connecting with her friends who she was missing.

Like the other groups in this study, JSU members were not homogeneous in their religious observance. Students made a range of choices regarding when and how they wanted to adhere to particular Jewish practices. Many of the JSU men interviewed said they would take off the kippah when at parties, concerned that women seeing them wearing the kippah would assume that they would not be interested in flirting and sex. These JSU men were aware that the kippah

communicated messages about their religious adherence to others, and wanted to control the environments in which they shared their observance with others. This is an example of a type of strategy that JSU students employed to help them control when, how and where they communicated their religious identity to others.

Similar to their peers across the religious groups, MMSU students found that the transition to college caused them to reflect on their beliefs and practices and decide for themselves how they wanted to continue their religious practice. Dameer described this experience this way: “It’s been a really big thing from high school to college is that [I’ve had to be] more independent, like I have had to [decide how to practice my religion] myself no one is going to tell me if I want to do it. I don’t have to do it if I don’t want to.” Jamal chose not to prioritize his religious observance when he began attending college. However, feeling its absence, he changed his priorities to ensure that prayer was again a priority in his life: “I guess one transition that has happened through the course of my college career is really prioritizing my prayers and really making sure that I’m devoting enough time to Islam in the midst of all that’s going on around here with classes and extracurricular [activities].”

MMSU students recognized that they would sometimes need to figure out how to hold on to their religious practices while keeping up with coursework. Fox adapted to this challenge by observing that there are two kinds of knowledge: “spiritual knowledge [and] academic knowledge, [and] a lot of times the two pieces don’t really match.” He and his Muslim peers viewed the Qur’an as a “deep sacred text,” a perspective that was not shared by the “western academics” who taught many of his courses.

Addressing and countering the stereotypes against religious people on campus was a constant challenge for each of the four groups in this study. Haven members believed that

Christians were seen as unintelligent by the broader campus community. David described this stereotype this way: “a lot of people see...Christianity [as], ‘Oh you believe in ghosts and stuff like that – pretty much like the supernatural stuff, that [is] not backed up by science so you must not actually be very smart.’” This often came up in classes where belief in evolution was a foundational part of the course. Haven members worried they would be dismissed by instructors or peers if they shared that they ascribed to a version of creation offered in Genesis, not the scientific explanation that was offered in their courses. David recalled taking several classes that were rooted in “the assumption that...everything about evolution is true” and “if you don’t [believe in evolution] then you are out of your mind.” In order to avoid confrontation or being dismissed as foolish by instructors and peers, Haven students often chose to keep their beliefs to themselves.

Many Haven students were frustrated that they felt like they constantly ran the risk of being labeled as “intolerant” and “unloving” (Felicity) by their more progressive peers for their opposition to abortion, condemnation of same-sex relationships, and other socially conservative views. Felicity explained this concern this way:

I feel that people are fine with knowing you are Christian, but when that starts affecting your moral beliefs on things, there can be political issues. Then they dock you. I’ve had that happen with someone in the music school...[They said,] “You’re Christian? It’s great,” but then when you believe this, this and this, it’s like, “Uh-oh,” and you are intolerant.

Felicity believed that her peers did not object to religious practice or Christianity specifically, but balked at her interpretation of Christianity. Just as many Haven members distinguished between “true believers” (Jason) and Christians more broadly, Felicity suspected her peers did the same

and objected to Haven members' interpretation of the faith.

Not all stereotypes of Haven members were negative, and participants agreed that Haven students had a "nice factor" (Felicity) and had a reputation of being "just really nice" (Mark). This "nice" stereotype, stood a stark contrast to the "intolerant" stereotype. Ignite students also believed that Christian students were seen as boring and only interested in "'clean fun' which is 'boring fun'" (Madison). Madison endeavored to counter this stereotype through making an effort to be extra "welcoming" and "jovial" with others. Ignite members also described being very deliberate about when they chose to share their faith with others and often got the impression that Christians were not always welcome in certain environments.

JSU students were aware of the stereotype that Jewish people are "richer or more entitled" (Jill), "affluent" (Jacob), and "sly businessmen" (Rebecca). Rebecca and other JSU students sought to be extra "nice" and "friendly" to help provide a counter example to these stereotypes. JSU students also took great care when deciding to talk about their faith with their peers, like the other groups in this study. Jacob explained, that he was selective about when he decided to speak up in class and avoid being labeled as "the Jew that is like stirring trouble or being controversial." Across the groups, students were aware that they were often put in situations where they felt they were tokenized for their religious identity, and asked to speak for all who shared their faith.

All of the students I interviewed for this study took comfort in the feeling of safety or community they had with others in their religious group. Haven students frequently lived together in single-sex houses or apartments. Ignite members expressed gratitude that the Ignite community is a "safe space" (Madison) to openly share ideas and find comfort and support. MMSU students created a number of informal spaces on and off campus where they could

reliably connect with other Muslims. Liberty Place was a particularly prominent example of this type of space. Additionally, there were particular tables and spaces in the undergraduate library where MMSU students could reliably connect with other Muslims, students informally organized rows in large lecture halls where they could connect with other students, and students also knew they could find one another in one of the designated reflection rooms on campus that many Muslim students used to pray. This informal network of spaces allowed MMSU students to dependably find places of support and retreat to help them cope with and celebrate academic challenges and victories, and also find community and safety amidst frequent experiences of Islamophobia.

Participants explained that they believed that the strength of the relationships they created within their respective religious groups was due to their shared religious belief. Madison described her closeness to her Ignite peers this way:

When you have your faith in something or someone, in Jesus in this case...you get to see peoples' lowest moments. You get to see their highest moments. You get to see the journey and the improvements that they have made. I just feel it's something stronger...versus just the average org on campus.

Shared religious belief deepened the connections between participants, which further allowed participation in their religious community to be a place of refuge and support amidst the broader campus environment.

Study participants disagreed on whether the University was antagonistic or simply indifferent to religious students, but regardless, they continued to actively engage in their religious life independent of the University's support or engagement. Overall, the findings from the interviews and group discussions illustrate that students' faith lives touch nearly all (if not

all) aspects of their college experience. Across the groups, students relied upon their religious faith to find comfort and support throughout the ups and downs of campus life and to negotiate stigma. They used their faith as a tool to help them decide how to interpret their courses, as well as make choices about how they wanted to participate in college social life. Participants were aware that sometimes their choices distinguished them from their peers and caused them to rely upon their religious faith to help them interpret their peers' social choices and make their own.

Gender as a Within-group Organizing Principle

Gender played a significant role in how the students interviewed thought about their faith and how they negotiated their religious identity on campus. Each of the groups had particular expectations for its male and female members that impacted how they related to one another, structured group activities, and interpreted their responsibility to maintaining and supporting the religious practices of other group members. There were also variations in how men and women in some groups were expected to present themselves and to share their feelings.

The JSU participants noted numerous differences in the expectations for Jewish men and women. Aaron described these differences this way, "In Judaism, there's a big difference between men and women...while there's a lot of equality, there's very distinct lines between the roles of male and female." The JSU women interviewed took on a greater degree of responsibility for talking about their faith with other Jewish students and encouraging them to increase their observance. Jill lamented that she had to encourage Jewish men to attend services in order to have the quorum needed to form a minyan. In doing so, Jill took responsibility for the maintenance of Jewish worship, while knowing that the presence of her body did not impact whether a service could take place.

The Jewish women interviewed were also less likely to change the presentation of their religious faith when in social situations. Rebecca felt confident explaining that she was Jewish to a Jewish male peer who had come back to her room would communicate her sexual boundaries. It surprised her when he appeared not to understand. Isaac and Jacob consciously chose to remove their kippah at parties so that the women they met would not assume they were rigidly devout Jews uninterested in kissing or sex. Put another way, Isaac and Jacob sought the freedom to be flexible in their religious practice and presentation when socializing, whereas Rebecca appreciated that her Jewish identity helped her to communicate her sexual choices.

Though I am unable to compare the experiences of the men and women who participated in Ignite, because only women were interviewed, it is possible to make some tentative claims about the gender dynamics and expectations of the group based on the significant leadership and participation of women. Participants estimated that 90+ percent of the group's membership is women, and women consistently made up Ignite's entire leadership board. Christina recalled that more men were involved in the past, but that their participation wavered. She also observed that women not only participated in religious groups more than men, but men appeared more hesitant to share their faith with others. This hesitation puzzled Christina: "I know [men who] are religious, but I don't know, is it they don't want to outwardly show it? I don't know. I don't get it." In the past, a few men recruited several of their fraternity brothers to participate or brought members of their sports team, but their participation decreased depending on the energies of the male members who had originally brought their friends to Ignite. Men could come and go from Ignite's activities and participate in group leadership when it suited them, and perhaps do so knowing that the women in the group had and would continue to keep the group going. The Ignite women conveyed that they felt a great responsibility for stewarding the group into the

future and worried aloud about the dips in participation that they suspected would occur after a particularly active class graduated. Their continued leadership in the group indicates that they felt a responsibility to use their labor and time to maintain the group, and that the handful of male participants did not appear to feel that same sense of obligation and preferred to come and go as they pleased.

