Abstract

OFSTEIN, JENNIFER B. Religion, Spirituality, and Popular Culture: Where College Students Learn About Religion and Spirituality. (Under the direction of Alyssa Bryant.)

This study aims to assess if students are learning about religion and spirituality from popular culture, and if it subsequently affects their understanding of their own religious or spiritual identity, or the religious and spiritual identities of others. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Perry's (1970) scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) theory of Women's Ways of Knowing, and Gerbner's (1978) Cultivation Theory, I assessed whether students are affected by participating in popular media and if they identify the media as an authority in their own understanding of religion and spirituality.

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND POPULAR CULTURE:
WHERE COLLEGE STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

by
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This thesis is dedicated to Kevin Eagan, for his guidance, support, love, friendship, and humor. Without him, my graduate experience would not be what it is today.

Biography

Jennifer B. Ofstein was born in Albany, New York and raised in Coral Springs, Florida. She graduated from Florida State University with her Bachelor's Degree in English Literature and Religious Studies. In 2004, she moved to Raleigh, North Carolina to work on her Masters of Science in Higher Education Administration with a focus in Student Affairs at North Carolina State University.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> "Our religion has got rules that are way old and way set in stone and way spiritual and you don't mess with them. You don't anger the ancestors, even if you pierce your tongue and play in a band." -Anna Chue, "Grey's Anatomy"

Statement of the Problem

Whether on the "Big Screen" or "Little Screen," within magazines, newspapers, and graphic novels; or heard over the most popular FM radio frequency, religion and spirituality play a significant role within American popular culture. Popular media represents religions and spiritualities in multiple forms that range from the "overtly secular" to the "overtly religious." Films deemed "overtly secular" engage the audience in a religious story without appearing "religious," and though the audience may not regularly recognize the religious story, it remains an effective medium through which religious ideas may continue to develop and emerge as popular themes (Kozlovic, 2004, p.53). "Overtly religious" films are films where the religious commentary, images, and main ideas behind the film are blatant with religious information. Over the years, critiques of popular media have stated that popular culture has taken a drastic turn, ranging from inappropriate allusions and religious subtext to misrepresentations of both spiritual and religious and non-spiritual and non-religious people. As attitudes toward popular media evolve, the secular genres emerge as a forum wherein religious and spiritual messages may be found (Kozlovic, 2002b).

Whether in television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) and *Joan of Arcadia* (2003) or in films such as *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999)*, Bee Season* (2005)*,* and *Dogma*

(1999), concepts and images of religion and spirituality are prevalent themes that may be used as the foundation for learning among students and religious and spiritual seekers today. For the purpose of this study, religion refers to the individual or communal practice of a specific faith tradition, creeds, ideologies, and beliefs. Spirituality refers to the process of finding meaning within the interactions between one's self, others, and/or a higher power. Faith refers to the act of believing in or trusting in a concept when experiential or physical proof is lacking. Television and film, however, are not the only media through which these ideas are expressed. These same ideas resonate clearly through mediums such as popular music, newspapers, magazines, books, and graphic novels. Religious and spiritual subtext can be found in the music of Bob Dylan (Gilmour, 2004) and Kanye West (2004); Jewish and Messianic figures are depicted throughout comic books like *Superman* (Kozlovic, 2002a); Hindu Traditions are exemplified in novels such as *Life of Pi* (2001); and the secret life of Jesus of Nazareth is depicted in the novel *Lamb: The Gospel of Biff Christ's Childhood Pal* (2002).

The aforementioned writers and directors are those dedicated to reshaping the philosophies and beliefs of the dominant culture, and they also shape the religious and spiritual identities within popular media (Ewen, 1982). It is in these explanations that the creators of the narratives, whether filmed, sung, or written, have the opportunity to illuminate their desired message. In the religious and spiritual context, narrative designers, like the screenwriters within popular culture, propagate their religious agendas while the engineers of the project, like the directors, utilize characters to sustain the chosen religious metaphors (Lansingh, 1999). This could affect the way in which students view or understand specific religious and/or spiritual ideologies.

Purpose of this Study

Media has shifted away from avoiding the traditionally taboo social topics such as religion and spirituality and media makers are well aware of the overall effectiveness that media has when sending thought-provoking messages to a mass culture. "The twentieth century anti-film fears of resentment and ridicule are slowly dying and being replaced by a more enlightened twenty-first century attitude that see popular films as important for religious education *because* of their popularity" (Kozlovic, 2004, p. 54). It is in this popularity that the ideological compass within media points to a philosophical shift, emphasizing theological ideologies within major media events and movements (Suman & Keiser, 1997).

It is in this shift that the opportunity lies for students to learn more about religions, both their own and those alien to them. It is also in this same shift that questions remain unanswered. Do college students today learn about religion and spirituality from popular media? If so, what and how? What, if anything, from popular media has influence over students' belief structures and faith development? Through the conceptual frameworks of Perry (1970), Belenky et al. (1986), and Gerbner et al. (1978), I examined the means through which students learn about religion and spirituality from popular culture and its subsequent mediums.

In utilizing the above theories to inform this research, this study identifies the role that popular media plays in the faith development of college students today. Using literature in the areas of college student intellectual and ethical development, cognitive development theory, faith development theory, and media theory, I examined the role that popular media plays in both the lives of students, as well as in the development of their spiritual identity.

Through the use of qualitative research methods, including focus groups, interviews, and

observations, students' experiences were identified, assessed, and contextualized through the lenses of the theoretical frameworks that drive this study: Perry (1970), Belenky et al. (1986), and Gerbner et al. (1978). Perry's (1970) and Belenky's et al. (1986) theories were selected because they address how students identify authority figures, find the authority to believe what they believe, and create meaning from their experiences and the knowledge taught to them from the authority in their lives. Gerbner's et al. (1978) theory was selected because it addresses how media influences and shapes audience experiences and perceptions of the world around them.

Significance of this Study

Students' experiences were not only contextualized through the above theories – they were also contextualized through literature concerning cognitive development, faith development, and the role of media in the lives of its audiences. These larger bodies of literature concerning the aforementioned areas are important for this study because they provide a multi-frame approach for assessing the faith-related experiences of students today. In contextualizing the faith-related experiences that students are having while in college, this study informs media theory and the literature discussing students' faith development by shedding light on the role that media plays in students' spiritual identity development.

By seeking a better understanding of students' experiences as they progress through college and develop their spiritual identity, this study provides institutions of higher education with ways in which they can offer students a more holistic education that transcends the classroom and enriches the everyday lives and experiences of students. Understanding the role that media plays in the spiritual identity development of students today is also important because it can aid in further understanding the impact that media has on students as they are learning,

developing, and educating others about religion and spirituality.

Lastly, there is very little literature on the role that popular culture plays in the identity development of college students today, specifically in the faith identity development of college students. This study is guided by the following questions:

1. Do college students today learn about religion and spirituality from popular media, if so, what, where, and how?

2. Is popular media affecting a student's understanding of his or her own religion or spiritual identity, and is popular media influencing his or her perceptions of the religious and spiritual ideologies of others?

Though one of the aims of this study is to add to the research concerning popular culture as a learning tool, and its role in the overall authority in the identity development of college students today, it specifically aims to discuss *if* and *how* students utilize popular culture when exploring their spiritual identity. More specifically this study aims to understand the role, if any, that popular culture has on influencing student perceptions, ideas, and practices in regards to religion, faith, and spirituality.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The theoretical frameworks for this study include Perry's (1970) scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) theory of Women's Ways of Knowing, and Gerbner's et al. (1978) Cultivation Theory. These theories were selected because of their applicability to male and female student learning, development, and ideas concerning the relationship of authority in student learning. In identifying student learning and the role that authority plays in the identity development of students today, these theories provide lenses to examine how students learn about religion and spirituality. Throughout the literature review, each theory is examined through multiple perspectives from both critics and proponents for cognitive development theory, faith development theory, media theory, and social interaction theory.

In the later half of the literature review, discussion concerning the aforementioned theories is supplemented by literature in the topical areas of popular media as a learning tool, religion and popular culture, and religion in higher education. These topical areas inform this research in the assessment and application of the aforementioned theories as it helps to contextualize the theoretical frameworks and study while informing the answers to the research questions:

Theoretical Framework

In providing a framework for understanding how to support students through challenges presented by university life and the media, intellectual and ethical development theorists, as well as media theorists, have created models that provide a guide in assessing student faith

development throughout traditional students' college experiences. Perry (1970) and Belenky et al. (1986) offer a framework for understanding how students develop intellectually, ethically, and morally. Furthermore, Gerbner's et al. (1978) Cultivation theory provides a lens with which to examine the role that media plays in the student's intellectual and ethical education.

Perry (1970) establishes a foundation for understanding students' intellectual, ethical, and moral development. Understanding these areas of development in college students provides a lens to assess how religion in popular media influences students' progression in establishing their personal identities. Belenky et al. (1986) complements Perry's (1970) perspective in understanding student's ethical and moral development; however, they address this understanding as it pertains to women's experiences. These theoretical frameworks assist in helping to determine how religion in popular media influences female students' identity development as well as male students' identity development by providing a framework that discusses how women develop their understanding of authority and information. Lastly, Gerbner et al. (1978) articulate that television influences audience understanding of the surrounding community while shaping their perspective of the people, ideas, and events around them. Understanding the influences that media has on its audiences provides a perspective in examining the role that religion, when represented in the media, has on its audience.

As their concepts are challenged and supported through varying forms of popular media, students likely incorporate media as an authoritative voice in their faith and intellectual and ethical identity development. This is because media serves as an environment (Zukin and Snyder, 1984) and students are influenced by a variety of environments (Holland, 1985, 1992). Through the lens of Perry's theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development (1970) and Belenky's

et al. theory of Women's Ways of Knowing (1986) one can develop a better understanding of students' spiritual identity development. While looking at spiritual identity development through the lenses of Perry (1970) and Belenky et al. (1986), and integrating Gerbner's et al. Cultivation Theory (1978), a set of guidelines emerge that aid in understanding students from multiple faith, religious, and spiritual backgrounds as they move through their spiritual identity development while in college.

The aforementioned theories provide a perspective in determining how students interpret the authority of religion and spirituality in popular culture and in examining the effects that media have on the faith development of college students today. In reviewing literature that considers students' use of authority in taking ownership for their ideas and from research that examines how media teaches ideas and beliefs to its audiences, a direct relationship emerges between the ways in which media affects the audience's understanding of different ideas and where audiences find the authority to believe what they see.

Intellectual and Ethical Development and Women's Ways of Knowing

In addressing the areas wherein students find the authority to believe what they believe, Perry's (1970) theory of intellectual and ethical development and Belenky's et al. (1986) theory of Women's Ways of Knowing are major contributors in articulating how students find authority in their ideas and in the ideas of others. In bringing our understanding of college students' cognitive development to the forefront, Perry's (1970) scheme of intellectual and ethical development states that students potentially move through nine positions of ethical and intellectual development. Perry (1970) extended the work of Piaget by providing student affairs professionals with a better understanding of students' ethical and intellectual development (Love

& Guthrie, 1999, p. 6).

Perry's scheme involves students moving through the positions of Dualism, Multiplicity, Relativism, and Commitment in Relativism. In moving through these stages, students are developing their own sense of intellectual and ethical authority in the context of traditional authorities, absolute truths, globalization of ideas, and integration of multi-frame perspectives. Students begin to understand that the authority figures they have been subjected to may not have all of the answers. Students realize that they might have some of the right answers, just as their classmates, professors, peers, and other sources for information may have valid and authoritative perspectives. The role of authority moves from solely looking to an external figure to recognizing the authority within one's own identity as well as the authority within multiple people and arenas outside of the student (Perry, 1970).

Dualism is the position where "morality consists of committing to memory… correct responses, answers, and procedures, as assigned by authority" (Perry, 1970, p.59). Multiplicity is the position in which a student recognizes that multiple "right answers" exist, and each student has the responsibility to identify what is "right." This position encourages students to weigh the validity of authorities, and students usually find that there is no "wrong answer." They must learn to trust their own voice. Relativism involves the student's ability to understand, analyze, and evaluate their own thinking. Oftentimes students in this position exhibit "a changed relationship to authority, a new capacity for detachment, and an awareness of a path to a new identity through personal commitment" (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p.12).

In this stage, students utilize critical reasoning skills to come to decisive conclusions rooted in substantial reasoning and knowledge. This stage differs from multiplicity in that

multiplicity implies a level of uncertainty within the voices of authority and the students themselves, whereas relativism implies that "all knowledge is perceived or accepted as relative" (Perry, 1970, p.115). Lastly, Commitment in Relativism, the final position, is the integration of learned knowledge with personal experience. This is the position where the student makes the commitment to reflect on his or her own experiences in context with what he or she has learned from others (Perry, 1970).

In considering these positions, not all theorists agree with Perry's (1970) assessment. Patricia Bizzell (1984), author of *William Perry and Liberal Education*, claims that Perry (1970) describes "something that does not necessarily happen to all cognitively normal 18-21 year olds" (Bizzell, 1984, p. 449). In assessing Perry's applicability, Bizzell (1984) finds that Perry is not as translatable as one might expect and that Perry's intentions seem to be vague. Bizzell (1984) goes further to say that Perry (1970) implies that development is desirable, though not necessary (Bizzell, 1984, p. 449). In saying that development through the developmental levels is desirable, Perry seems to be adding value to each position, and as a result is positing one stage as more desirable then its predecessor.

Stemming from William Perry's work, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) research on intellectual and ethical development furthered the understanding of cognitive development as it pertains to women. In Belenky's et al. (1986) view, cognitive development is "dependant on the evolution of identity (self); the interrelationship of the self with others (voice); and the understanding of truth and knowledge (mind) as defined by the self" (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 17). Like Perry (1970), Belenky et al. (1986) created a set of positions that women move through when drawing "conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority" (Belenky, Clinchy,

Goldberger, and Tarule 1986, p. 3).

Belenky et al. (1986) determined that the male voice had already been heard and decided to investigate how women develop their own authoritative voice. Belenky et al. (1986) states, women were found to conform with the patterns that had been observed in [Perry's (1970)] male data. While this strategy enabled researchers to see what women might have in common with men, it was poorly designed to uncover those themes that might be more prominent among women (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 9).

Belenky et al. (1986) claim to address the gap left by Perry's (1970) scheme of intellectual and ethical development, as it only considers the development among men. In contrast, Belenky et al. (1986) set out to incorporate the different ways in which women develop their own authoritative voice.

In assessing the data collected from their participants, Belenky, et al. (1986) found that the information did not fit neatly into Perry's model for Intellectual and Ethical Development. In attempts to establish a better understanding for women's experiences Belenky et al. (1986) developed a five-position model that encompassed women's ways of understanding and knowing. These five positions are Silence, Received Knowledge, Subjective Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, and Constructed Knowledge.