The MMSU women interviewed also took on a great deal of responsibility for the maintenance and visibility of their faith. Many associated gender, race and ethnicity with religious visibility. As Rima put it, her religion, race and ethnicity are identities that she “can’t put on and take off.” Accordingly, the Muslim women interviewed often had to contend with other’s assumptions and feelings about their religious and ethnic identities. As Hopkins and Greenwood (2013) observed in their study of British hijabi women, the hijab not only reflects one’s religious identity, but national and gender identities as well. Similarly, the hijabi women in this study viewed their hijabs as expressions of the intersections of their ethnic, gendered and religious visibility in ways that set them apart from Muslim men. As Amina pointed out, hijabi women “are a lot more visible than [Muslim] guys,” and are the “standard bearer[s]” of the public perception of the broader Muslim community. Women who did not wear a hijab still had to contend with their peers making (often Islamophobic) assumptions about their religious choices and beliefs based on their racial and ethnic identities. Their perceived freedom to choose whether to share their religious identity with others led Jazmin to refer to herself as an “invisible Muslim.”

Some MMSU women expressed frustration that male group members did not always understand, as Sofia put it, “what [hijabi women have] been facing.” Abed recognized that his experience was different from that of Muslim women. While he and other men tried to be

supportive of Muslim women and similarly visible on campus through wearing a kufi, he recognized that doing so was not the same experience as wearing a hijab every day. He had the ability to take the kufi on and off as he pleased, whereas he knew that in his family and in many other Muslim families, the hijab was seen as an “obligation.”

Haven participants viewed gender as a tool to help organize themselves and their activities. The majority of Haven activities were divided by gender and members believed that these segregated spaces allowed them the opportunity to let their guard down, and share things that they viewed as more difficult to say with members of another gender present. These gendered divisions also served to reinforce heterosexuality and hegemonic gender norms. Sex and sexuality was seen as a kind of third rail in their relationships, and the combination of presumed heterosexuality and staying in largely single-sex environments was understood as a resource to help Haven members avoid what they viewed as the temptation of sex.

In her ethnography of an Evangelical Christian college student group, Wilkins (2008) found that Evangelical students learned “to see themselves as ‘good people’” and focus on presenting themselves as happy and joyous young men and women (p. 114). Hochschild (1983) famously observed, the expectations of women to control and manage their emotions are often greater than those placed on men, and the Evangelical women in Wilkins’ study were no exception. Similarly, the Haven women I interviewed discussed a commitment to particular emotional presentations. For example, Beth believed that women should focus on “understand[ing] gentleness and the beauty” where men could focus on “a little more the power and the fighting.” She believed that women were “just as strong as men,” but women engaged in “soft fighting.” Put another way, women were responsible for limiting their emotional spectrum to “soft” feelings as opposed to the “powerful” emotions of their male Haven peers.

Haven women had to control both their own feelings and that of Haven men. Laura explained that she felt responsible for maintaining “emotional boundaries” with men. Not only was she expected to confine her own feelings to a designated spectrum, but to monitor the emotions of the men around her. Despite the emotional monitoring they felt their religious commitments required, the Haven women believed the Bible gave women a kind of “treasured” status (Katie). Haven women did not find the constrained emotional spectrum limiting; instead it allowed them the freedom to focus on their positive relationship with God and one another.

Haven was not the only group where women were encouraged to confine their emotions to a limited spectrum. Madison, one of the Ignite students interviewed, assumed that her peers believed that Christians only liked to have “‘clean fun’ which is ‘boring fun.’” To counter this stereotype, she felt pressure to “be a lot more welcoming and just more jovial when it comes to interacting with people that are strangers.” In other words, Madison was careful to limit herself to expressing a particular set of emotions to others to avoid being seen only as fulfilling a stereotype. Other Ignite women interviewed explained that they used their faith to help them cope and manage their emotions when confronted with discrimination. As Nia put it, “relying on God” helped her to not “let [her] emotion[s] get the best of [her].” Tiffany followed “God’s guidance” to help her decide, “No, you don’t need to say that right there.” While Muslim men were “encouraged to be very loud or speak up,” Amina learned early on that Muslim women are supposed to be “quiet” or a “shy hijabi.” She noticed that others were surprised when she expressed feelings outside the bounds of this stereotype.

There were several notable differences between Ignite and MMSU women’s experience of managing emotions and that of Haven women. Amina openly expressed some frustration at the limits of these expectations of women’s expression, and proceeded to give examples of

Muslim women in leadership positions on campus whom she admired. For the Ignite women interviewed, limiting their emotions to a particular spectrum was employed as a tool to help them deal with perceived stereotypes and experiences of discrimination, and less as a celebrated aspect of femininity.

Despite the fact that all of the groups' studied have practices that could be interpreted as oppressive or constraining to their female members, the women interviewed regularly demonstrated agency within their traditions and took pride in their religious identity. For example, many women viewed their gender as a sign of their special status with God. The women in Haven believed that "a great part about being a Christian" is that women are seen as "treasured daughter[s] of God" (Katie). Similarly, Amina believed that Muslim women had a "special relationship" with God, and wearing a hijab allowed her to be "known" by God in a unique way. Hermione found strength in thinking about the "worth that Islam places on women." Rebecca enjoyed expressing and sharing her Jewish faith with others, even taking the time to write Baruch Hashem on the top of course papers to signal her gratitude that "[she has a] paper and pen to write with and am about to get an education." Consistent with previous research (e.g. Mattis, 2003; Musgrave et al., 2002; Williams, Jerome, White & Fisher, 2006), women viewed their faith as a source of resilience and a tool they would rely upon to help cope with adversity.

Race and/or Ethnicity as an Outside Group Organizing Principle

Students used the combination of their race, ethnicity and religious identity to help them examine how they related to others in the campus community at large, and to distinguish their religious group from other campus organizations. The salience of race and ethnicity across the different groups varied widely. I asked all of the participants to name identities other than their religious identity that were important to them and the differences between the groups' answers

was striking. Haven students spoke primarily about personal relationships and meaningful activities, but little about race, ethnicity, gender or other social identities. Haven students described themselves as “very patriotic” (Jason), “a daughter and a friend” (Felicity & Laura), “a Michigan student” and “athletic” (Jared). While JSU students’ comments were similar, a handful mentioned their ethnicity and its’ relationship to their experience of Judaism. Jacob and Aaron (JSU) talked about where they grew up and their love of sports as important to their identity. Yet others, like Abby and Gabe, explained that their experience of being Modern Orthodox is shaped by their connection to Israel and family history of migration.

The responses offered to the same prompt by MMSU and Ignite members, the two groups comprised entirely of people of color, were markedly different from their JSU and Haven peers. MMSU students spoke about their ethnicity as a meaningful aspect of identity, and one that shaped their experience of Islam. They became more aware of the relationship between their ethnic identity and experience of Islam through interacting with Muslim students of different ethnicities and discovering variations in religious practice. The MMSU women interviewed frequently mentioned their gender as also being a significant aspect of identity, and discussed at length their relationship to the hijab. The women who wore a hijab thought a lot about its influence on their life and engagement with others, and the Muslim women who did not were well aware that their experience was not the same as their hijabi classmates. Ignite students named race and gender as important aspects of their identities, and like their MMSU peers, they believed that these identities were integral to their religious lives. As Nia put it, her Christian identity and race are “interconnected in the way that [she] respond[s] to a lot of things.”

The racial and ethnic identity of Haven and JSU students did not seem as salient a part of their identity. The lack of awareness of white students of their racial identity compared to their

peers of color is well documented (e.g. Hurtado, Alvarado & Guillermo-Wann, 2015; Steck, Heckert & Heckert, 2003). For example, Hurtado et al. (2015) surveyed undergraduates to investigate how often they thought about their racial and ethnic identity. Of all the groups surveyed they found that Arab Americans thought about their racial and ethnic identity most frequently, with black students following close behind, and white students thought about their race the least.

Regardless of how salient their racial or ethnic identity, race and ethnicity were important factors in how students across groups thought about their own religious identity and related to other groups on campus. Though Haven members did not mention their race when describing themselves, they acknowledged a close relationship between their whiteness and Christianity. Haven students discussed that one of the reasons that they chose Haven out of the many Christian campus groups was because it was comprised primarily of white students. Felicity opted against joining another Christian group because it was “all Asian.” David, a Chinese American, chose Haven over one of the many East Asian Christian organizations on campus because a white Christian environment was “comfortable” and familiar:

I came from high school that’s predominantly white so I always felt super comfortable around Caucasians in general and less comfortable around a predominantly Asian population I guess. So, I never really considered [a large predominately East Asian Christian organization] that much...I don’t really specifically look for that kind of community.

This preference for white Christian organizations demonstrates that attraction to Haven was not simply a matter of shared theology, but it is also important that theology is embodied in a white racial package.

The relationship between whiteness and Christianity for Haven students was particularly apparent in the group discussion. Felicity had observed increasing administrative and community support for Black Lives Matter, and she had seen signs that read, “Blackness is Life, Blackness is Joy and Blackness is Love,” posted in academic buildings. Felicity was concerned that the University did not and likely would not offer similar support for white Christian students: “I am white; do I not have love, joy and life or whatever? You know, so if you put whiteness is, or Christianity is...all that stuff, people get mad. I just think that’s crazy.” Jason agreed, believing the University would not offer similar support for Christian students experiencing discrimination, adding “the University would respond differently if it were us.” Jason’s “us” is not simply referring to the broader Christian community, but a very specific white subgroup of Christians. Moreover, his use of the term “us” indicates an awareness that white Christianity is part of the cohesion of Haven, and something that distinguishes Haven from other groups.