The first position, Silence, is when a woman's experience is passive, dependent, and subject to the power of authorities that she sees as all powerful. In this position a woman is typically blindly obedient and often silenced by the actions of others. A woman in this stage is without a voice of her own. Position two, Received Knowledge, is where women recognize that they are capable of receiving knowledge but not creating it. "The ideas and ideals that these

women hear in the words of others are concrete and dualistic" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 37). Women in this stage tend to be very dualistic and have no tolerance for ambiguity. This is because the identified authorities are the only source for knowledge and truth (Belenky et al., 1986). This is similar to Perry's (1970) Dualistic position, whereby individuals tend to imitate and adopt the perspective of authority.

Subjective Knowledge, position three, is the position where the perceived authority begins to lose its influence over women in the sense that women begin to understand and embrace the authority within them. This means that women officially recognize themselves as an authority and more specifically, as an authority that is valid. Procedural Knowledge is the position where women "are systematic thinkers…[and] their thinking is encapsulated within systems. They can criticize the system but only in the system's terms, only according to the systems standards" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 126). Women need rules and regulations for knowing. With a critical inner voice, women in this stage need means with which to measure the validity of all knowledge learned and experienced.

The fifth and final position, Constructed Knowledge, is the position where women integrate their "self," "mind," and "voice" (Belenky et al., 1986). Women in this stage understand that all knowledge is constructed and that each person plays a role in the understanding and the knowing of this knowledge. In this stage, women are able to recognize a certain interconnectedness among constructed knowledge, understanding, and their own role, as well as the role of others. Women in this stage typically reflect on ideas and feelings and exhibit critical reasoning abilities while recognizing the importance of both the context of knowledge and its ambiguity (Belenky et al., 1986). In understanding the ambiguity of knowledge and the

need for reasoning while putting it in context of an authoritative voice in this stage, women find authority from different perspectives as well as their own perspective. For women in this stage, it is possible that all is not known, and that new ideas and knowledge can be learned at any moment.

Both Perry (1970) and Belenky, et al. (1986) depict their participants as moving from a dualistic perspective toward an integrative and relativistic ability to weigh the validity of varying truth claims while making a commitment to these assessments and deciding for themselves what that truth is. Much like Perry (1970) and Belenky, et al. (1986), other cognitive development theorists such as Love (2002), Parks (1986), and Day (2001) examine the role of authority and understanding; however, they do so in context of religion, spirituality, and faith.

Cognitive Development Theory and Faith Development

Love (2002) compares Faith Development Theory (FDT) and Cognitive Development Theory (CDT). In so doing, he defines faith as being "differentiated from traditional cognitive development theories because it is the activity of seeking and composing meaning involving the most comprehensive dimensions of the human experience" (Love, 2002, p.358). He identifies faith as a social phenomenon, and he characterizes each relationship based on the social context of each relationship. This means that all experiences and relationships that a person has must be contextualized within the social context of each experience and relationship.

Love (2002) identifies Faith Development Theory as fusion of three important aspects of the mind. They are theology, human development, and psychology. Love (2002) claims that the FDT is a process of meaning making that changes and develops over time. He identifies CDT as the process of change in the cognitive structures that determine how meaning is structured and

how one perceives the world. Love (2002) claims there is no need for FDT and CDT to have similar qualities, though they both relate to the development of meaning making and as such, it is unlikely that they would diverge (Love, 2002). Overall, CDT and FDT focus on how people create meanings within the world they live and within the experiences they have. Love (2002) differentiates faith from cognitive development by noting that faith development focuses on seeking and composing meaning. This means putting together the "Big Picture." Cognitive development is how people adapt, understand, and communicate the knowledge that they learn from their environment, whereas faith development is the act of constructing meaning within the context of their knowledge and environment.

Faith Development theorist James Fowler rooted his FDT in CDT, and it consists of the seven following stages of development: Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith, Intuitive-Projective Faith, Mythic-Literal Faith, Synthetic-Conventional Faith, Individuative- Reflective Faith, Conjunctive Faith, and Universalizing Faith. These stages are linear, sequential, and hierarchical. One must begin at the pre-stage and transition to the next. Transitioning to a higher-level stage is not a presupposition or condition of the theory; in fact, one may remain in a particular stage throughout his or her entire life (Fowler, 1981). While moving through these stages, a person will move from an imitative phase reliant on imagination, and modeling the behavior of an authority, to a final stage that "exhibits qualities that shake our typical criteria of normalcy" (Fowler, 1981, p. 2000). People in this position have a "felt sense of an ultimate environment that is inclusive of all beings…they have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community" (Fowler, 1981, p. 200). This means that people within in this stage put their faith into practice and actualize their thoughts, ideas, and beliefs.

In discussing FDT and CDT, Love (2002) also considers the work of Parks (1986). Parks builds on Fowler's FDT, specifically in the role of imagination and the re-examination of the transitional period between the Synthetic-Conventional stage and the Individuative-Reflective stage (Parks, 1986). Parks (1986) describes CDT as moving from an "authority-bound, dualistic cognition through the development of intellectual thought, toward responsible and convictional commitments" (p. 51). She identifies the move from Fowler's stage three to stage four as "Counterdependence."

In separating themselves from conventions surrounding them, young adults create distance while asserting their independence from others. Fowler (1981) sees this action as gaining independence whereas Parks identifies this as changing perspective while continuing participation and dependence. According to Parks (1986) in continuing dependence, they are developing the ability to articulate their life experiences through their use of language and narrative. This is still continuing dependence because the individual is defining his or her perspective in the context of another person's perspective, which Parks (1986) terms as inner-dependence. Inner-dependence occurs "when one is able to self consciously include the self within the arena of authority" (Parks, 1986, p. 57) It is not yet independence, because a person in this stage still defines his or her perspective in the context of another authority figure. In moving toward independence, individuals develop the ability to articulate their life experiences through their use of language and narrative.

Parks claimed "stage-related developmental theories" move from "adolescent to adult and attribute any 'noise' or anomalies between those two stages to the transition from adolescence to adulthood" (Love, 2002, p. 356). Parks stated that instead of writing these anomalies off as

"noise," the development occurring in this stage should be recognized as another stage of development. Parks (1986) claims that a developmental stage exists between adolescence and adulthood, and she calls this stage "young adult." She explained adulthood and noted that there is a difference among adults and that difference lies in the characteristics between tested adults and mature adults. "This results in a four-stage model of development: Adolescent/Conventional, Young Adult, Tested Adult, and Mature Adult" (Love, 2002).

In creating this four-stage model, Parks (1986) not only draws on the work of Fowler (1981), she also pulls from the work of Perry (1970). In building on the work of Perry (1970), Parks' (1986) theory draws from cognitive development, the social aspect of faith development, and other forms of knowing (Love, 2002). Parks (1986) focuses on how people feel, their interpersonal relationships, and the social implications of their development as well as what it means to see "oneself as an authority figure" (Love, 2002). Seeing oneself as an authority figure directly refers to Perry's (1970) Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development.

Unlike Parks (1986) and Love (2002), Day (2001) states that CDT as a foundation for FDT is unacceptable. Day claims the CDT models are "untenable" because they are not only inadequate when discussing psychological functioning, and portraying psychological functioning but the model's philosophical foundation is itself inadequate (Day, 2001). Day addresses the weaknesses within the CDT approach and supports claims for a constructionist perspective. He argues that speech, language, and narrative should serve as the focal point for understanding FDT and that FDT should be interpreted in terms of interpersonal relationships (Day, 2001). This perspective reinforces the role that interpersonal relationships and communication play in Belenky et al., (1986), Parks (1986), and Gerbner et al. (1978), while it also addresses the lack of

personal relationships in Perry's (1970) work. This focus on interpersonal relationships and communication leads to discovering one's own authoritative voice.

Day (2001) appeals to the idea that there must be cultural and contextual diversity in the claims of the FDT. Appealing to Gilligan (1982) and Kohlberg (1981), Day (2001) asserts the need for a voice of care and for a voice of justice. This "variety of voice characterizes religious language and this variety is linked to gender, social class, religious affiliation, and ethnicity" (Day, 2001, p. 178). These differences are shaped by context and experiences. This is important because faith is an extremely personal experience, and each person has many different perspectives and means of articulating his or her needs, which will affect how faith development unfolds. Furthermore, Day (2001) calls us to contextualize a student's experience within his or her own environment. As shown by Romanowski (1996), this environment includes the communication of and teachings within popular culture.

In contextualizing a student's experience within his or her environment, Tisdell (1999) claims that one must also contextualize a student's experience, cognitive development, and faith development within context of other identity developments that a student might experience. Like Day (2001) and Parks (1986), Tisdell (1999) further contextualizes a student's experience and discusses the relationship between CDT and FDT. Tisdell (1999) articulates the need to incorporate and recognize other forms of identity development. Tisdell (1999) goes further to identify FDT as an integration of many different identity developments (Tisdell, 1999). Tisdell identifies the limitations of a linear representation of human development that she claims excludes reflection on the past and learning from one's history (Tisdell, 1999).

Much like Tisdell's critique of the linear model, Streib (2001) questions cognitive

development as the driving force behind FDT. Streib (2001) states that CDT as the driving force should be terminated because the "cognitive developmental logic used [excludes] dimensions of content, experiences, and function of religion" (Streib, 2001, p.144). By utilizing the structuralist logic, the richness of religious and life experiences are overlooked. This logic does not account for experiences and interactive and interpersonal relationships. Though Streib (2001) reiterates Tisdell's (1999) point that people have multidimensional perspectives and a layered understanding of the environment around them, CDT as a foundation for FDT is important because it incorporates learned behavior, experiential learning, and the environment when discussing FDT and the act of meaning making. As it is important to look at FDT through a multi-frame perspective, one cannot ignore the impact that cognitive development has on how people construct knowledge.

Though Streib (2001) supports hierarchical stages within FDT, he asserts the need for an acknowledgement of the multidimensional and multilayered aspects within each stage. In looking at Streib (2001) through the lens of Perry (1970) and Belenky et al. (1986), the relevance of life experiences and interpersonal relationships are acknowledged within their understanding of a student's relationship to knowledge and authoritative figures. Knowledge can be gained through interpersonal relationships as it can be learned through life experiences. Though Streib (2001) articulates a need to recognize the multidimensional aspects within the stages of FDT, he ignores the multilayered aspects that CDT brings to the discussion.

Streib's (2001) idea of multidimensional perspectives and a layered understanding of FDT is supported by Rizzuto's (2001) psychoanalysis that indicates "the progressive and integrative formation of an individual's psyche in the context of and in exchanges with its human

and physical environment" (Rizzuto, 2001, p.202). Unlike Streib (2001) Rizzuto (2001) articulates the importance of one's physical environment but goes further to identify faith as a psychic development that is conditioned by trust in those creating our surrounding environments.

Like Day (2001), Rizzuto (2001) pulls from Gilligan (1982) and calls for the need of a caring voice. This concrete interaction with others aids in the transformational process that results in internal representations formed from concrete interactions. This allows for the individual to attain the level of symbolization needed to transition to another stage. It is in these transformative periods that one must confront and identify specific faith related issues.

An individual's faith development includes moral reasoning, concrete relationships and interactions with others, a layered understanding of one's environment, a multidimensional perspective, learning from our own history, and making meaning over time. These attributes also make up the characteristics within Perry's (1970) Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical development as well as Belenky et al. (1986), Women's Ways of Knowing. In taking into consideration a "layered understanding of one's environment," one must consider the role that media plays in informing the environment and "multidimensional perspective." This is important because media is an avenue through which students are exposed to ideas and representations that are a part of the environment wherein students develop their multilayered identities, inclusive of their spiritual identity.

As an individual's faith develops, he or she attempts to cultivate his or her own spiritual identity while assessing all of the information that is disseminated to him or her. This is where Perry's (1970) and Belenky's et al. (1986) understanding of knowledge and authority come into the "Big Picture" of student identity development, while Gerbner's et al. (1978) Cultivation

Theory and the authoritative role that media assumes, aid in informing the environment wherein faith development occurs. Faith development is informed by intellectual, ethical, moral, and cognitive development, and because of this, it is important to establish and identify the multiple authoritative voices that influence a students' faith development. This environment can include family, friends, professors, and media as they each influence students throughout their developmental process.

Popular culture shapes the multilayered identities of students today. Gerbner's et al. (1978) Cultivation Theory discusses the effects that popular media have on students in regard to their perceptions, understanding, and overall awareness of the surrounding world. In looking at how television shapes the perceptions of students today, Gerbner et al. (1978) argues, "television cultivates a particular view of the world in the minds of the viewers" (Williams, 2003, p.179). This means that popular media is a part of the multidimensional environment that informs students' identity development. As part of this environment, media plays a role in informing a student's faith development as well as students' cognitive development. This is due to multilayered perspectives enriching the learning environment for students, which informs a student's faith development. In noting the role that media may have on a student's faith development, it is important to look at how or if popular media shapes, influences, teaches, and or informs a student's faith development.

Media Theory

As shown by the amount of television watched (Fiscina, 2007), movies attended (Weblog, 2006), and music downloaded (Musgrove, 2007), popular media such as television, film, books, movies, and news play an important role in the lives of college students today. As an

informative tool, popular culture exposes, shapes, and informs students about their surrounding community. Media theory addresses how popular media affects student perceptions of their surrounding culture, as students are learning consciously and subconsciously from their media-enriched environment (Blumer, 1933). As one of the influential early studies in media theory, Blumer (1933) found evidence to suggest that, when a child attends the movies, he or she is introduced to new information that is directly related to areas of the movie goers' personal interest. He further discussed that the values that are put forth through the cinematic endeavor play a role in the behaviors exhibited by the child attending the film (Cressey, 1934). Gaining a child's interest is accomplished by selecting alluring plotlines depicted with famous faces.

> The prestige of the movie stars in the child's own play world and in the urban community itself, even as much as the prestige in which they are held when seen upon the screen, contributes also to the educational influence of the cinema (Cressey, 1934).

It is in relating to the film, or escaping in the film that draws people to the movies, and it is in attending the movies that the media passively or actively shapes the viewers' understanding of the world around them (Cressey, 1934).

In utilizing the prestige of the movie stars and the overall interest in the media to gain an audiences' attention, media shapes the viewer's understanding and perceptions of the surrounding community. Gerbner's et al. (1978) Cultivation Theory claims that television cultivates, shapes, and promotes a particular understanding of reality within our society today. Though this perception of reality is inaccurate, media consumers believe that it is an actual reflection of today's social environment (Gerbner et al., 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1996; Signorelli & Morgan, 1990). This theory shapes viewers' attitudes, beliefs, and

actions (Wood, 1997). People who watch television are more likely to exhibit views in congruence with messages presented within the media than those people who do not watch television. Gerbner et al. (1978) states that when people experience television regularly, their ideas become homogenous with those produced on the small screen, producing the "mainstreaming effect" (Gerbneret al., 1978).

Gerbner's et al. (1978) Cultivation Theory is built on three assumptions: Blurring, Blending, and Bending Reality. Gerbner et al. (1978) assumes that television blurs worldviews, blends realities, and bends the popular views to serve the interests of the sponsors (Gerbner et al., 1978; Wood, 1997). These assumptions both limit the application of the theory, as it is based solely on television and not other forms of media, and it takes the position that mainstream has a homogenous worldview.

However, unlike McLuhan (1964) who suggests that media creates society, Gerbner et al, (1978) posits that media does not create society so much as it influences the way that society sees its surrounding community (Hadsell, 2006, p.2). In supporting Gerbner's et al. (1978) postulation that media influences the community at large, another media theory, Technological Determinism, states that "a single phenomenon determines other aspects of life" (Wood, 1997, p. 283), indicating that television and other mass media generally have an effect on society as a whole. Gerbner et al. (1978) and Wood (1997) claim that media influences and affects the way in which society perceives its surrounding community. Parenti (1992), author of *Make Believe Media* went further to suggest that media influences cultural ideologies, specifically people's general perceptions of gender, goals, and beliefs. Though Gerbner et al. (1978), Parenti (1992) and Wood (1997) agree that popular media is a major influence on their audiences' perceptions

of their surrounding community, not all media theorists agree.

Unlike Parenti (1992) and Gerbner et al. (1978), not all scholars agree that media plays the most important role in shaping the societal perceptions of its consumers. Hadsell (2006) claims that Cultivation Theory is a strong starting point for understanding the role that media plays in the lives of its viewers and readers, but in order to successfully understand media's true effect on society, social interaction theories must be incorporated into the research and studies investigating the role of media today. Social interaction theories suggest that cognitive development needs social interaction to ensure total identity development (Vygotsky, 1962). This means that in order to comprehensively look at how a student's identity develops, one must take into account the student's cognitive development and faith development, as well as the interpersonal relationships and social interactions that each student has within his or her influencing environment.

Much like Hadsell (2006), upon further assessment of Gerbner's et al. Cultivation Theory (1978), Hirsch (1980) asserted that more information was needed to affirm the authority of the Cultivation Theory. Hirsch (1980) stated that Gerbner's et al. (1978) findings were inconsistent with the Cultivation Theory and that the researchers only reported data that were consistent with their goals. DeFleur and Vall-Rokeach (1989) claim that Gerbner et al. (1978) are naïve in assuming that television is a "singular" cause for shaping the beliefs of mainstream viewers. They claim that the assumption is further limiting because it does not allow for other medial relationships to enter into the equation. DeFleur and Vall-Rokeach (1989) also state that media and direct experience as well as other people influence attitudes. The notion that people are influenced by other media, such as film, writings, and music, as well as by their own level of

cognitive processes, socioeconomic standing, education, religion, race, gender, and sexual orientation, is an idea that takes the media consumer's context into consideration when interpreting the effects of media on the core values of the mainstream public.

Cultivation theorists ignore the "social dynamics of television use" as well as developmental levels, viewing experience, knowledge, race, sex, gender, ethnicity, contexts, family, and socio-economic background all contribute to shaping the ways in which television is interpreted by viewers (Hadsell, 2006). The Cultivation Theory also falls short in that it only focuses on the amount of television that a person is exposed to, ignores the differences in how viewers interpret television realities, and does not take into account the viewer's motivations (Dominick 1990)

Like other critics of Gerbner et al. (1978), McQuail (1987) argues that Gerbner et al. oversimplifies the context of his theory, in that "it is almost impossible to deal convincingly with the complexity of posited relationships between symbolic structures, audience behavior, and audience views, given the many intervening and powerful social background factors" (Boyd-Barrett & Braham, 1987, pp. 99-100). This means that there are many other factors that play into how viewers interpret and learn from the images, ideas, and questions posed while they are watching and experiencing the information projected through the varying forms of media.

Though many critics of Gerbner et al. (1978) claim that television is not the only medium through which people learn, it is important to note, that Gerbner et al. (1978) was not suggesting that television was the only influencer, so much as it was an influencer that needs to be recognized as a medium that shapes an audiences' perception of their surrounding community. In incorporating social interaction theory, it is important to note that these critiques and

subsequent theories help further connect this study's theoretical frameworks. Perry (1970) and Belenky et al., (1986) incorporate interpersonal relationships, environment, and socialization. They also ensure that multiple authoritative voices are noted and incorporated *as* authoritative voices within both the cognitive development and the faith development as experienced by college students today. Gerbner et al. (1978) connects this multi-frame approach to understanding student cognitive and faith development by reinforcing the role that television plays as an authority in the lives of college students today. Though Gerbner et al (1978) focused on television, his findings are applicable to other media sources like movies, books, music, and other printed media.

Authority of Popular Media as a Learning Tool

Students attending colleges and universities are inundated with images, ideas, and questions proposed in popular media. Popular culture as a whole infiltrates the lives of college students in a way that demands attention (Barth, 1976). Smith, author of *Popular Culture and the Freshman: Three Questions*, states, "these freshman with whom we are concerned have lived and are living in a world of mass media, an environment in which the mass media are among the most important facts" (Smith, 1959, p. 254). In identifying that students are exposed to mass media in a paramount way, Smith (1959) goes further to state that students model the behaviors of those represented in popular culture in a way that influences their learning. Smith points out that though students discern different meanings from varying messages, overall they seem to learn a great deal from media (Smith, 1959).

Popular media serves as a learning tool in many ways. According to Romanowski (1996), movies are an "effectual learning format" that affects the attitudes of students, so much so, that it

influences views on social issues like war, capital punishment, and the treatment of criminals. When used as a learning tool inside the classroom, media "affirmed American mythology and middle-class culture…and while movies offered models of behavior and shaped interpretations of life, they also tended to reaffirm already existing values and attitudes in moviegoers" (Romanowski, 1996, p. 148). Many educational leaders, as well as religious and "civic minded reformers," thought that movies taught moral and social lessons.

These same leaders and reformers saw the potential that films had for formal instruction (Romanowski, 1996). Clearly stating that film should be utilized during formal instruction, Romanowski (1996) supports the idea that popular media serves as a medium through which students learn and develop their personal ideologies. Having identified that "movies could fill gaps left by family, church, and school, even if what they presented conflicted with the standards and values these other institutions sought to impart," (Romanowski, 1996, p. 149) researchers identified that entertainment is an important source of guidance as other social institutions like family, church, and school, no longer influence the culture as powerfully as they had in the past (Romanowski, 1996 p. 216).

Today, young adults are learning from popular media both inside and outside of the classroom (Farber et al., 1994). In identifying time spent engaging with popular media, Cressey (1934) stated, "The average time spent by the city child in attending movies would alone seem to suggest the cinema's potential influence" (Cressey, 1934, p. 504). Romanowski (1996) supports the use of media in the classroom and states, "Cinema should be engaged at the institutional level. As a storytelling medium, movies possess unique pedagogical advantages over schools" (Romanowski, 1996, p. 150). Like literature, media tells stories in a way that engages students

while teaching them about the world. Because of its innate entertainment, popular media has many educational advantages.

As an informative tool, popular media serves multiple roles. "The popular media are studied either as purveyors of information, as tools for persuasion, or as means for improving skills…" (Barth, 1976, p. 84). Studying film encourages students to develop good "habits of perception, analysis, judgment, and selectivity for the processing of visual data" (Barth, 1976, p. 86). This means that after being exposed to ideas expressed in various forms of media, students need time to process what they experienced. It is in this processing that the students develop and refine their perceptions of the media's validity.

Processing media happens both actively and passively. In their study, Zukin and Snyder (1984) found that those in media-enriched environments were more knowledgeable about community and world events than those in media-poor environments (1984). They further explored the impact that the varying interest levels in the media, of those exposed to the media, had on the influence of the media. This insinuates that the amount of interest a person has in the topic represented in the media may make it more likely for that same individual to absorb the information projected by the media. Zukin and Snyder (1984) found that "at all levels of interest, the media environment was a critical variable…clearly citizens learned passively from the simple availability of information" (Zukin and Snyder, 1984, p. 637). This implies that the media influenced all viewers on some level.

Popular media is identified as a positive learning tool in that students passively and actively engage in learning from the media. Many researchers have stated that popular media should be used as a learning tool in and out of the classroom; however, educators need to

challenge students to think critically about meanings within popular media so as to add to students' intellectual development (Barth, 1976). Society has cultivated critical thinking skills and insight in the minds of our youth as they read literature and understand its significance. Society should begin to incorporate media such as television, film, and music into the repertoire of our students' intellectual development. As students find multiple perspectives within the great novel, they will be able to find multi-frame perspectives through other popular mediums.

Just as the varying forms of media are seen to affect the moral and intellectual development of the individuals exposed to it, it can be assumed that media influences other aspects of an individual's development. Day (2001) suggested that faith reasoning is moral reasoning shaped in religious language. If this is true, then as popular media affects the moral and intellectual development within individuals exposed to it, media has the potential to affect the faith development of each individual. Just as morality, intellectualism, social justice, politics, and relationships are depicted within popular media, so are religion and spirituality.

Religion and Spirituality in Popular Media

Much like philosophy, religion, values, and morals are taught through literature, popular media exposes people to the same ideas through the medium of television, film, advertisements, graphic novels, music, magazines, and newspapers. On many occasions, a wide range of religious and spiritual ideologies are depicted in popular media. As writers, directors, and producers of popular culture shape their religious and spiritual messages within the media, they are also distributing their ideologies through the media, often skewing the ideas through both positive and negative lenses.

Understanding how people interpret and assimilate popular media and information into

their knowledge of how the world functions around them, and looking at this assimilation through the lens of religion and spirituality is important when assessing the media rich environment that may impact the faith development of college students today. While considering religion and spirituality in the media as it relates with faith development, it is important to identify the authority that the ideas proposed within the media have. As informed by Perry (1970), Belenky et al., (1986), and Gerbner et al. (1978) it can be assumed that an individual shapes his or her religious and spiritual perspectives in the process of assimilation previously described.

Religion and spirituality are incorporated into popular media through many avenues. In opening a magazine or a newspaper, one may find a cartooned religious satire and when flipping through the channels on a television, one may find shows depicting spiritual ideologies and religious groups. Religious and spiritual symbols, ideas, commentary, subtext, and allusions are found in nearly every form of popular media.

More specifically, the aforementioned religious and spiritual nuances can be found in graphic novels such as *The Sandman (Gaiman, 1993)*, *Lucifer (Carey, 2001)*, and *Superman* (Siegel & Shuster, 1932), and in animated movies such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Conli & Hahn, 1996), *Hercules* (Clements, 1997), *Pinocchio* (Disney, 1940)*, Prince of Egypt* (Chapman, Hickner, &Wells 1998), and *Snow White* (Disney, 1937). They can also be found in television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997), *Angel* (Whedon, 1999), *Joan of Arcadia* (Hall, 2003), *Dead Like Me* (Chelov & Marshall, 2003), *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2007), and *Grey's Anatomy* (2005), and in movies such as *The Matrix Trilogy* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999), *Bee Season* (McGehee & Siegel, 2005), *Stigmata* (Mancuso &

Wainwright 1999), *and Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999). Lastly, religious and spiritual topics and ideas can be found in popular books such as *Lamb: The Gospel of Biff Christ's Childhood Pal* (Moore, 2002), *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001), and *The DaVinci Code* (Brown, 2003).

All of the above movies, shows, and books are vehicles that depict religions and spiritualities in unique, informative, and influential ways. As individuals choose to participate in the viewing, listening, or reading of these mediums, they are exposing themselves to varying forms of religious and spiritual ideas. As Gerbner et al. (1978) noted that exposure, at minimum, passively influences the viewer, it is the aim of this study to determine if the exposure to various representations of religious and spiritual ideologies through movies, books, television, music, and the news have any influence on the spiritual identity development of the participating individual. This potential influence, in turn, could prompt the individual to assess the authority that each medium has in reference to his or her own spiritual identity.

Individuals who choose to participate in the varying forms of popular culture that depict religion and spirituality through differing forms of media, expose themselves to a media enriched environment that could influence and or shape the participants views of religious and spiritual practices and ideas. When thinking about the influence of popular media on college students' spiritual identity development, Gerbner et al. (1978) states that media influences perceptions about society, and Perry (1970) and Belenky, et al. (1986) state that individuals must assess and interpret the authoritative roles depicted within their environment, now understood to be inclusive of the media.

As students move through the stages of their intellectual and ethical identity development and spiritual identity development, the environment students experience everyday, plays a large

role in shaping the students perspective (Day, 2001). In assessing students' experiences in the media enriched environment, religion as it is represented through popular culture should be taken into consideration when thinking about spiritual and faith-based identity questions. As the environment plays a vital role in the identity development of students today, it is also important to recognize the different types of environments that students are exposed to. An individual is confronted with many challenges to his or her ethical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual identity when presented with any new environment and situation and much like media shapes students perceptions (Gerbner et al. 1978), other environments, like the college environment, can inform can shape students perceptions and identity (Perry, 1970).

Religious Education and the College Student

When students enter college and are exposed to a new environment, they are put into an uncomfortable position that directly impacts their identity development (Holland, 1985 & Holland, 1992). These uncomfortable positions could arise through classes, residence halls, social arenas, and popular culture. Each of these positions offers an opportunity for a college student to challenge his or her own belief structure and learn more about the world outside of the typical college campus. Romanowski (1996) claimed that popular culture is an effective learning tool and Gerbner et al. (1978) noted that television shapes students' understanding of the surrounding community. With this in mind, a gap in the literature exists and research has not yet examined how students view celebrities in the media and if students view celebrities as authority figures. Based on Perry (1970), Belenky et al, (1986), Gerbner et al, (1978), and the other theorists noted in this research, this study aims to identify how these ideas are related. As students search for their own authoritative voice (Perry, 1970) they tend to look to relatable

authority figures and popular icons to aid in shaping their ideas, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions (Belenky et al., 1986). These same icons depicted through television, film, books, music, graphic novels, and the news could serve as authority figures to the traditional aged college student who is experiencing intellectual, ethical, and faith based identity development.

In ensuring that the needs of traditional aged college students are met, one of the areas that should be given more attention is that of students' spiritual identity. College students today are focusing on religion, the practice of one's beliefs, and spirituality, the practice of connecting and meaning making. It is shown that the faith-related issues discussed by Day (2001) and Rizzuto (2001) are prevalent among college students today. This means that the topic of religion and spirituality are predominant themes in the minds of college students (Astin, et al., 2005). The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) (Astin et al., 2005) recently published a longitudinal study entitled *Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose*. This study indicates that more than half of the students surveyed valued integrating spirituality into their lives, and three-fourths identified themselves as spiritual beings. Over 75 percent of those surveyed not only said that they discuss religion and spirituality with their peers, but that they each pray on a regular basis. Moreover, 65 percent of students reported struggling with questions about faith and spirituality. Two thirds of the students surveyed articulated that professors rarely if ever provided opportunity for discussion on spirituality or the meaning and purpose of life (Astin et al., 2005).