It is important to note that not all Haven group objected to expressions of support for Black Lives Matter by the University. Katie believed that it is very “legitimate” for the University to actively support black students because the discrimination students of color experience is very real and “because if there were racial slurs against us, we would hope that there would be a space to talk about it too, but there isn’t, as far as I’ve experienced.” The “us” Katie offers here could refer to the all-white group discussion, or the all-white Christian group discussion. Regardless, Katie’s comments highlight the fact that part of what she and other group members believe binds Haven together as a group is both their Christian faith and white identity.

Whereas Haven members did not mention their whiteness as a salient part of their identity, but used it to position themselves as different from other campus groups, Ignite and MMSU participants indicated that their racial and/or ethnic identity were core aspects of

themselves and were well aware of its impact on how they related to other campus groups. MMSU students spoke extensively about the challenges involved in being “brown” (Hermione) and Muslim at Michigan. They acknowledged that to those outside the Muslim community, Michigan Muslim students likely appeared to be a monolithic group, even though there was significant internal diversity.

MMSU students came from a range of ethnic backgrounds that often shaped how others perceived their religious identity. One of the clearest examples of this is Jazmin’s conversation with a classmate regarding how others made assumptions about her religious identity upon learning that she is Muslim:

I’ve had this conversation with so many people where people will say, ‘Oh, you’re Indian, so you must be Hindu,’ and I’d be like, ‘No, I’m Muslim my family is Muslim. We’ve always been Muslim.’ And they are like, ‘Oh, so you’re from Pakistan,’ and I was like, ‘Nope, I just told you I was Indian.’ And they are like, ‘But, that means you are Hindu.’...And a lot of times people don’t seem to understand that Indians can be Muslim as well, and there’s more Muslims in India than there are Christians in the United States. It’s a very significant population.

Jazmin’s classmate had trouble comprehending a world where someone could be both Indian and Muslim, believing that the two are somehow incompatible. Recalling this exchange, Jazmin sighed frustrated that she has had “this circular argument with people so much,” and constantly has her identity questioned. Differences in race and/or ethnicity among MMSU students were important and often provided opportunities for connection and learning between group members. However, MMSU members were aware that the broader campus frequently looked at them with far less nuance and lumped them together as “brown” Muslims.

Race and religious identity were clearly linked in the minds of Ignite students, who were well aware that the combination of being black and Christian separated them from other campus religious groups. Ignite students especially sought out Ignite among campus religious groups because they were looking for a group that felt like the black Christian churches they attended prior to Michigan. Nia explained that her identity as a black Christian woman made her “unique” and distinguished her within the college environment as a whole, and she acknowledged that she had many friends who shared that combination – many of whom were involved with Ignite. Ciara described this connection between race and faith identity this way: “It’s cliché, but [if] you’re African-American that means you’re Christian... Mostly, all the African-American people that I know are Christian, and if they’re not, they’re Muslim.” Even if the African-American people that Ciara knew were not wearing something on their body that suggested they were Christian (e.g. a Christian cross necklace or clothing inscribed with a Bible verse) she observed that the connection between race and religion was so strong among African-Americans that she felt confident making assumptions about their religious belief.

JSU students held varying opinions about the relationship between their white identity and their Jewish identity. In a group discussion, Aaron explained that he believed that he is “not just a white guy,” instead he is “a Jewish guy” with “minority status” and should not be lumped in with other white men and seen as “a perpetrator of having done all these terrible things throughout [history].” Aaron’s JSU peers disagreed, believing that it was inaccurate of him to claim that his experiences as a Jewish person was equivalent to that of other marginalized people, and that he did not share in the privileges of white racial identity. Isaac described his disagreement with Aaron this way: “I don’t think anyone looks at a Jew and says, ‘Wow, you’re a minority.’ Like, ‘You’re being persecuted.’” JSU students I interviewed agreed that anti-

Semitism exists on campus and in the world more broadly, however many were aware that they enjoyed many of the benefits of white racial identity.

In addition to the interviews and group discussions, the students' engagement with me highlights the influence of race and ethnicity in how the groups perceived of themselves and other campus communities. This connection was particularly notable for Haven students who were quick to presume similarities between myself and them. As I mentioned earlier, Felicity made assumptions about my Christian faith based in part on my appearance, likely including my white racial identity. Five of the Haven students interviewed asked if I was Christian before they even sat down. When I answered "yes" they assumed that the way that I approached the faith was similar to their own. Despite their belief in the idea that not all Christians were "true," they seemed uninterested in knowing whether I met their criterion. For example, Mark asked me a few questions about graduate school, which he was considering, and about the experience of being a GSI. At one point in our conversation, I mentioned that I taught a class called Introduction to the Historical Jesus in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Hearing this, Mark asked, "How did you deal with the parts of the course you did not agree with?" Mark suspected that there were likely portions of the Historical Jesus course that he would take issue, and assumed that my faith was similar and thus I would see it the same way. In other words, based on very little data about me or how I interpreted my Christian beliefs, Mark felt comfortable assuming that our beliefs were similar.

It is curious that though Haven students interact daily with many Christian students who practice the faith differently, and in ways that they would dismiss, they did not ask about my faith practices. As I mentioned, in many ways, I appear similar to Haven students. I share the race of all but two of the Haven members interviewed, I suspect they perceived me as generally

warm and approachable – two character traits they considered to be positive aspects of their own reputation – and I nodded along knowingly when they mentioned particular Bible passages or stories. I also reflected back what they were saying occasionally as a means of member checking, and they may have interpreted this (more so than the other groups because of our perceived sameness) as evidence of our shared belief. Moreover, I suspect that though it is easy to hold ideas about true and false Christians in the abstract, it is much harder to interrogate someone about the validity of their faith while sitting in a small room in the library together. Regardless, though Haven students were arguably the most theologically and politically different from my own beliefs, they were the most eager to read my embodiment, questions and curiosity towards their faith as signs of theological concurrence.

JSU students also made assumptions about my religious practice based on my appearance. In the process of answering an interview question, Rebecca asked, “You’re Jewish, right?” I said I was not, and later asked what led her to make that assumption. Seemingly a bit embarrassed, she explained I was interviewing Jewish students and that looking at me “[she] would assume that [I am] more of a reform secular-type of Jewish.” Rebecca continued to explain the other physical traits that one can use to determine if another person is Jewish:

You can tell if someone’s religious based off dress...Looking at me, I don’t think you would assume I’m Jewish because, first of all, [I have] blonde [hair] and blue eyes, which is not typical of a Jew at all, and I’m in regular clothing...[However,] the JSU rabbi’s family, like you know that they’re Jewish. She has a sheitel⁴², like a wig, and is dressed very modestly.

⁴² A type of full or partial wig worn by some married Orthodox Jewish women as a means to conform to an interpretation of Jewish law that requires they cover their hair.

Like Mark, Rebecca also knew very little about me other than that I was a graduate student who was interested in religion, yet she was comfortable assuming that she and I shared a faith in common.

Mark, Felicity and Rebecca's assumptions of my beliefs stand out because none of the students in the two groups comprised of students of color assumed such similarities. Though I was occasionally privileged to have similar casual conversations with Ignite students who also learned that I was Christian, none of the Ignite students indicated at any point that they suspected that we saw Christianity the same way. The Muslim students I interviewed appeared to think of me as a curious outsider. Often this was expressed when they would politely explain Arabic words or aspects of Islam that came up during our time together. I presume they did so because nothing on my body suggested that I was Muslim or well-versed in Islam. Where the white Christian and Jewish students assumed a kind of sameness with me – so much so that they believed it was possible that I shared their tradition and beliefs – the Muslim students presumed the opposite. As I mentioned in chapter III, I did not want to put undue responsibility on any of the religious groups to feel compelled to explain their aspects of their faith. So, beginning with MMSU students, I learned to emphasize that I am trained in religious studies. I hoped that this would lead them to assume that I had at least a base-line knowledge. Any terms or practices that I encountered that I did not know, I took it upon myself to look up after the interview or group discussion.

Through their interactions between one another and with me, the students in the four groups demonstrated some of the ways that they believe race and/or ethnicity to be connected to their religious experience in ways that define their own group and distinguishes them from other religious groups and campus communities. Returning to Fenstermaker and West (2002), many of

the students I interviewed treated me, and often each other, as if “appearances are...indicative of some underlying state” (p. 67). In this case, that “underlying state” is religious belief. As Fenstermaker and West point out, groups do not have to be categorically diverse to demonstrate how they conceptualize difference or sameness. Indeed, the most illuminating conversations about race and ethnicity came when the participants were talking to one another in group discussions. Even though all of the participants across the groups shared a common interest in participation in and engagement with religious community, the way in which they engaged with and viewed that participation differed significantly. Participants had ascribed meaning to race and ethnicity in ways that indicated that they did not think about their race and ethnicity or that of others in a vacuum, instead they are inexplicably linked to their experiences as and conception of religious people.

Expectations for Inclusion on Campus Varied Across Groups

Across each of the four groups, students described ways that they felt excluded or marginalized from participating in college life with the same freedoms and resources as their non-religious or differently religious peers. What they required in order to experience a greater sense of inclusion, as well as how they interpreted the University’s choices to withhold particular resources or opportunities, varied significantly across the groups. The differences in the groups’ expectations for inclusion and opinions on their relationship with the University, reflect the wide-ranging intersectional experiences of privilege and/or oppression shared by a group’s members.

MMSU students arrived at Michigan knowing that they would be a minority and that there would likely be many places where they would have to adapt their practices to fit in with the social and academic expectations and requirements of University life. Like their peers in

JSU, MMSU students did not expect college to be always compatible with their religious practice. Instead, they simply hoped to exist on campus without having to also contend with discrimination perpetuated by the University administration, faculty, or graduate instructors. Sadly, MMSU students shared a number of instances where they felt that basic need was unmet.