Much like the HERI (Astin et al., 2005) study, Johnson, Kristeller, and Sheets (2004) published a study that discusses students' religiousness and spirituality. However, it does not necessarily support HERI's (Astin et al., 2005) findings. Johnson et al. (2004) states "Spiritual

well-being may decrease from the summer before college into the first two years, bottoming out in sophomore year and then rising steadily…and religious distress may decrease from the junior to senior year" (Johnson et al., 2004, p.14). Though Astin et al. (2005) is looking at students' spirituality during one specific time period, and Johnson et al., (2004) is looking at students' spirituality across multiple time periods, their common theme is overwhelming: religion and spirituality are on campus and students today are interested in navigating what it means to be spiritual and religious while searching for meaning and purpose in college.

These studies indicate that as religion and spirituality are salient for students, they are thinking about religious and spiritual ideas while participating in activities on campus like social, academic, and media enriched events. The literature has shown that students experience intellectual and ethical development, faith development, and cognitive development while in college. The literature went further to say that in developing one's aforementioned identities, authority figures and the roles of one's own voice, self, and mind assume multifaceted roles that are informed by the environment wherein a student is living and learning and that these authoritative voices play a major role in the construction of a college students identity.

Though there is a thorough body of literature concerning cognitive development, faith development, and popular media as a learning tool, a gap in the literature remains. There has not been a large amount of peer-reviewed research on the topic of religion as it is represented through the media. There have been significant informal commentaries, articles, and Internet sites dedicated to these ideas however; there has not been a significant amount of reliable research that explores representations of religion and spirituality in the media. This is important to investigate because pop culture and the media are a large part of society, just as religion and

spirituality are a large part of the lives of those participating in experiencing the media.

There is another gap in the literature concerning the understanding of audiences' experiences as they process through the information disseminated from the media. Though there is research that discusses how media influences an audience, and how media may be used as a learning tool, there is not a broad spectrum of literature that discusses how an audience processes through the information depicted in the media. Understanding how an audience processes through the information from the media will further inform the research on the effectiveness of media as a learning tool.

In identifying the need for more research in the aforementioned areas, there is also a need to investigate the role that popular icons play in the lives of young adults today. In thoroughly examining media as an effective learning tool and the process through which an audience accepts or rejects the information projected in the media, it is also important to identify why an audience accepts the information disseminated from popular icons. There is little or no reliable research that discusses the authoritative role that popular icons play in the lives of college students today. This gap is important to address because it would provide another perspective in understanding another environment wherein students may find authorities as role models.

Lastly, there is yet another gap in the literature that exists. There is no research that addresses the effect that media has on the identity development of college students, and more specifically, if television, movies, books, music, and other printed media specifically affects the faith development of college students. This is an important area to research because gaining more information about how students develop their faith identity, will help to inform the overall understanding of how students develop their faith, religious practices, and beliefs. In

understanding this, institutions of higher education can better educate students through multi-frame holistic means.

In identifying the gaps within the literature, and in pulling together Perry (1970), Belenky et al. (1986), and Gerbner et al. (1978) to frame this study, it is important to take a multi-frame approach when assessing the role that media may play in the lives of college students today. As a student's environment plays a large role in his or her identity development, and process of constructing knowledge, students are influenced by their intrapersonal relationships, interpersonal relationships, and the information communicated through varying forms of popular culture. In thinking about religion, spirituality, and popular culture as a learning tool, this study aims to discern if popular culture has a role in shaping a student's spiritual identity. It is in this context that I investigate the role of popular media in the development of traditional aged college students' faith development. Through this research, it is expected that a student's faith development is affected, either consciously or subconsciously, by religious and spiritual representations in the media. It is also probable that students will find authority figures through popular icons that he or she relates with, and that similarly these popular icons will play a role, large or small, in the student's overall spiritual development.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In the context of religious and spiritual life on campus such as campus faith groups, religion courses, clubs and organizations, both public and private institutions face multilayered issues when broaching religion, popular media, and their relationship to the institution. This study focuses on the role popular media plays in the religious and spiritual lives of students at a large, public land grant institution in the Southeast. The study design includes interviews, observations, document reviews, a focus group, and surveys involving full-time, traditional, undergraduate students. This study includes all class-level designations (i.e. freshmen through senior) in order to understand the role that popular media plays in the religious and spiritual lives of college students during the significant life change that each student faces when transitioning to college, through college, and out of university life.

Research Paradigm

The qualitative methods paradigm affords me the opportunity to generate an understanding of the role that popular culture plays in the lives of traditional-aged college students. I gathered an initial demographic recording of the students participating in the study by qualitatively surveying them, and I proceeded to capture students' experiences via a focus group. I also took snapshot of students' feelings and experiences through individual interviews. The methodology of this study is a descriptive study of lived experiences with some phenomenological attributes. Phenomenological tools were utilized because it "describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p.51).

A descriptive study of lived experiences focuses primarily on the experiences people have. Typically, these studies are interested in understanding a phenomenon and describing it through an individual's own experience and how the individual experiences it. It is my interpretation that religion in the media affects the spiritual identity development of students and that this effect is a phenomenon that is experienced in an individual manner. Because of this, it is important to understand each participant's experience and extract meanings from each experience that will aid in gaining a better understanding of the role popular media plays in the spiritual and religious identity development of students today. This approach will help to identify how students are learning about religion and spirituality from the media, and it will identify if popular culture has an influence on students' spiritual identity development (Creswell, 1998).

Participants

All participants attend a large, public, land grant institution in the southeast. A total of 98 students participated in this study: 89 students participated in the qualitative survey, five students participated in individual one-hour interviews, and four students participated in a two-hour focus group. I recruited students for this study in multiple ways. In recruiting for interview and focus group participants, I hung flyers on three campuses: two large public institutions in the southeast and one medium sized private institution in the southeast. Due to lack of interest from two of the institutions, this study took place at one large, public, land grant institution in the southeast. This institution is located in the "Bible belt," and is predominantly male and Christian. Other recruitment methods included creating a "Facebook group," and e-mailing campus organizations' presidents and advisors asking them to disperse the information about this opportunity. Table 1 presents descriptive information about the survey participants.

Table 1
General Demographics of Surveyed Students

Self-Identified Demographic	Percent
Gender	
Male	66
Female	34
Classification	
Freshman	66
Sophomore	25
Junior	7
Senior	2
Race	
White	81
Black	8
Hispanic	6
Asian	4
Pacific Islander	1
Religion	
Christian	47
Baptist	13
N/A	13
Catholic	10
Agnostic	5
Protestant	3
Atheist	2
Jewish	2
Lutheran	2
Methodist	2
Episcopalian	1
Identify as religious and/or spiritual	
Religious	33
Both	33
Neither	24
Spiritual	10

Source: Religion in the Media Student Questionnaire

Those students participating in the survey did so voluntarily. The researcher hosted a

table for two hours in the lobby of a traditional residence hall comprised of 416 students

consisting of 70% male and 30% female. All students were asked if they would like to

participate in a study by completing a survey. Of the 89 students who participated, 66% of them

were male. A majority of the participants self identified as Christian, or of a Christian denomination. Of the 89 surveyed 66% students indicated that they were religious, or both religious and spiritual.

Each participant from the focus group and from the individual interviews was assigned a pseudonym for anonymity. The students participating in the focus group and individual interviews were selected because of their interest in the study and because of their willingness to participate as their schedules permitted. The time allotted for interviews and focus groups were also scaled down due to schedules of the participants. Interviews were rescheduled to be one comprehensive interview, rather than two separate interviews with reflection in between each meeting. The participants' schedules were hectic, as the interviews took place near mid terms.

The focus group included three male and one female participant. Of the four participants, Bobby, a male participant, identified as a junior and as a Deist; Anthony, a male participant, identified as a senior and as a Unitarian Universalist; Jonathan, a male participant, identified as a freshman and as a Christian; and Bethany, the female participant, identified as a freshman and as a Christian. All four of the participants identified as Caucasian. I chose these four students to participate in this focus group because they were interested in participating in the study in this manner, and their schedules permitted a two-hour time commitment.

Four men and one woman completed the individual interview. Of the four men, three identified as freshman and one identified as a junior. The female participant identified as a senior. Ethan, one of the freshman males, identified as a non-denominational Christian. Jason, another freshman male identified as spiritual. Samson, a freshman male, identified as Christian and Quinn, the junior male, identified as Christian. The senior female, Evey, identified as atheist

with agnostic leanings. The participants in this study were primarily male and Christian. This could be due to the population at the institution as it is predominantly male, and the students attending the institution predominantly identify as Christian.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection methods included: a general qualitative survey, five interviews, observations of students as they engaged in watching television together, one focus group, and document reviews. The document reviews consisted of reading through printed media such as newspapers, novels, and graphic novels, as well as watching television shows and movies. During the interviews and focus groups, the participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form (Appendix E) which discussed the purpose of the study, any potential risks, and provided resources for the participant should they need support.

In selecting the data collection methods, I chose interviews, qualitative surveys, focus groups, observations, and document reviews because they provide the opportunity to explore individuals' experiences through multiple mediums. This allowed for me to gain a full spectrum of information from multiple participants in many different ways. Varying data collection methods is important in guiding this study because each method reveals different aspects of the participants experiences (Creswell, 1998).

Focus Group

Students from three different institutions were invited to participate in a focus group comprised of four students varying in age, religious identity, sex, gender, culture, and race. Though students from three different institutions were invited, only students from one large, public, land grant institution in the southeast responded with interest. The focus group intended

to expose the participants to people with different perspectives and encourage dialogue within the group. The participants were given a brief survey gauging their opinions about their own religion and their understanding of others' religions. This initial survey was issued in order to gain an understanding of the students' perceptions of their own religion and spirituality, the religion and spirituality of others, and the role religion has in popular media before engaging in discussion about the topics that could have influenced the participants' initial responses.

After the students filled out the initial survey (see Appendix A), they were shown clips from television shows, movies, music videos, and commercials as well as newspaper clippings, cartoons, and ads from newspapers and magazines. Samuels (2004) found that using photo elicitation as a method for data collection during interviews provided more information from the participants as it encouraged their comfort, helped them to discuss ideas, and sharpened their memory. Utilizing this method of compiling images, I created a set of clips from movies, television shows, commercials, songs, magazine covers, and cartoons that were utilized during the focus group.

The images were selected due to their religious and spiritual connotations, contexts, imagery, commentary, or reference. All of the pieces were compiled onto one DVD with a "teaser" to the DVD. The teaser montage was comprised of a set of movie and television clips as well as cartoons and magazine covers set to a slide show with music in the background. After the montage was shown, the students had the opportunity to select the clips that were watched and subsequently discussed. There were over 30 clips to choose from. The participants were asked to select the clips that they were most interested in viewing because this encouraged discussion.

After listening to and watching the clips from television shows, movies, commercials,

and music videos, the students discussed the clips and were asked to fill out another brief survey (see Appendix B) about each of the scenes, ads, or videos. This survey asked each participant to write their opinion about the media they had been exposed to as well as the representations and affects that this media did or did not have on their religious or spiritual perspective, or their understanding of the religious and spiritual philosophies of others.

Interviews

Five students participated in individual interviews. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and included questions about the participant's faith, religion, life experiences, authority figures, the role of popular media in their lives, and perception of the role media plays in the lives of current college students (see Appendix C). The students participating in these interviews were each randomly selected, and the purpose of these interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of authority in the participants life, and the role that popular media plays in his or her spiritual and or religious identity or understanding of others' spirituality.

In interacting with participants in this study, I established rapport with those who chose to be involved. I created this atmosphere by using appropriate language, listening skills, foregoing judgments, and by emphasizing confidentiality. In putting these ideas into practice, I created an open atmosphere where participants felt comfortable to answer questions and engage in group, and or one-on-one discussions. When I was asked a question, or challenged, I facilitated the conversation in a way that was both accepting and not defensive. With these guidelines in place, I was afforded the opportunity to have a friendly and positive environment for research.

Observations

Observations were completed by observing students before, during and after watching television shows together in a community lounge. Document reviews were completed by reading through many magazines, general advertisements, and campus and citywide newspapers, while watching movies, television shows, and listening to popular music. As a method of data collection, observations inform this study because it allows me to observe students interacting with their peers as they engage or disengage from media without the researcher's influence in making media the focus of conversation. Document reviews inform this study because it attempts to show that media and popular culture incorporate religion and spirituality into their marketing, plots, pictures, dialogue, and music. In utilizing observations, I had the opportunity to see if students were in fact engaging in the popular culture when viewing the media with their peers.

These observations took place on several occasions in the television lounge in a traditional residence hall housing traditional-aged college students. As the observations, document reviews, focus groups, and interviews were completed, a researcher journal with subsequent notes was maintained. This ensured that no information was overlooked, and that all pertinent information was chronological and comprehensive.

Surveys

Qualitative surveys (see Appendix D) were completed by 89 students. In collecting the qualitative surveys, I hosted a table in the lobby of a traditionally underclassman residence hall for two hours. All participants needed to be a freshman, sophomore, junior, and or senior in order to participate. Participants were selected on a first-come, first-served basis. The questions on the survey included general demographic questions, picture identification, and, and short answer.

The questions were aimed at gaining a sample of students' awareness of popular images, advertisements, and famous people as well as their awareness of the religious symbolism in the media.

Analysis of Data

The data were analyzed using open coding. Open coding is when "the researcher forms initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied by segmenting information" (Creswell, 1998, p. 57). This use of open coding, allowed for a phenomenon to naturally emerge when coding, and in segmenting the information, I looked for several commonalities within the data collected and selected the most prevalent themes. In utilizing open coding, I made sure to also look for themes noted in the literature. Codes were noted in the margins of the transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups and they were also noted along each of the surveys and throughout the researcher notes for the observations and document reviews.

The open codes were categorized by theme. The themes with the most codes attributed to that theme were chosen as the themes discussed in the findings and discussion sections of this study. Each of the data collection methods provided data that, when analyzed, had very similar themes emerge. This made it very easy to link the observations, document reviews, interviews, focus group, and surveys together to develop a cohesive findings section. This use of coding lends itself directly to the use of the qualitative research paradigm as well as the specific descriptive study of lived experience approach because it aids in identifying the emergence of the experience where religion, as it is represented in the media, may or may not affect students' spiritual development.

Limitations

The limitations to this study include: small sample size, diversity of participant pool, time, and researcher bias. This study included a small participant pool that consisted of five students who were interviewed, one focus group with four participants, and 89 surveys that were completed. The diversity among the participants was lacking in that all of the participants attended the same institution and were not very diverse in terms of gender, culture, race, age, classification, and religious affiliation. Most of the students who participated in this research study were Caucasian Christian males in their first year of college. This lack of diversity among participants may affect the applicability and generalizability of the findings.

Of those students who participated, some of the students were directly connected to the researcher either because they participated in a student group the researcher advises, worked directly for the researcher, or lived on the campus wherein the researcher is an administrator. Some of those participating in the research had a previous relationship with the researcher and, as such, may have felt more comfortable disclosing information, while other students may not have had that type of atmosphere. This could affect the data gathered in that some of the participants may have felt more comfortable self-disclosing information than others.