When MMSU students raised concerns to the University about experiences of Islamophobia, they felt that they were often ignored and that their concerns were not met with the sense of urgency they believed was warranted. MMSU students interpreted the University's decision not to classify the numerous instances of discrimination and violence towards Muslim students in the wake of the 2016 election as assaults or hate crimes as a sign of the administration's apathy towards their concerns. This perceived indifference reinforced the belief that the most reliable source of support came from within the Muslim community.

JSU students agreed that it was generally easy to be a Jewish student at Michigan. They benefited from robust Jewish community and several Jewish organizations where they could find support and solace. However, like their MMSU peers, in ways small and large they were regularly reminded that the University was not built to accommodate their religious practice. They were well-aware that attending Michigan, as well as most U.S. colleges, meant that there would be times when their faith practices would bump up against campus academic and social practices.

Though accommodations in courses were relatively easy to obtain, the fact that JSU students had to ask at all highlighted their minority status. Their Christian and non-religious peers could go through most classes without having to ask for time away for religious observance, though this was a common practice for the JSU students interviewed. Doing so often required that they disclose their religious identity early in the term, so faculty and graduate

instructors regularly learned about JSU students' faith at the same time they were learning their name. While there appeared to be little concern of discrimination, the structure of the academic calendar and many University courses demanded that often JSU students' first interaction with an instructor was not about a class project or an academic subject area, but about an intimate and deeply personal aspect of their life: their faith practices.

Many of the experiences of marginalization and discrimination shared by students in the two groups comprised of religious minorities, MMSU and JSU, were likely not the result of malice from University officials, but instead highlighted their lack of awareness of the needs and concerns of students of various religious identities. Sofia's professor likely assigned a class activity on distilleries without knowing that doing so created a potential minefield for her, one which resulted in a semester filled with fear and anxiety over having her Muslim identity discovered. It is likely that the University did not initially decide to screen *American Sniper* with the intent of doing harm to Muslim students, though that was the outcome. When professors hold review sessions on Saturdays, they likely do not do so with the goal of excluding Jewish students. Accordingly, an important aspect of inclusion for all of the students interviewed, especially Muslim and Jewish students, is that people at all levels of University life cultivate increased religious literacy and awareness of the issues facing students of a range of religious identities.

Ignite participants believed that much of the campus and the University administration were apathetic toward religious students. As far as the University was concerned, Ignite was "literally just another group" (Ciara), no different from a club sports team, volunteer organization, or any one of the hundreds of campus student organizations. Ignite students appreciated that there were a range of Christian group options for students to choose from, and

that it was easy to become involved in campus religious life. Their frustration with how the University engaged with religious students centered on the limited funding available to religious student organizations. They did not interpret this lack of funding as a sign of the University's disapproval of religious organizations, but saw it as a missed opportunity for U-M to support a very important part of students' lives.

Many Ignite participants also believed that if the University were more supportive of religious groups, and more open about their presence on campus they would likely attract more students who would otherwise attend religious colleges. Ignite students regretted that they felt compelled to mislead the administration about the nature of their group in order to receive funding, and wished that there was another way that they could receive the few hundred dollars of support they required to support basic group activities, like photocopies and advertising for events. The hope for minimal funding as a means to improve their feelings of inclusion, stands in stark contrast to the wide-ranging requests of Haven students, their white Christian peers.

The majority of Haven students felt that they should be free to share and express their faith when and how they wished. They believed that the administration did not consider religion to be something "very valuable" (Bill), and were offended at the University's attempts to limit their evangelism efforts. Haven students were either unable or unwilling to see why the University might object to providing them and members of other religious groups unrestricted access to the residence halls, and why some of their peers might be made uncomfortable by their presence. Evangelism was a central part of religious observance for Haven students, so any restrictions were viewed as impingements on a core part of their Christian practice. In their view, Michigan was interfering with a sacred call that they share their faith with others.

Many Haven students believed that by focusing on discrimination against LGBTQ people

and students of color, the University was missing or choosing to ignore the frequent discrimination experienced by Christian students. Christ's name, they claimed, was regularly taken in vain by faculty, graduate instructors and their peers, and stereotypes against Christian students were commonplace. Kevin went as far to suggest that Christ's name was taken in vain far more frequently than "racial terms or epithets" were used or that women were talked about "in a demeaning way." As discussed in the previous section, there was an especially strong belief among many Haven students that white Christians were the true victims of discrimination on campus. Haven students provided a number of examples as evidence of their perceived marginalization. They frequently mentioned their frustration at not being able to share their belief that being LGBTQ is not "morally right and not receive a hostile reaction" (Kevin).

In order for Haven students to feel included on campus the University would have to address an exhaustive list of demands. This included unfettered access to the residences halls and other University buildings, ability to freely express their options on whether other identities or choices were "morally right" without fear of reprisal or critique, and the University would need to recognize the frequent discrimination experienced by Haven students and respond with the same commitment and outreach that Haven students perceived the University as doing for various marginalized groups on campus.

For Haven students, their Christianity was an extension of their whiteness. As discussed earlier, Christian whiteness was foundational to group cohesion, so much so that the term "us" was used to denote white Christianity. As white students, they felt entitled to move freely on campus unencumbered by any restrictions or fear of discrimination. Sullivan (2002) describes white entitlement to various spaces, university and otherwise, this way: "White people tend to act as if all spaces – whether geographical, physical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or

otherwise – are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish” (p. 10). Any affront to that freedom, however mild, was interpreted by Haven students as an obtrusive and prejudicial restriction. The experiences of the students in Ignite and MMSU shared further illustrate what a large body of research (e.g. Cabrea, Nolan & Watson, 2016; Leonardo & Porter, 2010) has already illustrated that control over and freedom of movement within campus spaces is not something that students of color can assume. The differences in privilege and expectations of entitlement experienced by the groups in this study reflect the variations in their expectations in University support and expectations for inclusion.

The most basic expectation across the religious groups in the study was simply that they are able to go about the business of life without being harassed for who they are and what they believe. They were, as Jamal (MMSU) plainly put it, “just trying to get through college,” and would like to do so without having to fend off offensive comments from peers, faculty or staff. Especially upsetting to students across the four groups, were the times when they would approach the administration with a concern and those who were charged to listen appeared uninterested or unwilling to do so. The four groups have a shared desire to be heard by University officials, and have them respond to their concerns, address fears, or at a minimum, offer an explanation for inaction.

Conclusion

The students’ reflections illuminate many of the different ways their religious identities operated on campus. Returning again to the three-prong definition of identity I offered in chapter two and again at the beginning of this chapter: 1) the individuals in each of the four groups in this study conceptualized their religious identity in particular and unique ways; 2) the participants made choices about how and when they wished to share their religious identity with

others based on their assessment of the risks involved and the other person's views toward religious people; and 3) their choices around religious disclosure were shaped by their perceptions of how the broader campus environment (e.g. the University administration, peers, faculty) thought about religious belief and religious individuals. Moreover, students' expectations for inclusion were shaped by how students conceptualized their religious and other categorical identities and their perceptions and expectations of how their environment was responded to those identities. Students' religious belief and perception of how their religious identity is viewed in the campus environment has a profound influence on how students perceive, and interact with others in the campus environment.

All of the students talked about how their religious identity and involvement in a religious student group helped them to connect to others who were like themselves and distinguish themselves from other groups. Each of the groups considered race and/or ethnicity as an important factor in the connection that they shared with their peers in their religious group. Although, the ways in which they talked about race and ethnicity in relationship to themselves and their peers varied widely, it played a significant role in how all of the groups conceived of their own religious identity and how they interacted with their environment. Similarly, gender served to organize the members within the four groups and women and men were cast in particular roles.

All of the groups described their faith as a source of resilience and support throughout their college life, and they took great comfort from connecting with students who shared their religious identity. However, it is important to note, that these students' religious identities not only helped them deal with challenge, but regularly filled them with joy, helped them to develop rich and fulfilling relationships, and celebrate successes. In my first individual interview with all

of the participants, I asked them to describe what being a Christian, Muslim or Jewish person meant to them. Most students smiled as they responded, excited to talk about a part of their lives that was so meaningful, but infrequently discussed outside of their religious organization. Bill (Haven) eagerly shared with me that his relationship with Christ “makes life extraordinary” and provides him “a whole lot of peace” and “joy.” Kayla (Ignite) excitedly spoke about how “vital” her faith was to her life, and was grateful that she ultimately “decided to give God full control” over her life. Amina (MMSU) explained that her faith not only helped her connect to God, “but also to connect with people around me, to myself, and get to know myself better in the religion.” Rebecca (JSU) found the practice of offering blessings throughout the day helped her to find joy in everyday acts. She shared with me that she regularly recited a Jewish blessing given to honor the freedom and ability to use the bathroom without assistance, a practice helped her to realize that many seemingly ordinary experiences are in fact worthy of awe.

The interview excerpts presented in this dissertation cannot fully capture the fact that students appeared genuinely excited to talk about their religious lives. Many of my interviews ended with participants requesting a hug from me, telling me about an academic success, upcoming job interview, or their recent engagement. Talking about their religious identities, something that was so meaningful and central to their lives, led them to eagerly open doors to other parts of themselves and I was honored to peer in. Time and time again I was reminded just how important religious faith is to my participants.