Another limitation to this study is the amount of time wherein the data were collected. The interviews took roughly one hour and there were only five total interviews over the span of one week. Likewise, the focus group was made up of a small number of people and in itself took place over a short period of time. Had there been time for follow up interviews, students would have has an opportunity to think about the interviews and notice the patterns of behaviors they themselves exhibit. Had there been more focus groups, the researcher would have been able to

compare the information across various groups.

A final limitation to this study is that of the researcher's bias. I have my own understanding of the role that popular culture plays in the lives of students today, just as I identify religion and spirituality within popular culture on a regular basis. This could potentially affect the way that the data were coded and analyzed.

Reliability and Credibility

The overall reliability and credibility of the research was verified by triangulation in that the research was validated by observations, interviews, and literature-based data sources. Triangulation is when "researchers make use of multiple and different resources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence…typically evidence from different sources shed light on a theme or perspective" (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). Along with triangulation, the credibility of this study is also assured by the peer review process and member-checks. Each transcript was shared with the interviewee for verification of intent and meaning. These actions were taken to assure the authenticity of the data collected.

Researcher Lens

I am examining the role that popular media plays in the spiritual development of students because of my experiences with religion, popular culture, religious development, and overall religious practice. In grade school, I stopped practicing any form of religion, and I identified as Atheist until I graduated high school. When attending college, I was introduced to a new environment that provided me with resources about multiple religions and spiritual practices as well as many critiques of religions and spiritualities through academic departments, peers, the media, and popular culture. However, in presenting me with all of this information the

environment did not provide me emotional, intellectual, or spiritual support, nor did it provide me the tools with which I could navigate through my spirituality in this new media rich environment.

During this time I began identifying as Agnostic and have since remained Agnostic while continuing to search for meaning and a spiritual identity. It is important to me to learn about student experiences while searching for religion, God, spirituality, and meaning while in college. In approaching this study, though I experienced this same phenomenon that I am currently researching, I used my experiences as a tool for research, but I also made sure to bracket my experiences so that the research, and findings would not skew toward my own experiences. I bracketed my experiences by researching objectively, coding objectively, forming questions with a broad perspective, and analyzing the data from multiple perspectives.

It is also important to me to learn about how and where students are learning about spirituality and religion today, specifically in context of popular culture and the role media plays in the spiritual development of college students today. I am interested in understanding how students process the information they are exposed to through the media and how this shapes their own spiritual identities or their own understanding of religious and spiritual identities of others. It is through the lens of an unsupported student, affected by finding authoritative literature without supplemental authority figures to guide me through the journey of finding and creating meaning, that I investigate students' overall experiences with understanding religion as they are exposed to varying images through the media.

It is my contention that students today affirm, change, or recede from their religion and spiritual identity when they are confronted with a life change as impacting as the transition to the

media-filled environment of college. It is also my contention that students take many of their ideas and refine their ideologies by modeling images presented to them through varying forms of popular media. By assessing the data obtained from the interviews, focus group, qualitative surveys, and observations, I expect to find ways of enriching the lives of our students by attending to their perceived spiritual and religious needs in a way that will support each student through the challenges of university life.

Chapter 4

Findings

Through the findings of this study, the following themes emerge: 1) Environment; 2) media agenda and their representations of religion and spirituality; 3) consciousness level and the viewer lens; 4) media and college students' language, self perceptions, and feelings; 5) and media as a learning tool and pop icons as relatable role models. These themes identify the environment wherein students learn about religion and spirituality, how those creating the media shape the representations of religion and spirituality within media, and how the consciousness level and lens through which students engage in the media affect how they interpret it. Furthermore, the findings indicated that the participants' use of language and their perceptions of religious and spiritual practices were affected by the information provided from the media. They also indicated that the icons students deem relatable, as apposed to the icons they do not deem relatable, are more effective in influencing student behaviors.

Environment

Students learn about religion and spirituality through many different environments. These environments are inclusive of school, religious institutions, family, friends, society, and the media. Discussing the environments wherein students learn about religion and spirituality is important because it helps to contextualize where students are getting their information and knowledge about their own religion and the religion of other people. This also helps to shed light on just how accessible ideas about religion and spirituality are to students today.

The environments listed above were identified by the participants of this study through surveys, focus groups, observations, and interviews. The data collected from those students

surveyed is represented below.

Table 2

Self Identified Environments: Data Collected from Surveys

Question/Identification	Percent/Percent Yes
Where do you learn about Religion and Spirituality?	
Religious Institutions	70
Parents	51
Friends	17
School	14
Myself	7
Programs/ Organizations	6
Books	6
Community	5
TV	3
Society	2
Question	% Yes
Have your own ideas and thoughts about religion and spirituality changed since attending college?	45
Do you learn about religion, spirituality, and God in the classroom?	18

Source: Religion in the Media Student Questionnaire

The data from the surveys indicated that roughly half of the students who took the survey had no change in their religious or spiritual identity since coming to college, whereas the other half of the students who took the survey noted that their religious and spiritual identity had changed. Of the total surveyed, a majority of the students indicated that they learn about their religion and spirituality from their parents. Another majority stated that they learn about their religion and spirituality from church or synagogue. A small set of students indicated that they learn about religion and spirituality from discussions with their friends, and roughly one-fourth of the students indicated through short answer that they learn about religion from television, books, community, and society.

The aforementioned environments were also identified through interviews. When reflecting on the role his parents played in his spirituality, Jason said, "I really haven't thought a whole lot about religion throughout my life just because it wasn't a big influence that my parents brought in." Like Jason, Evey said, "Its not really big with my parents and since my parents don't talk about it a lot, its never been something that's like, 'hey lets talk about that today,' so I lean more towards my friends to talk through and listen to; its definitely not my parents." Though both participants said that their parents did not bring religion into the home and as such they said that they were subsequently not affected, it is important to note that they in fact were affected. They were affected because as religion didn't play a large role in the lives of Evey and Jason throughout their childhood and teenage years, its lack of presence influenced Evey and Jason in that religion and spirituality is not a major part of their lives today. Though Evey indicated that her parents did not play a large role in her religious or spiritual identity, she did indicate that her friends played a large role in her discussions about religion and spirituality.

Samson noted that he learned about religion from his family, but he also indicated that he learned about and continues to learn about religion from his local church, other people, and from the media. Samson said, "I learn about mine [religion] specifically from it being brought up in the family and in my local church and I also learned from people, TV, everything around you, Internet, and school." Samson went further to say, "When [I am] going to class, and my main goal is not to think about religion…someone beside me could start talking and my teacher could bring it up, it could happen … that's also true with the media." Here, Samson shows that religion and spirituality are brought up while he is sitting in class or talking with peers. He applies the same line of thinking to the media and acknowledges that religion and spirituality are brought up

in the media when he least expects it. Like Samson, Quinn also noted that the topic of religion and spirituality can emerge from conversations with friends, and it can emerge within the classroom, but he goes further to say that it is in any new situation that one could be affected by the topic of religion and spirituality. Quinn said,

> Anytime you encounter a new situation, whether it is a new friend or when you go to a whole new environment like college or something like that, something is going to happen; it's going to challenge some belief if not more than one, so it [the environment] forces you to change that belief, or hold tighter to it, but its still going to influence your belief somehow.

Both through the above statement, as well as through the environments that Quinn and Samson mentioned earlier, Quinn noted that each environment is going to challenge a person's belief system whether it is through peers, college, or the media. These environments are not the only environments that play a role in influencing the participants understanding of religion and spirituality.

According to the participants, there is a broader societal context that is yet another environmental influence on students' perceptions of religion and spirituality – often through the portrayal of religion in the media. This is the political environment within the American community at any given time. One of the important factors that plays a role within the overall American environment is the war on terror and the war in Iraq. Jason said, "If it's a religion from the Middle East, the American outlook on the Middle East isn't so great right now so our portrayal of their religion isn't the best either." Samson went further to say "I think at the current time [Islam] is the worst portrayed especially as far as satires and comedies mainly because of

9/11 and the war we are currently in." These statements directly correlate with the fact that our country is involved in a war with a country that has a different majority religion than our own.

At the same time as the American political environment is exhibiting unrest, as it is portrayed in the news, the majority values of popular religions practiced in America are also portrayed. In representing religions from countries that are different from our own, especially in times of unrest, Jason said, "I have noticed that people, especially since we live in the US, they don't slander Christianity from what I have seen, it tends to be towards the religion of countries that we are not on great terms with." Here Jason is articulating that if America isn't on "great" terms with a country, then how that country is reflected back to the American people through the media may be slanderous and portrayed negatively. This indicates that the participants identify the greater national environment as an important aspect in contextualizing students' perceptions of the religious and spiritual practices around them, especially when those religious and spiritual practices are represented in the media.

As religion and spirituality are represented in the media, and like Samson and Quinn noted earlier, students are exposed to media through media rich environments. In observing religion and spirituality in the media, it is clear that religion and spirituality are represented through the mediums of film, television, music, books, graphic novels, and advertisements. Through these mediums, religious and spiritual language, religious and spiritual imagery, and situations prompting religious and spiritual questioning are prevalent in everyday media accessible to students today.

Media is consistently and readily available to students and as students spend some of their spare time listening to music, watching television and movies, and reading books and

graphic novels, they are regularly and actively engaged with popular culture (Nielson Website, 2001). In observing students while they engaged with media and spent time with their friends, I observed students who posed questions and engaged in conversation with their peers about the media, specifically religion and spirituality in the media

Not only have I come to the study as someone who observes media regularly, in the context of the study, I also observed the media and its message through watching television, movies, reading books, and listening to music. In each form of media there are scenes about, discussions on, references to, and characters that practice differing religions and spiritualities. This is representative of the media rich environment wherein students live and learn, and it is also representative of how religion and spirituality are made accessible to students through their media rich environments.

In one observation session with students, a group of students watched the television show "Grey's Anatomy," (episode: "Some kind of Miracle." In this episode, one of the main characters dies and there is an afterlife depicted. After this episode ended, one of the students watching the show stated, "Do you think that's what its like?" while another student indicated that "It was neat to see Denny [a character who had passed several episodes ago] in heaven, but what is that other place where Dylan [another character who had passed] went?" These statements indicate that students are asking questions about the media that they are exposed to and they are engaging in dialogue with their peers after participating in the media together, on their own. This observation intermingles a few different environments. The observation took place on campus with a group of students as they self selected to spend time with their peers, and within a media rich environment, an environment where media is readily accessible and

available, as they were engaged in watching a show together.

On a separate occasion, I observed students watching the animated television show *Family Guy* (episode: "When I wish upon a Weinstein") where Peter, the main character of the show, is searching for a Jewish accountant so that he can one day be wealthy. When he finds one, he accompanies the accountant to synagogue. During this episode, the three students watching made jokes about those practicing the Jewish religion and how they thought "the whole beanie thing" was "weird." Furthermore, while this episode continued, there was a scene depicting Catholic nuns attempting to prohibit Peter from converting to Judaism, and in response to the scene, one of the students said, "That's so how the nuns are, always trying to recruit and threatening with rulers." As students were watching this episode on their own, this observation indicates that students are seeing religion and spirituality represented on multiple television shows and that they notice religious commentary and imagery. In some cases, I heard students asking thought provoking theological questions such as "Is it really the same God?" and "Why is being Jewish like a race?" while other students are embracing the stereotypes and reinforcing information that may not always depict religious practices in an appropriate light.

These observations indicate that students are engaged in and exposed to media easily, as the episode of "Grey's Anatomy" was on a TV in a lounge, and the episode of "Family Guy" was owned by a student and again, watched in a lounge. This is an example of how media is a part of students' everyday environment, and it goes further to show that media is also a very accessible environment. As students were leaving the room after watching the episode of "Grey's Anatomy," one student stated, "I can't wait until next week to see what happens with Meredith [one of the main characters]." This statement indicates that students not only plan to access

media, but that they will be able to access the media easily and repeatedly.

The accessibility of media plays a role in how students are exposed to religion and spirituality because media represents religious and spiritual ideas and concepts through story lines, songs, or images. Though the observations only discussed one avenue of media (television), it still remains one of the avenues wherein students are learning about religion and spirituality. Students chose to watch the episodes of *Family Guy* and *Grey's Anatomy* on their own and they engaged in conversation with their peers without any prompting other than how the topics were brought up within the episode.

Like selecting television shows to watch, students are also seeking books to read that pique their interest. Evey discussed the novel *The DaVinci Code* and noted that how even though it was specifically targeting a particular religious perspective, it remains representative of religion in the media and students are noticing it. Samson said,

> I think they do [students notice religion in the media] especially when it's made or when it's a specific aspect, I mean I immediately knew Madonna's red bracelet thing and I knew Tom Cruise and scientology and because we can't cut on the TV especially to a news show or an entertainment show or even a comedy show without seeing someone making fun of them [the religious stars], talking about it [religion], or analyzing it, that's just what we get.

Here Samson has noted that students are inundated with information regarding the lives of entertainers including their religious and spiritual practices. He noted that it is so apparent, that there is not an opportunity for a student to escape the commentary and representations that leads to direct or indirect exposure to the ideas that are out there. This further supports the concept that

students are living in a media enriched environment and that this same environment plays a role in teaching students about religion and spirituality today.

Understanding the environment wherein students learn about religion and spirituality is important because it helps to contextualize where students are becoming informed about religious and spiritual ideas. As noted above students live in a media enriched environment that exposes them to religion and spirituality. In understanding that religion is represented in the media, it is important to contextualize how religion and spirituality are represented in the media. This can be assessed through looking at the religious and spiritual representations in the media as well as examining the agendas of those who create the media.

Media Agenda and their Representations of Religion and Spirituality

Creators with a multitude of intentions represent religion and spirituality through the media and represent it in many different ways and through many different avenues. In contextualizing how audiences receive the information about religion and spirituality from the media, one must assess if the representations are overt or not overt, and assess the intentions and agendas of those creating the media.

As noted through the theme of *Environment* students contextualize their ideas about religion and spirituality within the current political environment of the U.S. The participants in the focus group discussed how in times of unrest, media may polarize religions and reinforce negative portrayals of certain religious ideas. For example, the current status of war and the views of the majority religions of the countries we are at war with, are seen by students as less familiar, and they play a role in polarizing specific religious and spiritual concepts. As media is the source from which students receive this information, how the media chooses to portray the

information plays a role in the perceptions students have of the idea portrayed. Bethany said, "The only thing they put on the news is bad stuff, and it gives a bad portrayal for Islam and all the people in Iraq. The most I hear is …. how they're forced to be Muslims." This is an example of how religion and spiritual ideas can be skewed to the agendas of the people producing the media.

As audiences are being informed about what is happening with the war, the religion of the people in Iraq is depicted in a negative light. Bethany has inferred that the people in Iraq are forced to be Muslim, rather than people who have the freedom to choose to practice Islam. Anthony went further to say that during war, the media places Islam even further away from the American people. Anthony stated,

> It [the movie *Finding Humor in the Muslim World*] places Islam even further away from us by placing the Hindus, people we know less about, as the friends and then, by having the Islamic people laughing at it and saying "I was the funniest one in explosives training." That's playing on the stereotype of Islam being the violent religion, the terrorist religion.

Here Anthony noted that our media is further representing Islam as a violent religion and promulgating the idea that Islam is only the religion of the terrorists. Through the movies and through news stations, a singular representation of Islam as a hostile religion is portrayed. This portrayal is exhibited because those producing the media allow it.

Islam is not the only religion noted as being misrepresented or ostracized within the American populous. Bobby said,

> There's been the patriotic songs since 9-11 and that's polarizing. The thing about the

media [is that it] tends to polarize. The media portrays Christians as doing that [polarizing Atheists and Agnostics from Christians] and then that actually polarizes Atheists from Agnostics and so people don't talk to each other because the media has taught them that they should hate each other.

Bobby noted the effects that this is having on the relationship among American Christians, Atheists, and Agnostics. He noted that this relationship has been negatively affected since 9-11 and that these religions are so polarized that they don't try to communicate any further. Bobby said that the ideas presented in the songs are impacting people in a way that reinforces stereotypes and encourages a lack of communication. Though Bobby noted many negative outcomes due to how producers represent religion and spirituality in the media, many other students noticed religion and spirituality in the media, in a more neutral, or even positive light.

Samson noted that in order to understand what the producers are trying to say, whether positive or negative, one must look at why the media is being made, even if it is assessing whether the media is intended for recreational or educational purposes. Samson said, "You have to look at who it comes from because its bias is based on who it comes from. I mean some of it is informative and some of it is merely for entertainment and not necessarily something you should learn from." Like Samson, Evey noticed that media intended for entertainment might also serve as an educational form of media, though sometimes the producers' agendas could interrupt the learning process. Evey said,

The DaVinci Code was like [explosion sound], and then the movie happened. I think it got people talking and it almost went well, but then it went from getting people talking, to this whole commercial endeavor that undid anything good that it initially might have

done to start conversations... I think they took something that initially started a lot of

conversations and milked it for every dollar.

In this case, a piece of fiction for entertainment purposes took on an educational role with the

general public, and then was 'milked for every dollar' taking away from the possibility of the

media serving as a more intentional educational piece. This instance is an example of how

students perceive a producer's agenda and how they think that it has evolved from being focused

on entertainment and education towards a more financial agenda.

In thinking about the stakeholders who participate in the production of popular media,

and in thinking about who is making the media and why it is being made, Bethany said,

If it's *Time* magazine and not the *Enquirer*, we have to weigh who is making it. I think

there are definitely people who come away to college for the first time and they are away

from their parents and they are trying to find out who they actually are. So it plays a

bigger role with those people who are trying to figure it all out as they go through this

stuff and try to discover who they want to be and where they want to be.

Taking the agendas of those creating media into account when assessing how the media is

representing religion was important to the participants. Many of the participants indicated that

people should look at the role of the producers, however in doing this, many of the participants

indicated that religion was prevalent within media. Like Bethany and Samson noted earlier, a

majority of the students surveyed indicated that religion and spirituality are represented through

popular culture today. As represented in the table below, the students surveyed recognized that

religion is represented in the media, further reinforced that they learn about religion and

spirituality from the media, and identified the religions of several popular icons, as well as the

religious subtext in commercials and film.

Table 3
Question and Picture Identification Data Collected from Surveys

	% Yes
Is religion and spirituality represented in the media?	82
Where do you learn about Religion and Spirituality?	
Books	6
Community	5
TV	3
Society	2
Percent who Identified the following correctly	
Adam Sandler's religion	75
Tom Cruise's religion	75
Mel Gibson's religion	69
Scene from a Redbull Commercial	57
Kyle's religion (from Southpark)	53
Scene from the Daily Show	44
Scene from Snow White	37
Aladdin/Jasmine's religion	36
Scene from The Matrix	30
Peter's religion (from Family Guy)	27
Scene from The Boondock Saints	27
Madonna's religion	23
Scene from Dogma	23
Rugrats' religion	19
Scene from a Verizon Mobile Commercial	15
Scene from a Kleenex Commercial	14
Scene from a Kanye West performance	12
Pocahontas's religion	5
Scene from an Orbitz Commercial	3
Superman's religion	0

Source: Religion in the Media Student Questionnaire

Many students could identify the specific religious affiliation of the celebrities and characters noted above. Some religious affiliations or imagery were easier to identify than others. This is due to the media representing the ideas in either an overt manner, or a non-overt manner. More specifically due to the media's representations of Mel Gibson, Tom Cruise, and imagery associated with Islam, students assigned characteristics to each celebrity or character based on

how familiar they were with the celebrity's and character's representation within the media. A handful of students identified Aladdin's religion as the "religion of the terrorists," Mel Gibson's religion as "Anti-Semitic," and Tom Cruise's religion as "Scientology – the Crazy one." This lends evidence to the proposition that these ideas are reinforced through the information communicated through the popular media as it is in accordance with the ideas, opinions, and the agendas of those producing the media. For example, the publicity of Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic remarks during a traffic stop and how the situation was represented through the media clearly has had an effect on how students perceive this celebrity and his perceived religious practices. This is an example of an overt representation a religious idea or someone's religious affiliation.

Pointing to the difference between religions represented overtly and non-overtly in media, Samson said, "I mean if it is a movie that didn't really deal with it [religion], then we say, 'who cares?' but if it's a movie like *Passion of the Christ* that it [religion] is the main focus then you have to pay attention." Samson went further to say,

There are a lot of movies that address spirituality. I saw the new Disney movie, *The Bridge to Terabithia* and they showed a scene where they [the characters] went to church together. A lot of it was talking about God and being damned to hell, and then the girl died and it was a lot more religious than I've ever seen a Disney movie.

Although Samson noted some examples of overt representations that "you have to pay attention to," Quinn observed that the representations don't have to be as overt as the *Passion of the Christ*:

I don't think it has to be overt. It's the easiest one and the majority of people are reached by the overt ones, but I don't think a lot of people are in tune with the non overt ones

either. I think the overt stuff that gets noticed is useful, and I think the stuff that isn't immediately apparent still reaches people. Sometimes it's subconsciously, but I think the population still gets reached by the non-obvious stuff, even though that population may be smaller.

In noting the importance of the non-overt representations, Quinn went further to discuss the subconscious effects of the role religion in the media plays in his own life, and the lives of others:

I think people [including himself] are influenced even on a subconscious level. Whether they are intentionally influenced by it or not, they are still influenced by it. It may be that they are influenced by it to make them agree more with what they already agree with, or their opinion may actually be changed, but they are changed somehow.

Much like Quinn noticed the subconscious influence, Evey noted how non-overt representations bring ideas to the surface. Evey said, "I don't think they are necessarily changing people's minds [including her own] but it's definitely doing something even if it's just making people laugh about it or bringing it to the surface." By making people laugh and bringing feelings to the surface, the media is exposing people to different points of view, which could be beneficial because it plants a seed of information that could lead to further thought and investigation by those exposed to it. Bobby expanded on this concept and noted that sometimes he is affected by the representations within media when he doesn't expect to be. He said, "I'll catch myself watching a movie and going along with it and be like, 'wait a second that doesn't make any sense.' If you your brain isn't looking for stuff in the background you will just kind of accept it."

Like Bobby indicated that "you just kind of accept it [ideas represented in media]," In

response to the question, "Do you think media affects people's religious understanding before it is pointed out to them?" Anthony said, "Yes, especially in cases when we don't know any different." Anthony stated that media is affecting students before it is pointed out to them, while Bobby claimed that media is affecting students both consciously and subconsciously, specifically indicating that "subtle is much worse because you don't think about it, it just goes to the back of your mind."

Two of the focus group participants noted that sometimes media is aggressive in depicting ideas and portraying certain ideas to the general public. Bobby said,

I think that the media overwhelmingly pushes Christianity on everyone, and it's very hegemonic and makes people think that if they're not Christian they're a bad person…and I tend to empathize with anyone who is not a mainstream religion because I feel that they get the short end of the stick.

Here Bobby is saying that he sees the media push particular religious ideas and perspectives on its audiences while shortchanging other ideas. Anthony supported Bobby's statement, but also added that it was not just Christianity that was forcefully represented to the public, but any topic that sells. Anthony stated,

There are very non-Christian things that are shoved down our throats from the media and they are more secular things. Like [the] celebrity news we've seen recently. It's going to be what sells because it's interesting lives of interesting people and people find that all interesting.

Anthony stated that it isn't just one particular religious perspective that is represented throughout the media, but it is also secular ideas. Anthony went further to say that we are shown what

"sells." This idea of "selling," points to the intentions and the agendas of the creators and supporters of the media or popular culture being used.

These findings indicate that some students' perceptions of others' religions is influenced by the way in which the media portrays a religious idea, or a person practicing a specific religion. In noting the role media takes in the lives of students today, Bethany stated, "media makes up 95% of students' lives," and as such it serves as a "compass that guides" their behavior. However, it is important to discuss how the media "compass" represents religion, so that we can accurately assess its influence. Anthony said, "There's a difference between trying to overtly be an influence and trying to make a good interesting point. There's a big difference between something like Lord of the Rings …. and something that's really overt like the Left Behind Series." Anthony has indicated that media can present religion to its audiences through different forms, overt and non-overt, just as it can present media through different avenues like television, books, movies, and music.

Bobby has shown that engaging in different forms of media like books versus television engages the mind differently and has different effects. He indicated that when participating in forms of media that require the audience to actively partake, students are analyzing the religious and spiritual ideas presented to them, whereas when they are engaged in a form of media that requires less effort on the part of the audience, the religious and spiritual messages and undertones are just accepted by the audience. This is important because when a producer decides what avenue to utilize when representing their ideas about religion and spirituality, the producer must to choose an avenue of media that is most affective in portraying the message.

Bethany further substantiated Bobby's point by suggesting, "In movies it's like it's being

told to you and in reading you are making your own impressions…and a movie [it] is like you're being told how the movie makers wanted it to be told to you." Here, Bethany is stating that the role the audience plays in each of the media communications is different. She articulates that in reading, the audience serves as an active participant, but in activities like watching a movie, the audience takes on a much more passive role. Jonathan supported this idea and said, "I definitely see myself trying to identify more religious stuff in books because it's different when you have a movie and a book….because it's not twisted [like] when you are trying to make a great show." In this statement, Jonathan supports Bobby's and Bethany's idea that various forms of media engage students differently.

In assessing the messages within the media, while assessing the avenue through which the ideas are portrayed, it is also important to assess the motives behind those in charge of creating the media. Samson said, "I mainly look at who makes it, what company makes it, who is talking, and whose information this is… the people dishing out the money have to agree with what the show is about or they aren't going to fund it." In assessing the motives behind the creators, students should also assess whether they feel the piece has been influenced by the views of the creators. Quinn said, "there have been a lot of movies that are influenced by the director or writer's religion or spirituality – aside from the obvious movies like the *Passion of the Christ*, but ones like *The Matrix* trilogy where it [intentions] is less obvious." This supports the idea that some media has clear representations of religion and spirituality and that these representations are reflective of the stakeholders' views. Other forms of media may not be as obvious in their religious representations, and subsequently the religious and spiritual agendas of its stakeholders may not be as apparent.

The participants indicate that students (including themselves) notice both overt representations and non-overt representations of religion and spirituality in the media. They went further to say that, in order to understand what the representations mean, one must look at the intentions of those who created the media. The representations within the media and the agendas of those creating the media are not the only agendas, representations, and lenses that need to be taken into account. The lens of the viewer and the framework through which a student approaches engaging in the media must also be taken into account.

Consciousness Level and the Viewer Lens

This theme is representative of the conscious or subconscious awareness that students exhibit while engaged in the media and the lens through which students are viewing the media. The consciousness level of the student engaged with the media, and the lens through which they view the media affects the students' ability, or awareness level, to see religious imagery, understand religious subtext, and notice the religious and spiritual meaning within the media. These findings indicate that students are aware of the information transmitted through popular culture specifically through the means of television, movies, commercials, and the news, however they indicate that a student's awareness, and lens through which they participate in the media, influences how much the ideas within the media affect his or her perceptions. Given that the majority of the students are able to identify the religions of famous people, fictional people, and the religious imagery used in advertisements, it is clear that popular culture is reaching students on some level, even if it is as simple as identifying religious concepts and imagery.

Of those surveyed, a trend that arose from the data was that of students forming their own opinion and students' susceptibility to media influence. One participant stated, "People don't

form their own opinions; they trust a news show that puts a comedic/sarcastic slant on things."

Another participant noted, "[students] want a more attractive way of being educated of what's going on in the world, that's why I watch it anyway." This indicates that students today are forming their opinions based on television shows that they find to be entertaining when dispensing information. Bobby said that media subconsciously affected people and then Bethany took it a step further and indicated that in order for people [not including herself] to be affected by the media, they must be susceptible to its influence. Bethany said, "It [Media] may have an underlying affect [on people] but people have to be susceptible to the effect for it to take place."

The focus group identified two different roles that viewers take on when engaging in the media. They identified these roles as that of an active participant in media or a non-active participant in media. The focus group further indicated that these roles contextualize the audiences' experiences because how a viewer chooses to participate in the media, affects the potential for the media's influence. In expanding on what it means to be a non-active participant in the media Jonathan noted, "It goes into that thoughtless thing, I don't care when I go watch a movie. When I go to watch, it's to see Gandolf kick butt, it's not to figure out who he is in the bible." Though Jonathan claimed that he was only concerned with the plotline, Bethany claimed that the viewer lens affects her understanding of religion and spirituality if you have never had direct contact with someone from that religion. Bethany stated, "If you never actually know the religion one-on-one, or if you don't meet someone or experience it through a religious meeting, then all you know is what you are shown on TV or in the movies." Though Jonathan noted that he is sometimes unaware of messages behind plotlines, Bethany articulated that students are going to be influenced by the images depicted through media if they are aware of the messages

or not.

As noted above, media is playing differing roles in the lives of students today; whereas one student may see the themes and subtexts within the media, others may not. Ethan said,

Some people notice more than others, I don't really notice it. I am sure there is a lot more than what I see. There's a guy on my hall and he knows all about this stuff and sees the metaphor in everything. The people I know who do it, like to tell everyone about it. If you ask them what the movie was about, that's what they will tell you before they tell you the plot.

This indicates that some students are watching the movie for subtext whereas others may only be watching the movie for plot.

Like Ethan, Jason noted that he did not look for subtext in film. Jason said, "I don't particularly look for religion in the media, but if it's suggested, then I'll look for it and be like, 'oh yeah, you're right.'" Jason also noted that just because he doesn't look for it, doesn't mean he doesn't recognize it when it is pointed out to him. However, unlike Jason, Ethan said, "I buy into movies. I think of them only for the plot. If it's not part of the plot then I don't really look into it; I don't like looking for metaphors." Here, two different participants indicated that when they approach media, they aren't looking for religious subtext, however Jason indicates that if it is suggested to him he will pay attention to it whereas Ethan does not like to discuss the religious subtext presented in the media.