CHAPTER IX

Conclusion

I opened this dissertation with the story of two university buildings. Harvard's Widener Library and Memorial Church exist in a kind of partnership and directly face each other. These symbols of faith and reason shake hands in the middle of the nation's most prominent campus. This handshake was not a mistake; these buildings were designed to be frozen in relationship with one another for all of time. This dissertation is a look into the consequences of that relationship – that handshake – as religious students make their home on a secular campus. The data highlighted the complex ways that religious students negotiate their secular university environment and interpret their academic and social worlds.

This final chapter is divided into four parts. First, I summarize the study, including theoretical underpinnings, methods and findings. Second, I discuss the contributions that this study makes to the literature on religious students and college life. Directions for future research follow, and I conclude with some final reflections on the implications of this study for the relationship between universities and religious students.

Looking Back

In the years since the construction of Memorial Church and Widener Library⁴³, the relationship between religion and the university has changed tremendously. What remains

⁴³ Widener Library opened in 1915 (Harvard University, 2018b). Memorial Church was dedicated in 1932, though the first designated building for worship on Harvard's campus was Holden Chapel, built in 1744 (Harvard University, 2018a).

constant is the fact religious students continue to attend the nation's universities at high rates (Astin & Astin, 2005). Students' faith lives influence countless aspects of their academic and social lives while on campus (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010; Berkel et al., 2004; Ellison et al., 2008; Ozorak, 2003; Rettinger & Jordan, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009). Religion plays an especially important role in the lives of students who are often marginalized on college campuses. Research consistently shows that women and people of color tend to be more religious than their white male counterparts (Bryant, 2007; Jones et al., 2010; Kosmin et al., 2009; Pew Research Center, 2016). Women of color in particular use their faith to help them cope with adversity and find support (Mattis, 2003; Musgrave et al., 2002).

As a public university, Michigan does not have its own version of Memorial Church on its campus; but, as this dissertation illustrates, many religious students nonetheless call the campus home. U-M prides itself on its long-standing institutional commitment to supporting diversity. Given the documented importance of religion in the lives many students, including those who are often marginalized in many other ways, the lack of attention to religious identity in Michigan's diversity efforts and programs is notable and troubling.

Although literature on the role of spirituality and religion in student life has grown in recent years, many studies examine religious identity in ways that fail to consider how students' religious and spiritual lives intersect with other aspects of their identity, such as race, class, sexual-orientation, gender, and ethnicity. Not considering the role that various aspects of identity have on the student experience of religious identity fails to recognize what intersectional theory has and continues to teach us about the relationship between different parts of identity. Namely, that there is no part of the self that is only one identity, be it race, gender or religious identity (Hames-García, 2011; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; 2002). Instead, all aspects of identity shape

and influence each other simultaneously (Hames-García, 2011; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; 2002). Research that examines only one aspect of identity, or considers aspects of identity as separable from one another, is not intersectional.

Universities' historically divided relationship with religion and the religious students that attend the nation's campuses and the complexity of individual identities led to my research question: How do students understand their religious selves, and how do they say that understanding influences how they perceive, and interact with others in the campus environment? Following this question, I ask:

- How might religious students describe aspects of their categorical identities, such as race and gender, as influencing how they present their religious selves on campus?
- How might religious students describe the ways in which the campus environment influences how they present their religious selves on campus?

To address these questions, I conducted a qualitative research study of four religious student groups at the University of Michigan: 1) a Muslim student group (MMSU), 2) a Jewish student group (JSU), 3) a predominantly white Christian student group (Haven), and 4) a predominantly students of color Christian student group (Ignite). For each group, I collected data through interviews and group discussions during the Fall 2016 and Winter 2017 semesters. Then I asked the 45 who participated a range of questions about their religious identity and experiences at Michigan.

Participants across the four groups used their faith as a tool to help them navigate numerous aspects of college life. Their faith was influential in how they approached their coursework, thought about dating, approached campus social life, and found friends and community. Students were strategic in their choices regarding when and how they shared their

faith with others, in part because they believed that their peers and instructors often held unfavorable views toward aspects of religious belief and religious people. Participants' categorical identities had profound impact on how they related with one another and their perception of and hope for inclusion on the campus environment. In all of the groups, students greatly appreciated the comfort and support they received in their religious community. Their respective religious groups served as sanctuaries amidst the pressures and expectations of the broader campus environment.

Contributions

Interest and research in the religious and spiritual lives of college students is a growing field in higher education research. Previous research has shown that religious communities and religious belief is hugely important to the lives of many college students (e.g. Astin & Astin, 2005; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010; Smith & Snell, 2009), and both were very significant for all of the students in this study. Each participant helped to highlight the many different and unique ways that faith impacted arguably every inch of her or his college experience. Two things distinguish this study from much of the previous research on religious college students: the first is its attention to intersectionality; the second is the recognition that there is not one single definition of religion, spirituality or religious identity that operates on campus.

The differences between men and women's religious engagement within and across traditions is well documented. In the U.S., women participate in religion at higher rates than men and this trend has been true since researchers first began collecting data on the subject in the 1930s, and historians suspect that this trend likely went back even further (Gallup Jr., 2002). The historian of American religious history, Ann Braude (1997) describes the profound and lasting,

yet under recorded, impact women's labor and commitment to religious traditions has had on American religion:

Women have made religious institutions possible by providing audiences for preaching, participating in rituals, the material and financial support for religious buildings, and perhaps most important, by inculcating faith into their children to provide the next generation of participants. There could be no lone man in the pulpit without the mass of women to fill the pews. There would be no clergy, no seminaries to train them, no theology to teach them, no hierarchies to ordain them, unless women supported all of these institutions from which they historically have been excluded – and still are by Catholics, conservative Protestants, and Orthodox Jews. (pp. 88)

Like the women Braude described, many of the women I interviewed did not feel adequately heard or seen by male participants, and did not have male participants share equally in the labor required for maintaining their religious organization. This frustration did not inspire a political consciousness among most of the women participants. Instead, many often relied on theological explanations to make meaning of this labor imbalance. Across all of the groups, the women I interviewed were deeply dedicated to their religious tradition and motivated to work to ensure that others became more engaged in their faith and that their group existed well into the future.

Research has documented that race and ethnicity play an important role in religious groups and in the lives of religious people and the differences in religious engagement across racial groups (e.g. Bryant, 2007; Jones et al., 2010; Kosmin et al., 2009; Pew Research Center, 2016). It was clear throughout the interviews and group discussions that race was a part of how the members of each of four groups thought about their group identity. I was struck by how quickly Haven members began discussing race in a group discussion. Though white Haven

members did not identify race as an important part of their identity, it became clear in a group discussion that it was core to their group cohesion. A signal of the importance of whiteness in Haven came in the words of the two non-white Haven students I interviewed, who each indicated that one of the reasons they selected Haven was because it was comprised primarily of white Christians, a demographic that was comforting and familiar. Haven students understood Christianity as an extension of their white identity. Just as their white identity entitles them to move about campus without obstruction, they expected the same freedom should be offered to their expressions of faith. Any restrictions of that freedom by the University were seen as an affront to Haven students' Christian faith and whiteness.

The importance of race across the four groups offers both a challenge and an opportunity for diversity efforts at public research universities like Michigan. Simply ignoring or dismissing the experiences of religious students at best risks missing an opportunity to engage with students in conversations about race and identity, and at worst risks alienating some of the very students its diversity, equity and inclusion efforts seek to reach and support.

This study also highlights the importance opening up the discussion of what counts as knowledge within the university. Religious faith and expression is not only controlled in public and secular universities, like Michigan, through the Establishment Clause, but religious ways of knowing are marginalized as well – and are often not considered to be knowledge at all. Students across the groups regularly spoke about how they were hesitant to talk about their faith in the classroom for fear of their intellect would be underestimated. It is reasonable for faculty to want to engage in students in discussions that are grounded in scientific and empirical thought, and it is understandably challenging to figure out what to do with ideas that derive from belief and faith. Including these ideas, and accordingly these students, in the academic life of the university

requires examining how religious thought is understood and engaged with throughout the academy.

Another contribution of this study is the ways in which participants' religious identity and belief are not separate from the campus environment, but exist in constant interaction with it. The religious practices and choices the participants made regarding when, where and how to talk about their religious beliefs were constantly shaped by their perception of the assumptions and beliefs of their peers, administration and faculty. This finding speaks to the fact that religious identity, like other aspects of identity, is both socially negotiated (Goffman, 1959; 1963; Hames-García, 2011) and culturally defined (Goffman, 1959; 1963; Hames-García, 2011). Participants were especially concerned about stigmas against religious people or particular religious practices. Students believed stigmas toward religious people operated across the campus, both in individuals and in the environment as a whole. As Goffman (1963) argues, negotiating stigma is of great concern to individuals and often motivates decisions about when and how individuals decide to present or hide aspects of themselves. This is significant because it highlights the fact that the experiences of religious students should not be studied in ways that are disconnected from their institutional and social contexts.

Lastly, this study highlights the fact that despite the University's efforts to avoid engaging with the religious lives of its students, the students interviewed did not see the institution as a neutral actor. From the language of crime alerts, to the academic calendar, to student group funding, to faculty effectiveness discussing religion in the classroom, to policies surrounding residence hall access, the University is constantly shaping the religious lives of students. Across the groups, students attributed intention to University practices. For example, Haven students believed that the University exposed its bias against Christian students through

each instance when faculty or fellow students flippantly used God or Jesus' name and their language went unchallenged. MMSU students used the University's tepid response to instances of violence against Muslim students to reinforce their belief that safety and security was best found among other Muslims – even taking the initiative to develop a buddy system to support students who needed to walk home late at night. The impact of administrators, faculty and University policies was most concerning to students when it shaped students' ability to feel safe on campus, succeed academically, and connect with others who shared their faith identity. This finding is significant, because even though Michigan and many other public and secular private universities may see themselves as benignly neglecting the religious lives of the students in their care – in the eyes of religious students, the university is constantly determining crucial aspects of their experience and expression of their religious identity.

Directions for Future Research

Many avenues for further research are available to help us to learn more about how religious students negotiate secular university environments. Qualitative data collection takes place in a particular place and time, and is reflective of that place in time. My interviews and group discussions took place at an especially contentious time on campus and for the country as a whole. As discussed at various points throughout the dissertation, the 2016 election and its aftermath, especially the Islamophobic rhetoric that was a part of the Trump campaign, significantly impacted the interviews and group discussions. Sadly, like many campuses across the country, Michigan experienced a rash of instances of discrimination and hate on campus in the months surrounding the election. After the election, the number of MMSU students interested in joining my research project increased. I suspect they were eager for a comfortable and private space to talk about their beliefs.

Conducting a similar study at a different point in time, with a different campus and national climate, would undoubtedly have influenced the content and direction of my discussions with students. Later conversations would similarly be shaped by whatever is occurring on campus and in the broader world at the time. For example, Peek (2005) interviewed Muslim college students in New York and Colorado in the two years following the events of September 11, 2001, and the incidents of Islamophobia that followed. She explained the impact of these events on her participants this way: “The overwhelming magnitude of the events of September 11 led many students to pray more often and increased their need for a spiritual anchor, just as the events did for numerous other Americans of various faiths” (p. 231). Peek also observed that participants felt an increasing responsibility to represent Islam and Muslims positively to others, and were intensely aware of any physical manifestations of their faith that they wore on their bodies, like a hijab, and its impact on how they were perceived by others.

Identity is constantly shaped by the broader environment. It is an unfortunate truism that anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination – religious or otherwise – are an all too common a part of our collective environment. The trauma of watching a U.S. presidential candidate and later president embrace Islamophobia, and seeing some of his peers nod along in agreement or sit idly by, was acute for many Muslim participants and present throughout my research. As I drafted this last chapter of my dissertation, the nation and Michigan’s campus was reeling from the murder of eleven Jewish worshipers at a Pittsburgh synagogue. Vigils and memorials dotted the campus, and as I wrote students marked the first Shabbat after the shooting. If I were interviewing students now, I have no doubt that these events would be a part of the discussion. Both the experience and aftermath of discrimination is a painful component of research of diverse religious populations, and one that I sadly do not expect will go away soon.

Just as this study took place in a particular place and time that shaped the data, it also took place in a particular campus context. I chose Michigan as the site for this study because it is a large secular public university with a historical and ongoing commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion – a commitment that nonetheless affords minimal attention to religious students. U-M also exists in a region with a particular religious context. As mentioned previously, the Ann Arbor campus is a short drive from Dearborn, MI, a region that is home to one of the largest concentrations of Muslims and Arab Americans in the U.S. (Howell & Jamal, 2008). U-M's percentage of Muslim students is more than double the national average.⁴⁴ Many MMSU students described being attracted to U-M because of this especially robust Muslim community. Michigan also has a uniquely large Jewish population (Hillel International, 2018). A different campus context would have its own distinct relationship with and history of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and set of religious demographics. These differences would shape their choices regarding when to share their faith with others, the support they receive from the institution, and many other aspects of their experiences on campus. For example, many MMSU and JSU participants chose Michigan in part because there are many students on campus who their faith background. Jewish and Muslim students on campuses with smaller Muslim and Modern Orthodox populations would likely offer different reasons for being attracted to the campus and these students would likely have a smaller community of support.

Across the four groups in this study, participants greatly valued what they received from their religious group peers and saw the group as a reprieve from the broader campus environment. Their respective groups helped to ensure that their members had the resources and

⁴⁴ As stated on p. 81: A 2016 Michigan campus climate survey estimates that 2.5% of undergraduates and 2.9% of graduate students identify as Muslim (University of Michigan, 2016, p. 16). These numbers are more than double the 1.1% of the overall U.S. population that identifies as Muslim (Mohamed, 2018).

support needed to practice their faith, and a space to commiserate and organize when their needs were not met. A campus with less robust Muslim or Jewish populations, for example, might not feel compelled or even be aware of the importance of setting aside spaces for Muslim students to pray, accommodating religious conflicts with the academic calendar, or providing halal or kosher food in the dining hall. The lack of these necessary and basic resources would impact how included many religious students felt on campus.

I selected Muslim, Christian and Jewish groups, the so-called Abrahamic traditions, to be the focus of my study. I chose these groups because of their prominence on Michigan's campus, their diversity in religious practice, embodiment and presentation, and the fact that members of these traditions likely to occasionally find themselves at odds with the demands of the secular university environment. Though there are many differences between these three traditions in belief in practice, they share a belief in God and trace their history to the Middle East. They also share religious figures and texts. Jesus is profoundly significant to the Christian scriptures and plays an important role in the Qur'an. The Jewish Tanakh or Hebrew scriptures comprise the Christian Old Testament. Interviewing students of different religious traditions, with different histories, beliefs, practices and racial and ethnic diversity, is important to increasing understanding of how students of a range of religious identities negotiate life on secular university campuses.

Studying students involved in different religious traditions would enhance our knowledge of the experiences of religious students on secular campuses, so would interviewing students from different religious sects and denominations. For example, I selected a predominantly Modern Orthodox Jewish group for this research. JSU students recognized that their attention to particular Jewish practices was different from that of many of their friends who identify as

Conservative, Reform, or with another branch of Judaism. Additionally, Ignite and Haven represent only a small portion of the Christian groups at U-M and there are many others that could be examined. I did not interview Catholic or Mormon students, or students involved with one of the many other denominations and specialized Christian ministries on Michigan's campus. Increasing the diversity of religious groups, sects and denominations studied would yield valuable information regarding how students within various traditions engage with the campus environment.

The 2016 U-M climate survey, that I have mentioned previously, collected data on the religious identities of U-M undergraduate and graduate students. Though the survey provided helpful data on the representation of many religious groups at Michigan, several traditions, including Sikh and Bahai, were left out. This may mean that Sikh students, for example, were not given an option on the survey aside from "other," and joined the 2.4 percent of students who selected that category (University of Michigan, 2016, p. 16), or they did not participate. The Pew Research Center, a leader in religious survey research, has acknowledged that it is sometimes difficult to collect population information on particularly small religious groups, like Sikhs (Pew Research Center, 2012). There is presently a Sikh student organization listed among Michigan's registered student groups, however there is not a Bahai group. Though the overall population of Muslim students at Michigan is small, they benefited from access to a range of Muslim student organizations, including MMSU. How do Sikh, Bahai and students who are members who likely have smaller representation on campus find support? How does the lack of many similarly religious peers impact their overall experience on campus and their choices in sharing their religious identity with others? The inclusion of members of additional student groups beyond those included in this study would help us to learn more about the many different ways that

religious students, with different resources, social supports and communities, negotiate the campus environment.

Additional aspects of my findings could benefit from further exploration. Across the four groups, participants spoke about particular places on campus that were meaningful to them in helping them to connect with and find support from other students who shared their faith tradition. The strongest examples of this trend came from the MMSU students who described learning about “where the Muslim corner of the library was” and the community and support that arose from living in Liberty Place. Learning more about how students of a range of religious identities find and create these informal spaces of support would improve understanding of the strategies religious students use to navigate college environment.

Throughout the interviews, I was struck by the range of differences in how students responded when I asked them to name other aspects of their identity, other than their religious identity, that were important. Speaking broadly, the white students consistently mentioned activities, associations and personal relationships that they found meaningful (e.g. “a daughter and a friend,” “athletic,” “a Michigan student”). Students of color regularly mentioned their gender, race and/or ethnicity as meaningful. When I followed up by asking how the identity they just named impacted their experience of their religious identity, if at all, the participants of color appeared to have responses at the ready. The students of color demonstrated that they were well aware, as Nia (Ignite) put it, that their gender, race and/or ethnicity are “interconnected in the way that [they] respond to a lot of things.” Other research has documented the fact that students of color are significantly more aware of their racial and ethnicity identity than white students (e.g. Hurtado et al., 2015; Steck et al., 2003). In order to learn more about how religious identity relates to other aspects of the self, we need to know more about the relationship between

religious identity and the salience of other aspects of identity.

As mentioned previously, the participants were generally enthusiastic about their faith and were eager to discuss how their religious identity impacted their lives at Michigan. It is possible that this energy was a result of selection bias, and that students who were actively committed to their religion were more enticed to participate than their less energized peers. However, the depth of commitment to religious belief or religious organization was not the same across the board, and many were attracted to the study by the promise of a \$50 Amazon gift card for an average of less than three hours of time spent in interviews and a group discussion. I gained the majority of participants through snowball sampling, and many came to me indicating that they were drawn to speak with me both because of the gift card and the friend who had referred them said it was a positive experience. Recruitment through different means, that focuses on attracting particular groups of students, would yield additional findings regarding the experiences of religious students on campus. All of the students I spoke to were affiliated with a particular religious campus organization; however, there are likely many who identify with a religious tradition but are not involved with a campus religious organization – why? What is their experience on campus like? I spoke with first-year students to seniors, but focusing on first-year students could help us learn more about how religious students make the transition to college, how they chose whether to become involved with a campus religious group, and the influence of religion deciding which institution to attend. On the other end of the spectrum, talking only to students who are nearing graduation could yield data regarding how or if students plan to continue their religious involvement beyond their time as an undergraduate as well as their reflections on the interactions between their religious identity and their institution over a period of several years.