Unlike both Jason and Ethan, Quinn is looking for meaning and purpose in media. He said, "I can be greatly influenced by a simple quote in a movie, and my religion and spirituality are definitely influenced by movies and other media." Here, the lens with which Quinn

approaches engaging with media is affecting how media influences his ideas. Quinn's understanding that people's [including his own] ideas about religion and spirituality can be influenced by a snippet of dialogue reinforces the idea that media reaches students on both subconscious and conscious levels. Unlike Quinn, Jason went further to say,

> I didn't realize the extent of religion in pop culture until now and some of those pictures you showed me, that was not in my state of mind when you asked me the questions, but once I saw the picture I was like, 'oh yeah.' I guess the thought of religion and modern pop culture didn't necessarily jut out there in my mind. I guess it's not something I pay particular attention to.

These statements made by Jason and Quinn further support the idea that the viewer's lens and viewers' agenda play a role in how media affects their understanding of religion and spiritual ideas.

Though some students engage in media with a viewer lens that encourages students to notice religious and spiritual subtexts represented in the media, others' lenses do not encourage looking for subtext within the media. The participants indicated that regardless of the viewers' lens, they might be affected consciously or subconsciously by how media represents religion and spirituality. This idea of affecting students subconsciously is prevalent in how religious and spiritual representations in the media have influenced the participants. Media has influenced the participants' use of language, self-awareness, and their perception of how religion and spirituality, as it is represented in the media, affects a majority group.

Media and College Students' Language, Self-Perceptions and Feelings

The participants of this study articulated that media plays a role in normalizing their thoughts and feelings about religion and spirituality. Furthermore, the participants exhibited two separate characteristics of how media affects their understanding of religion and spirituality. Some of the participants exhibited behaviors that indicated that media affects the language with which they discuss religion and spirituality and they also exhibited behaviors that depicted how media shapes their understanding of their own religion and spirituality as well as the religious and spiritual practices of others.

An example of the effect that media has on students is the role of normalizing feelings and behaviors of its audience. This can happen when a student notices behaviors or concepts within media that normalize his or her experiences and feelings, however this is dependant on whether or not a student is aware of, or noticing the imagery and concepts presented through the media. In reference to the quote "you have to consider the possibility that God does not like you. He never wanted you. In all probability, he hates you" from the film *Fight Club*, Jonathan said, "I have struggled with those types of thoughts when things aren't going my way, that's something that we all think about, what if it is just us?" Here, Jonathan is indicating that he can relate to a film because he is experiencing questions that the main character is experiencing. This normalizes his feelings and reinforces the questions asked.

Quinn noted in an earlier section that people intrinsically want to investigate their own spirituality and religious identity and because television depicts so many religious and spiritual ideas, people have the opportunity to. Quinn indicated that the thoughts and experiences people may have in regards to seeking and investigating their own faith are normalized because they are

exposed to media that depicts other seekers, and it represents opportunities for the seekers to experience a variety of different perspectives This is normalizing because if people intrinsically want to investigate their belief system as Quinn noted, then the media provides a forum to do so while making their investigation seem like an everyday part of life as it is presented in an accessible way that reaches a large amount of people, and not just one viewer.

Like Quinn and Jonathan, Ethan said "It seems like everyone seems to go through the same stages and it's been helpful to listen to those songs [and] to see that what I'm feeling is normal." Ethan further expressed this feeling of comfort as it reaches him through movies and he said, "He [Mel Gibson] was in *Signs* and that was cool how everything happened for a reason. It's cool how he puts it all together at the end, and I can really relate to that in my life – how I think things are happening for a reason." The film *Signs* reached Ethan on an emotional level, just as the film *Dogma* reached Ethan on an intellectual level. Ethan said, "A lot of the stuff they say in *Dogma* is really the same stuff that I believe…that's really the only movie that has done anything for me, and it's more they just said what I was thinking. It was nice to hear someone else have that opinion."

As Jonathan stated earlier, his general understanding of religion and spirituality are normalized but he goes a step further to say that media not only affects his general understanding of religion and spirituality, it normalizes the spiritual questions that he finds himself asking. For these participants, media makes them feel normal in their religious and spiritual seeking, general understanding of religion and spirituality, and in their everyday thoughts about religion and spirituality. However, another way that media is affecting the thoughts, and more specifically the behaviors of the participants is through the number of pop culture references in their use of

language when discussing religion and spirituality.

Throughout the interviews, many of the students, without direct prompting, utilized the media to communicate their thoughts on the topic of religious ideas, or how they felt about a religious or spiritual aspects or practice. This indicates that the religious and spiritual representations within media are affecting the ways that some students communicate their own ideas about religion and spirituality and furthermore, that some students take on these same ideas and representations as their own. For example, three different students incorporated popular images into how they communicate religious ideas.

In reference to the question "What is your definition of God," Quinn stated, "George Burns."

In reference to the question, "What is your definition of God," Evey stated, "The stereotypical, …some old guy in a white robe trying to impress people with his magic tricks or like *Dogma* and Alanis Morissette or Morgan freeman from the other movie."

In reference to our discussion on "if any religion is right," Ethan said, "if you watch *Dogma* it talks about how the writing [in the Bible] is from different places and can be wrong. I don't know much about the other religions, but it seems like there are flaws in all of them."

Here students are using images, ideas, language, quotes, and perceptions depicted in media to describe their own faith practices, understanding of God, their own religion, as well as the religion of others. By utilizing the ideas and imagery presented in the media, Quinn, Evey, and

Ethan have exemplified the influence that media has on normalizing their beliefs and they incorporated the religious and spiritual representations into their own language when describing their perspectives. The above statements are examples of how media has given each student common images to explain their perspectives about certain religious and spiritual thoughts and ideas.

The participants use of ideas from pop culture as they are incorporated into their language and the effect of media normalizing students thoughts about religion and spirituality are not the only ways in which media has affected the participants. Throughout the interviews and focus group, the participants identified a majority group that is affected by media's representations of religion and spirituality. Though identifying that this group is a majority, each participant self-selected out of this group and did not recognize how they themselves showed characteristics of the group's effect on their religious and spiritual understandings.

The participants identified this group as a group that accepts what the media presents as the truth, without challenging any of the representations. Furthermore, they explained this group as an audience that is affected by the stereotypes in media, susceptible to media influence, unaware of how to separate factual ideas from fictional, and unable to look at ideas presented in the media through multiple perspectives.

Though the students identified this group, they did not recognize how they were included within this group. For example, Jason mentioned that he thought Tom Cruise was Christian because in the movie *Mission Impossible 3*, "Tom cruise dressed up as a priest." Jason again made the same assumption with Mel Gibson. When asked "How did you know Mel Gibson was Catholic?" Jason's response was, "I believe he directed the *Passion of the Christ*, and then there

was that incident with the drunken outrage." In the above statements, Jason is indicating that the projects, roles, and media that famous people participate in, correlate to that famous person's personal religious or spiritual practice. This means that instead of learning about Mel Gibson's and Tom Cruise's actual religious identity through research, he directly attributed the roles and projects that Gibson and Cruise are involved in to Gibson's and Cruise's religious practices.

Jason was not the only participant that exhibited the qualities noted from this "majority group." Ethan said, "I know that Tom Cruise is kinda crazy but that's just because his religion is weird but the only way I know about that [Scientology] is from the *Southpark* episode so that's pretty crazy if that's what he believes." Here, Ethan is indicating that an episode of *Southpark* is the reason he knows what Tom Cruise's religion is as well as what the religion Scientology is about. Here Ethan is saying that he learns information about a religion from a cartoon on TV. This is important because he is not the only participant who attains information from media and sees it as a credible source for information. Media serves as a learning tool, especially while in college as students engage with media more often with varying media, wherein students learn about differing ideas and belief structures. Though gaining some information from the media could be informative, using the information gained from the media as the sole informant for students' opinions and ideas skews their understanding of the greater ideas and information about religious and spiritual ideas and practices.

This pattern was again represented in the focus group through Bethany's observations of *Wife Swap*. Bethany said,

> I was just thinking about Wife Swap because lately they have been doing two different
> religions and one was this real big Bible pusher and the other one was Wicca and they

switched lives and they were both really afraid of what was happening at the time.

There's all kind of stuff like that, people that are very into the Earth and Pagan and

though it's not on the news, you get to see how it is.

Here Bethany was discussing the representations of Christianity and Wicca and she noted that a show was a source to "see how it is, even though it's rarely in the news." Both Ethan and Bethany have indicated that they utilize the representations portrayed through the media concerning specific religions, as an authoritative voice in their own understanding of others' religious and spiritual identities. This is important because these participants are not aware of the affect that the media is having on their own understanding of religion and spirituality. Though they can recognize this effect that media has on others, they do not recognize the effect it has on them. In taking the information presented through the media as fact, the participants are using that information to shape and develop their own perceptions, opinions, and understandings of religious and spirituality ideas different from their own. This potentially impacts how students are affirming their own beliefs.

The way in which students incorporate media into their language, the ways in which media normalizes students' feeling and thoughts, and the ways in which students are affected by medias' religious and spiritual representations are direct examples of how media influences students today. This is important to take into consideration when understanding the audience's role in learning from popular media and how media can be used as a learning tool that potentially shapes and influences students' understanding of religion and spirituality.

Media as a Learning Tool and Pop Icons as Relatable Role Models

As noted in the previous themes, media has the potential to influence students' ideas and

perceptions about religion and spirituality, however, this theme indicates that media also has the potential to serve as a learning tool for students. Media serves as a catalyst for learning because pop icons serve as role models, media influences student perceptions, and because of how religion in the media affects students behaviorally and emotionally.

One of the ways in which media serves as a learning tool is through popular icon's role modeling behaviors and ideas. The findings indicate that a popular icon that is seen as relatable to college students, potentially, has more of an influence of certain audiences. This relatable nature implies that students can relate with or relate to the stars or icons that are depicted within the media. Bobby said, "If your favorite movie star or music artist believes something, there's a good chance that you will look to them as some type of authority in terms of shaping your beliefs because they are a trusted figure."

The relatable nature and leadership of the famous individuals reinforce the information portrayed in the media and affect where students learn about religion and spirituality, and why students accept information as it is portrayed in the media. Samson said,

> A lot of people hold stars on pedestals and some people don't. Some people really dislike them, some people think they are the greatest, and some people are right in the middle and don't care. There are a lot of people, especially the younger generation that will model their [the stars] looks and their actions based on what their favorite movie star does and then there are others that completely go against it because they think its ridiculous, so they go the total opposite side.

In this case, Samson states that people are modeling behaviors after the stars or rebelling against the behavior depicted. This idea of modeling behavior was also noted by Evey,

Madonna reinvented the whole red bracelet something I can't pronounce religion [Kabala] and I have no idea what that's about and then for a while there she was recruiting Brittney spears to wear the red bracelet. Then all these random people [implying students] started wearing red string and they had no idea why they were wearing red string.

Here Evey indicates that stars and students modeled the behavior of one well-known star, and in this case, the behavior was directly correlated to a religious and spiritual practice. Quinn also noted a similar trend among other students' understanding of the religious practices of the stars. Quinn said, "We [implying himself and students] see that Buddhism is portrayed as chic or in style kind of like Kabala now is. This is because we have certain stars and actors and actresses who because they practice it, it must be cool." Quinn, Evey, and Samson have all indicated that stars that are seen as relatable to students are modeled, and their behaviors and practices are noticed, and in some occasions incorporated in the lives of students today.

Students are noticing media's potential effect on the perceptions people have about religion and spirituality. Indicative of this, Samson shared,

[I] go to class and [I] go to the fire department and the first thing we talked about is what happened on a show the other night. I went to class this morning and we talked about what happened on 24 or American idol, it's what we do. We watch TV, it takes up a lot of our lives, and it influences us.

As media is playing a large role in the lives of students today, it is also serving as a good way to encourage students to think about topics more critically as well as initiate self-investigation. Evey noted, "I thought it [*The DaVinci Code*] was interesting because I had no idea, and I have

no idea how much of it is truth or not, and I thought it got people to talk and people were doing these documentaries and rebuttal books, I mean I think it got a lot of people reading." Here Evey indicated that the novel that discussed religion and spirituality in book form got people engaged in reading again and talking about the topics of religion and spirituality in a way that people understood and in a way that kept people engaged.

In recognizing that being exposed to media influences and potentially teaches students about religion and spirituality Samson said, "I think it [popular culture] can do both [influence people and teach people]. It teaches on a certain level but it mainly influences people. I mean people's day- to-day lives are run around TV, at least people's discussions and stuff." This idea that media teaches and influences people is supported in Evey's statement,

> It [popular culture] may reinforce it [religious ideas], so for me it's more of learning more about it. Like I had no idea about the rapture until I read the *Left Behind* series. For me it's just a way to learn more because I don't know a lot, and I don't have the pre-existing ideas to reinforce, but for me it's still just learning.

Here Evey talks about media as a learning tool and reinforces that for her, media directly teaches her things that she does not already know. Ethan also stated,

> The only way I know about some religions is through the media, so I'm influenced in some way…It doesn't influence my spirituality, but it influences what I know about it. It will be the only opinion that I have ever heard. I don't really care enough to look it up, so the media is the only way I know about it.

Though Ethan indicated that media does not affect his spirituality, it does affect his knowledge of his own perspective as well as the religious perspectives of others.

In affecting the knowledge and perspectives that students have of varying religious perspectives, looking at the multitude of religious representations within the media is important. When asked about the significance of the statement, "most students get their news from John Stewart," it was noted by the students surveyed that students need to connect with the media in order for it to educate them. As exemplified by one of the responses, "students do not find normal news important, they want a more attractive way of being educated on what's going on in the world." Another participant suggested, "this generation is fed up with politics so instead they turn to a more entertaining way to get their information." These statements indicate that if the icons portrayed in the media are seen as relatable, than the students connecting to the media and the icons providing the information through the media, are more likely to adapt the ideas and perceptions portrayed about religion and spirituality into their everyday lives.

Anthony said, "[popular culture] is the easiest window to the outside world…and a lot of people would rather assume that to be right." In finding that the media serves as an "easy" informative connection to information for students, it is specifically noted that media has the potential to influence, teach and affect the decision-making processes of students today while reinforcing the popular ideas represented through the media.

While recognizing that media potentially affects students' decision-making process, thoughts, and perceptions of the world around them, Jonathan said, "[media] stimulates thoughts in me that I haven't encountered before." This shows that media is also is triggering ideas and feelings that students have not yet experienced. As Anthony noted,

People have to have some type of influence to get them away from thinking one certain way and the media can come in to do that….It [media] can both serve as the authority on

what we don't know and can be used to promote or condemn or make us ask questions of

what we do know.