Overall, this dissertation shone a light on many aspects of how the participants negotiated college life at a secular university and how their negotiations related to other aspects of their identity. However, as is the case with qualitative research, this study took place in a particular time, place and with a particular group of students, so generalization is not the goal of study. Rather, by revealing the intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, and faith, this study makes clear the need for greater attention to the study of student identities and how they influence campus experiences in secular universities.

Looking Forward

There are two places where universities like Michigan cannot help but bump up against religious students in significant ways, and these areas have led to significant anxiety regarding how universities relate to religious students generally. First, is the ongoing debate on college campuses regarding the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, which advocates that universities cease support and engagement with Israel to in protest of the Israeli government's treatment of Palestine. At Michigan, this concern has played out in a number of ways. Every year between 2014 and 2017, the student organization⁴⁵ called Michigan for a Free Palestine (MFP) brought legislation to the Michigan student government that asked that the student government to formally request that the University consider divesting from investments in Israel. The campus paper, *The Michigan Daily*, described the specifics of MFP's request this way, "The divestment movement calls for the University's Board of Regents to create a committee to investigate three companies operating in Israel and involved in alleged human rights violations against Palestinians" (Baker, Lacroix & Cheeti, 2017).

Each year since 2014, MFPs efforts to support this bill garnered significant attention from

⁴⁵ A pseudonym. Also discussed in chapter V.

the student body and campus press. In response to a 2014 vote by student government leaders to indefinitely postpone a vote on MFP's measure, MFP students and allies staged a sit-in that included more than 100 students, alumni and community members to demand that the student government hold a vote (Adamczyk, 2014; Lacroix & Baker, 2017). Each year thereafter the MFP continued to present their bill to the student government, which was eventually passed in the fall of 2017. Students argued passionately for and against the bill's passage (Adamczyk, 2014; Baker, Lacroix & Cheeti, 2017; Lacroix & Cheeti, 2017). These debates exposed some deep and uncomfortable fissures within the student body, as well as between the many members of the student body and the administration. After MFP's bill was passed, the University of Michigan Board of Regents declined the student government's request that they form a committee to investigate divestment (Slagter, 2017). There had been previous evidence to suggest that the Regents were uninterested in reconsidering the University's relationship with Israel, financial or otherwise. Six of the eight members of the Board of Regents had signed a joint statement indicating that they adamantly objected to any action that resulted in the boycott, divestment or sanction of Israel (Slagter, 2017).

My interviews with MMSU students in the fall 2016 term coincided with the conclusion of MFP's third failed attempt to pass a resolution with the student government. Omaria, one of the MMSU study participants, was a leader in the MFP movement, and shared her opinion that these annual debates were often very hurtful to her and many of her Palestinian and Muslim peers. Aware of some of the treatment that she and MFP peers and allies received, she concluded that though being a Muslim on campus is difficult, "being Palestinian on this campus is a lot worse than being Muslim." Omaria explained her frustration with being accused with being anti-Semitic because of her opposition to many of the efforts of the Israeli government:

Hold up! We are not attacking the Jewish religion, we're attacking oppression and the government. It was really [about the Israeli] government, it was really about that. There was no correlation [between the protest and our feelings about the Jewish faith] and they can't say we're anti-Semitic.

For Omaria, her Palestine and Muslim identity were deeply interconnected, and the pain from these intense campus conversations touched all parts of herself.

These divestment efforts were not substantially addressed in my conversations with JSU students. I conducted those interviews towards the end of the winter 2017 term, months after the discussion surrounding MFP's bill had faded on campus. A *Michigan Daily* article after the passage of MFP's 2017 resolution quoted a member of Hillel who opposed the resolution. The quote captures some of the hurt felt by many Jewish students each time this bill was brought to a vote:

I worry that because [student government] leaders were unable to see the subtle yet crucial forms of anti-Semitism lying in this resolution and the broader BDS movement it represents, people will feel emboldened to let these types of subtle anti-Semitic comments run rampant... We have so much work to do to address hate in all forms, and I hope we can work toward doing this in a way that does not cast any group aside. (Baker, 2017)

For this Jewish student, the conversation around divestment on campus was difficult not just because it involved discussions of Israel, but, in her view, many of the conversations surrounding the bill exposed the anti-Semitism that was present on campus.

It understandable that the very sensitive and deeply personal feelings surrounding students very real concerns regarding Israel and Palestine would cause anxiety for university

officials. These debates are places where the interconnected and inseparable relationship between religion, race and ethnicity is made acutely visible. Additionally, they highlight the farce of efforts to support marginalized students and engage with student diversity, while also trying to avoid engaging with students' religious identities. As the voices of the students in this study have highlighted in a myriad of ways, it is impossible to engage with students' race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality – indeed any aspect of identity – without also shaping their experience of their religious identity. There is simply no part of the lives of the students interviewed that was not shaped by their religious identity.

The second place where institutions of higher education uncomfortably collide with the religious identities of students is in deciding how to address the aggressive evangelism efforts of groups like Haven. Michigan's strategy to quell Haven's efforts to evangelize on campus was to control its access to the residence halls. Haven students dealt with this loss of access not by ceasing their campus evangelism efforts, but by refocusing their outreach towards other campus spaces, like the student union. In general, Haven students do not care what the University's policies are, because they see themselves as primarily accountable to their faith and to God, not to administrators. Accordingly, if additional restrictions are put in place, Haven members will continue to find ways around those restrictions, or just violate them outright, to allow them to enact this core aspect of their faith.

What I find especially concerning about the University's anxieties and challenges addressing both students' feelings around divestment and evangelism efforts throughout campus is that high-level administrators conclude that the best way to deal with these issues, and religion on general on campus, is to avoid discussing or engaging with it, regardless of the costs. I have observed that universities, like Michigan, appear to be worried that if they crack open the door

on religion and engage in a broader discussion of religion on campus the conversation would be quickly consumed by three things: 1) The deep and painful conversations surrounding any institutional relationships with Israel that risk exposing any pro-Israel biases, 2) Evangelical students' desire to share their faith whenever and wherever they please, and relatedly, 3) Evangelical students wish to be able to share interpretations of Christianity that perpetuate homophobia. So, instead of engaging with religion in a thoughtful, intentional and meaningful way on campus, the door to these discussions is nailed shut.

A great deal is lost by closing that door. Religion is critically important to many students and should be seen as a fundamental part of the diversity of higher education. By ignoring the religious identities and beliefs of many of their students, campuses like Michigan are missing opportunities to deepen their stated commitment to diversity and inclusion. Many participants in this study named instances when they felt tokenized for their religious beliefs by peers and faculty. Positive experiences discussing religion in classes were seen as outliers. Faculty and graduate student instructors often appeared to lack the training or desire necessary to treat students' religious beliefs and identities thoughtfully and with respect. Sadly, it is also true that many faculty and graduate instructors did not seem to know how to effectively create inclusive classroom environments.

The students I interviewed spoke very passionately about the meaning of their faith in their lives. Kayla (Ignite) described the significance of her faith by saying: “[My faith] means a lot, because it’s who I am...I think it’s important and it’s vital to my life and livelihood.” Religion is indeed vital to the lives of many participants. It is a steady source of inspiration, a resource in times of challenge, and a lens through which they can understand and interpret their ever-changing world. The students in this study recognized that their religious belief would not

always be well received by their peers and professors, and would, at best, be ignored by their institution; still they did not waiver in their faith commitment. This is not to suggest that these students are heroic; only that Kayla and her religious peers took their faith commitments seriously because they are a “vital” part of “who [they are].”

My findings suggest that religion plays a particularly crucial role in the lives of women and people of color. Across the groups in this study, women were especially committed to their religious faith and the maintenance of religious community. Students in the two groups composed entirely of people of color, Ignite and MMSU, spoke extensively about the support and encouragement their religious communities provided. One of the ways that MMSU students coped with experiences of Islamophobia and discrimination was to reach out to each other. This support was so important MMSU students created informal gathering places throughout the campus in apartment buildings, libraries and classrooms where they knew they could find fellow Muslims. Ignite students listed numerous times their faith helped them to cope with academic setbacks, and approach many of the challenges of college life. Accordingly, ignoring religion in the lives of college students means ignoring a vital part of the lives of the students that many campus diversity efforts aim to support.

Anxiety regarding the prospect of institutional efforts to support religious students is not a reason not to provide it; the role of religion in the lives of many students – especially those who too often find themselves on the margins – is just too important. Supporting religious students does not mean allowing them to say and do whatever they want. Students should not be free to evangelize whenever or wherever they wish, disparage members of traditions other than their own, or expect discriminatory views to be protected in the name of religious conviction. Instead, it requires colleges and universities, as institutions of higher learning, to endeavor to be

sites of religious inclusiveness and wrestle with what that means for their campus.

In their book on the state of religion in higher education, Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2012) describe the potential for inclusion of religious study in universities this way:

There is no question that, handled poorly, religion can be a disruptive force within higher education, but this is true of many other subjects as well, including politics, economics, race, class, and gender. Making an argument against religion in higher education because it is challenging would eliminate many other important topics of study as well. Religion is difficult because it is important. When the subject is handled well, discussed intelligently, and reflected upon seriously, religion (broadly construed) has the potential to enhance higher learning and open up a range of questions about the world and the human condition that otherwise might never be asked. (p. 154)

Though Jacobsen and Jacobsen are largely talking here about the importance of religion as a field of research and discussion in the classroom, I believe their words also apply to the inclusion of religious diversity more broadly. Yes, religion and religious belief can be challenging to those committed to diversity. Admittedly, I found the conviction of many Haven students that white Christians are somehow marginalized on campus offensive. I was deeply troubled by the view of a number of students across the groups that equality for LGBTQ people was antithetical to their faith. During the academic year in which I conducted these interviews, I worked as a graduate instructor for Introduction to Women's Studies. Personally, I often found it difficult to hear participants seemingly happily take on the same hegemonic gender roles I spent the morning critiquing with a group of their peers. Still, fear of engaging with beliefs and practices one might find objectionable is not a reason to force religion to the sidelines of the academy.

Wrestling with religion, religious beliefs and religious students on campus can be

disruptive to the norms that guide much of campus life on secular institutions. It requires that we challenge the notion that faith is the opposite of reason, which has pervaded American universities for many decades (Marsden, 1994; Sloan, 1994). It demands that instructors learn how to engage thoughtfully with religion in the classroom along with other aspects of identity. Campuses must invest in the spaces and resources needed for students to be able to worship and gather as they need, like prayer and reflection rooms, and halal and kosher food. Administrators must take a critical look at the academic calendar and campus events and ask who they include and exclude. Every effort must be taken to weed out Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and other forms of discrimination.

I do not claim to have the one-size-fits-all solution for how to do these things on the nation's many secular campuses or how to make universities beacons of religious inclusion. As Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2012) aptly point out, "religion is difficult because it is important." Living up to the goals declared in the University of Michigan's Vision Statement (2010) of a "scholarly community in which ideas may be freely expressed and challenged, and where all people are welcomed, respected, and nurtured in their academic and social development" is also difficult, but both are worthy of our effort. If Michigan is to become a place "where all people are welcomed, respected, and nurtured," endeavoring to be a religiously inclusive campus must be a part of that effort. Not considering religion, ignoring it or pushing it to the sidelines, means dismissing something that is "vital" to Kayla's "life and livelihood," and that of so many of her peers.

APPENDICIES

APPENDIX A

First Individual Interview Protocol

Introductory language & IRB Information

(Begin by reviewing and signing consent form)

Just as a quick introduction, I'm a sixth-year doctoral student with the Center for the Study of Higher & Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan. As a part of my dissertation research, I am interested learning about your experiences as a [Muslim/Christian/Jewish] student at the University of Michigan, both and in and outside the classroom.

I also want to make sure you understand that any findings I report will not include your name or any other identifying information. Do you have any questions about that?

As we discussed in our initial email/conversation, I'll be recording this interview. Just to confirm, is that still okay with you?

Okay. I'll begin recording now.

As I mentioned, I will not report your name in my findings. Is there a pseudonym that you would like to be referred to as?

Section 1: Demographics/Religious Identity

1. How did you come to identify as [Christian/Muslim/Jewish]?
 - a. Probe: Was identifying as [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] something that you were raised with or an identity that you came to on your own?
 - b. Probe: Do you identify/affiliate with a particular denomination/tradition/church?
2. What does being a [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] person mean to you?
3. We have been talking a bit about your identity as a religious person, but can you tell me about some other identities you hold that are important to you? And why are those other identities important to you?
 - a. As identities are revealed, ask how those identities affect the sense they have of themselves as a [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] person.

Section 2: Pre-College Experiences & Decisions

4. Can you tell me about how you made the decision to attend U-M? What kinds of colleges/universities did you consider?

5. At the time you applied, did you identify as [Christian/Muslim/Jewish]?
 - a. Probe for Christian students: If they did identify as Christian at the time of admission: What made you decide to attend U-M instead of an explicitly Christian institution?
 - b. Probe for Jewish students: If they did identify as Jewish at the time of admission: What made you decide to attend U-M instead of a school with a larger Jewish population?
 - c. Probe for Muslim students: What shaped your decision to attend Michigan? (probe for any religious rationalities not offered)

Section 3: Religious Student Group Involvement

6. How did you become involved with [name of religious student group] and what attracted you to participate in this group as opposed to other groups?
7. What are some of the things you like about [name of group]? Is there anything that you would like to see changed or improved?
8. Can you tell me a bit about your relationships in the group? What are they like?
9. How does participating in [name of group] fit in with your life at Michigan?
 - a. Probes: Is it a big part of your life at Michigan? Or is it something you participate in every once in a while?
10. Do you plan to remain in the group throughout your time at Michigan? If so, why? If not, why not?

That's all of the question I have. Thank you so much for your input. Do you have any questions for me?

I will see you again at the group discussion we talked about, and then for one more interview.

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX B

Group Discussion Questions

Introductory Language & IRB Information

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this group discussion. You already heard a little bit about me and my dissertation during our first interview. As was the case then and now, I want to ensure you understand that any findings I report will not include your name or any other identifying information. Do you have any questions about that?

Have any of you ever participated in a group discussion or focus group before? Well, the main reason why I am choosing to bring you all together is so that I can hear all of your different ideas and have you reflect on your experiences. Today, I've invited you because I want to learn about your experiences as members of [name of group] and your experiences as a [Muslim/Christian/Jewish] student at Michigan.

The way that these groups work is that you should feel like this is *your* group and you will be the talkers and I will be the listener. In fact, most of the talking you'll be doing will be to each other. My participation will be very minimal, because I am most interested in what you have to say. If I don't respond to something you say, please know that I am not trying to be rude – I am just most interested in hearing what you have to say to each other. Do you have any questions about that?

As we discussed in our initial email/conversation, I'll be video and audio recording this conversation. The video recording will only be used as a backup, in case I am unable to distinguish individual voices on the audio recording. Just to confirm, is that still okay with all of you? Okay. I'll begin recording now.

Group Discussion Prompts

- How would you describe the relationship between religious students and the university?
 - o Do you believe that relationship is different for different religious groups?
- How would you describe your group's relationship with the university?
 - o Probe for examples/specifics
 - Does your group have a relationship with other student groups on campus? If so, how did those develop?
 - Has your group ever had a conflict with the university? If so, what occurred and how was it handled?
 - How do you feel your group's activities are received by the university and by your peers?
- What is it like being someone who identifies as [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] at U-M?

- How do you think [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] students are treated at U-M?
- How do you decide when you share the fact that you are [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] and a member of this group with someone at U-M?
 - o Probe for examples/specifics
- Have you ever decided not to share the fact that you are [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] and a member of this group with someone even though you may have wanted to?
 - o Probe for examples/specifics
- What do you think colleges like U-M could be doing to support [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] students?

Closing

Thank you very much for participating in this conversation today. That is all the questions I have for you, is there anything that you like to share that I may have not asked specifically about?

Okay, do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again for participating in this discussion. I'll be in touch shortly regarding meeting for our final individual interview.

APPENDIX C

Second Individual Interview Protocol

Introductory language & IRB Information

Thank you for participating in the group discussion, and in this final follow-up conversation. I have a few questions about your individual experiences as a religious student at Michigan, and a few questions regarding what was discussed in the group discussion just to make sure I correctly understand what was talked about.

As I have mentioned before, I want to again assure you understand that any findings I report will not include your name or any other identifying information. Do you have any questions about that?

Like our other conversations, I'll be recording this interview. Just to confirm, is that still okay with you?

Okay. I'll begin recording now.

Section 1: Follow up from Group Discussion: [ask any necessary follow up or clarification question from group discussion]

Section 2: Life at college [Probe for specific examples]

Now we are going to shift to talking about some of your individual experiences as a religious person at Michigan.

1. What is it like for you being [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] at U-M?
2. What is it like being a [ask student about the experience of holding their intersectional identities at Michigan, e.g. What is it like to be a black Christian man at U-M? What is it like to be a Muslim woman who wears a veil on campus? Etc.]
 - a. Probe: Do you believe that people can tell by looking at you that you are religious?
 - i. If so, how do you think that influences your experiences at Michigan if at all?
 - ii. If not, would you ever consider showing some marker of your faith on your appearance (e.g. a cross necklace) while at Michigan? Why or why not?
3. Can you think of any instances at U-M where you felt that you were really aware of your [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] identity?

- a. Probe for the ways in which this awareness might be connected to other aspects of identity
4. Do you share the fact that you are [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] with professors, GSIs, or in class?
 - a. Probe: If so, under what circumstances have you decided to do?
 - b. Probe: If not, why not? Has there ever been an instance when you wanted to share but didn't?
5. Does the fact that you are [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] ever come up with your friends outside of [name of group]?
 - a. Probe: If so, how does it come up? [probe for examples]
6. Can you tell me a bit about some of the support you received (if any) as [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] identified person at U-M?
 - a. Probe: If so, where did you find that support?

Section 6: Recommendations

7. Do you have any advice for [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] students who are currently enrolled in [name of college]?
8. What do you think colleges like U-M could be doing to support [Christian/Muslim/Jewish] students?
9. What do you think colleges like U-M should be doing to support religious students?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share, that I may have not asked specifically about?

That's all the question I have. Thank you so much for your input. Do you have any questions for me?

Finally, if when I'm reviewing our conversation, I have additional questions, would you mind if I got in touch with you in the future?

Thank you again for your time and have a great day!

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