This statement shows that media can serve as a learning tool in that it is a catalyst for religious

and spiritual investigation, and can promote or condemn certain religious and spiritual ideals.

This statement also reinforces Jonathan's idea that media "stimulates thoughts," however,

Anthony goes further to say that people need to be influenced to change their thoughts and that

media can be the authority that has the power to potentially negatively and positively teach and

influence students' religious and spiritual perspectives.

As students understand that media can serve as an educational resource, Bethany

explored what it means to have popular culture serve as a credible or non-credible source of

information. She specifically said,

As a credible source, I would listen to Mel Gibson talk about Christianity because his

Passion of the Christ movie was so good, and as an non-credible [source] I would put

Tom Cruise with the Scientology stuff because he makes it looks like a load of crap

because he looks so weird.

In saying this, Bethany indicated that she weighs the validity of the ideas that pop icons have and

that based on what their idea is, she also supports and selects icons as role models and teachers.

Furthermore, Bethany noted how images and representations in the media, and ideas from

some of the stars, have affected her behavior and decision making processes. Bethany said, "I

have become less of a Bible pusher because there is so much of that in the media, and it is

turning people away from Christianity. So when I see that in the media it makes me angry." As a

result of Bethany's experience with her own religion portrayed in the media, Bethany changed

her behavior and how she practices her own religion. Bethany went on to say,

> If you're willing to let someone make a huge impression on you, it's going to happen. I think on some level it makes an impression anyway, but it's up to you, and how you act, and what you believe, and the media is a big part of where we get the compass to believe what we believe.

In saying this, Bethany says that media is the tool that helps to guide our behavioral choices but that ultimately; we make our own decisions informed by media. Bethany shows that though media potentially influences students' perceptions and educates them about religion and spirituality, ultimately students are not making their religious and spiritual ideological decisions in the vacuum of pop culture. Though media is informing and shaping students ideas and perceptions, it is not the ultimate influencer in how students make their decisions and form their understanding of the world around them.

Along with students learning from and making decisions and behavioral choices based on the media, the media also is affecting students' emotional processes. As religion and spirituality are topics rooted in knowledge and feelings, Ethan noted that as media affects his knowledge of other religions, it affects his emotions. Ethan said, "I get really into movies, so when bad stuff happens in the movies, I am really sad for those people and I get really into it." Ethan is not the only student who is emotionally affected by popular media. Quinn noted,

> There's a lot of times when I am watching movies and something will hit me. I watched the *Passion of the Christ* and I sobbed like a little girl, and I think that that movie really gave me a good visual understanding of what that time was like in Christ's life. Movies like *Last Temptation of Christ* really challenge my thought process a lot.

Here, not only is the media affecting Quinn and Ethan emotionally, it is affecting Quinn's overall understanding of the religion portrayed in the media, specifically in regards to religious practices, religious philosophies, and the experiences of religious leaders. Connecting media to students' emotions further connects the ideas depicted in the media to students because media potentially influences and shapes their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual understanding of the religious and spiritual practices and ideas.

The aforementioned identified themes of environment; media agenda and their representations of religion and spirituality; consciousness level and the viewer lens; media and college students' language, self perceptions, and feelings; and media as a learning tool and pop icons as relatable role models are all ways in which the media influences student learning. These themes are found in the environment wherein students learn about religion and spirituality and subsequently shape students understanding of religion, spirituality, and the way in which each student creates meaning for themselves.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The findings indicated that, dependant on amount of exposure, and the viewers' lenses, a media enriched environment influences students' understandings of religious and spiritual ideas. This is shown through how students incorporate language, directly referring to popular media, into their discussions about religion and spirituality. Furthermore, this is depicted in how students communicate their perceptions of other religions, based on exposure to representations of religious and spiritual practices through varying forms of media. Students also articulated that these representations are more impacting if the students can relate to the media, or the person giving the message.

Understanding the role media plays in the lives of students today is important. In synthesizing the data collected from this study with the literature and theoretical frameworks, I found four major theme areas. These include: 1) media as the source for students to find the authority to believe what they are practicing, 2) the process of learning about religion and spirituality from popular culture, 3) media influence on student belief structures, 4) the way in which students process through the information disseminated from popular media. These themed areas point to potential for media to be used as a source for students to critically reflect and dialogue with their peers, as well as serve as a stimulus to help students engage in questions that they may have. These implications for practices suggest that future research, in understanding the affect that popular media may have on the lives of college students today, is needed.

Popular culture plays a very large role in the lives of traditional-aged college students today. Whether students are talking about it in classes, at work, on the way home from a movie,

or with their peers over coffee, it is clear that popular culture is a regular part of the average college student's day. As popular media serves as a social outlet for students, it also serves as a learning tool. According to Romanowski (1996), movies are an "effectual learning format" that affects the attitudes of students, so much so, that it influences views on multiple social issues.

As shown through the findings, students today aren't just learning about the religion and spirituality from their families, churches, friends, and teachers; they are learning about it through major blockbuster movies, best selling novels, Internet blogs, and comic books. Students today live in a world where mass media presents the facts that serve as the most important and valid pieces of information. (Smith,1959). As American society has become that of a "plugged in" culture, our students are demanding their information in attractive, relatable, and "hip" new fashions. Students today would rather receive their news from the Daily Show, a 30-minute satire, just because Jon Stewart can "relate to students."

This concept of relating to media, also applies to the icons presenting the media. It is in relating to the film, or escaping in the film that draws people to the movies, and it is in attending movies where the media passively or actively shapes the viewers' understanding of the world around them (Cressey, 1934). Just as ideas about race, culture, war, economics, and environmentalism are represented in the media, so are ideas about religion and spirituality. Like Gerbner et al. (1978) suggests, this study indicates that media shapes viewers' ideas about the world around them, but goes further to suggest that it also has the potential to shape the audience's views on religion and spirituality, both their own and the ideologies and practices of "the other." It was shown that this shaping of ideas and this influence of ideals has the potential to directly affect students' intellectual, ethical, and spiritual development as they engage in

media and find authority figures, as well as their own authoritative voice through popular means.

As exemplified by the findings above, in addressing the first research question regarding if college students today learn about religion and spirituality from popular media, if so, what, where, and how, the students from this study self identified and demonstrated that they are finding authority figures in their family, friends, school, religious institution, and the media, and subsequently learning about religion and spirituality from them. Furthermore, students in this study indicate that they are learning about religion and spirituality, both subconsciously and consciously, through television, books, movies, actors, and music.

In addressing the second question, regarding if popular media is affecting a student's understanding of his or her own religion or spiritual identity, and is popular media influencing his or her perceptions of the religious and spiritual ideologies of others, I found that students are influenced by simple exposure to the media, but also by media that they can relate to. Lastly, popular media affects students' understanding of religion and spirituality as it pertains to their own identity and the identities of others and this is shown through the ways in which the participants incorporated information from the media into their everyday language and decision making processes concerning what to believe, practice, and not practice.

Where Students Find the Authority to Believe What they are Practicing

Today the topics of religion and spirituality are at the forefront of the minds of college students (Astin et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2004). Both studies have indicated that students are in fact, engaged in thinking about religion and spirituality. The findings from this study correlate to the findings from Johnson et al. (2004), and those from the HERI (2005) study in that students indicated that they thought about religion and spirituality when spending time with their peers,

family, or in class, however it takes it a step further and indicates that students are thinking about religion and spirituality while engaging in media. Based on the conversations in the interviews and focus groups, students seemed to have religion and spirituality readily on their minds, as they appeared to engage regularly in conversation with their peers about such topics, and they also consistently utilized popular media as a vehicle through which to express religious ideas with their peers.

Not only are religion and spirituality on the minds of college students today, but as Johnson et al. (2004) noted, this study affirmed that freshman and sophomore students pull away from their religion and spirituality just as upper-class students are thinking about it more and more. As shown through the upper-classmen participants in this study, some are thinking about religion and spirituality regularly, and using media as a means to engage in spiritual and religious questioning, whereas with the freshman participants, they not only had a more difficult time expressing themselves, but they oftentimes did not necessarily understand the influences media have on their own beliefs and practices.

In investigating where students are learning about religion and spirituality today and what has influence on students' religious beliefs and practices, students in the interviews and focus groups indicated that they learned about religion from a variety of sources, including peers, family, church, and the media. Though these students have articulated areas of influence, the breadth and impact of how these environments influence students identity development is not specified; however, students in this study suggested that they learned about religion and spirituality from the media as well as their family, friends, classes, and local religious institutions, a finding not noted in the HERI (Astin et al., 2005) study.

Students' potential reliance on media and popular icons as authorities supports Perry (1970) and Belenky et al. (1986), as students in this study rely on the voices of caring, trusted, relatable, and informed popular figures. However, in these experiences with popular media, students still need to make the decision of which they identify as an authority figure or an influence. As students identify authorities, they make judgments about the credibility of the source. In this study, some students indicated that it is important to take into consideration the agenda of those financing and creating the messages within the media. This supports Perry's (1970) notion that authority figures continue to have a significant influence on the lives of college students, but it goes further to support Gerbner et al. (1978) and Smith (1959) in that popular icons and varying forms of media serve as authorities, role models, and influences.

Aside from the traditional relationships noted by HERI (Astin et al., 2005), Perry (1970), and Belenky et al. (1986), this study also supports Cressey's (1934) research in that focus group and interview participants suggested having learned from celebrities. Cressey (1934) claims that the prestige of those in the movie plays a direct role in the influence it has over their audience. Participants from this study have implied that the prestige and relatable nature of the movie stars are important factors and influences in their lives . This study indicates that like Gerbner (1978) media is potentially serving as an authority in the lives of students today, even if they don't recognize it. Gerbner (1978) found that continued exposure to television influenced the perceptions students had of the world around them; this study also confirms this role and finds that media serves an authoritative role in the lives of students. Some of the participants suggested that the media plays an authoritative role in their lives because they gain a good amount of their information from television and movies, their feelings are normalized, and the use of media

references has shaped their language.

In recognizing the authority of the media in their own lives, participants related to movies because they challenged preconceptions about religions. They implied that movies served as an authoritative source and that through the films, they gained new understanding about religion and spirituality. Similarly, other participants understood how movies serve as a means of normalizing feelings, and an authority through which they could gain information and insight into religious and spiritual ideas represented.

This indicates that media serves as a learning tool through which students gain information, and because students may view pop icons as authorities, media potentially serves as a factor that influences students' identity development, and subsequently potentially affects students' intellectual, ethical, and spiritual development. As students are put into positions that challenge their thoughts and experiences, and as they are exposed to new environments such as media environment, their intellectual, ethical and faith identity development is challenged and influenced (Perry, 1979; Belenky, 1986; & Fowler, 1976). Accepting media as one of the many authoritative voices that influence students understanding of religion and spirituality, permits media to potentially have an indirect or a direct influence on students' knowledge of spiritual and religious ideas as well as if a spiritual identity progresses or digresses. Though it is not the sole influence, because media could affect students' perceptions and understanding of religion and spirituality, this could potentially play a role in the students' identity development.

Learning about Religion and Spirituality from Popular Culture

In recognizing the authoritative role of media in the lives of students today, Romanowski (1996) found that movies affect the attitudes of students while it influences views

on social issues. Moreover, when used as a learning tool inside the classroom, media offers

"models of behavior and shaped interpretations of life" while they reaffirm already existing

values and attitudes (Romanowski, 1996). This idea that media reaffirms existing values and

attitudes as well as serves as a learning tool in the classroom was apparent in the conversations

with some of the participants.

As indicated through the findings, participants were found to be using media as a forum

to analyze religious ideas, and doing so in a formalized classroom setting as well as informally.

Though it may not be on many occasions, the findings from this study indicate that religion and

spirituality are brought up within the classroom environment, and media serves as one of the

learning tools in that environment.

Just as media promotes learning inside the classroom, students gain new understandings

from media outside the classroom. The participants suggest that popular media plays an

influential role in the lives of students, even if it occurs subtly. Similarly, they note that the

media influences students consciously and subconsciously. In discussing the subconscious

effects of media, some of the participants indicated that subtle influence play into students'

perceptions of the surrounding society. Like Gerbner et al. (1978), Cressey (1934), and Parenti

(1992) students within this study indicated that media is subconsciously affecting student

perceptions of the world around them and, more specifically, of religion and spirituality.

In shaping and reaffirming existing perceptions and values, media play roles in students'

intellectual and ethical development. In reflecting on an episode of television, participants found

the episode to be an avenue through which one can learn more about two other religions. Some

of the students view episodes of television shows as credible or non-credible sources for

information. Some students found non-credible sources of media as credible sources, which depicted their inability to differentiate credible sources from non-credible sources, whereas other students distinguished one credible source from a non-credible source while weighing the validity of each source's claims.

Oftentimes, the students who had a hard time distinguishing credible sources of media from non-credible sources of media were unaware of this tension. The participants' suggestions that media affects student perceptions, and this behavior exhibited by the participants provides support for Gerbner's (1978) contention that regularly watching television encourages a homogeneity of ideas between viewers and the small screen. Gerbner (1978) called this phenomenon the "mainstreaming effect." Participants in this study appear to be both aware of and susceptible to the mainstreaming effect. In assessing the mainstreaming effect among the participants from this study, it is clear that the participants are not only aware of this effect, but that they themselves are affected by it.

This was shown in how a few students indicated that Scientology was that "crazy alien religion" Tom Cruise practiced while others indicated that Mel Gibson's religion was Anti-Semitic and over the edge. Many of those surveyed and interviewed recognized Kabala as that "red bracelet religion that Madonna practices," and that fictional characters Aladdin and Jasmine are members of the "terrorist" religion. These perceptions of the practices of these stars as they are portrayed through the news reports and on television shows are directly related to the media's representation of each. The aforementioned assumptions are a direct example of Gerbner's (1978) mainstreaming effect.

Gerbner's mainstreaming effect is clearly identified in how the participants identified

media's polarization of religions like Islam, Atheism, and Catholicism. The mainstreaming effect is manifest in stereotypes represented by the media. Some of the participants identified that people make assumptions about groups of people through the media, while other participants indicated that stereotypes come into play when people are making decisions about other religions in conjunction with the students' own. They further suggest that the mainstreaming effect, and the ideas associated with it, affect students' identity development in that the media they view as authoritative, shapes their understanding of religious and spiritual ideas in a negative, and occasionally positive way.

In comparing the projected religious identities of Atheism, Agnosticism, Catholicism, and Islam with their own, one of the participants suggests that the media claims that these religions are religions that are representative of something one should rebel against and separate one's self from. Since media has been established as a valid authority by some, this depiction of these religions will have a negative effect on the students' understanding of the religions' practices and ideologies and this subsequently affects the students' intellectual, ethical, and spiritual development because students are selecting what it is that he or she wants to believe and practice or not believe or practice. As the media is affecting students' intellectual and ethical development in this way, it is because the students identified authority figures who are providing positive, negative, or neutral information to the student. This will either help them to understand the greater role that that particular religion has in the world, and in their own belief system, or it will provide negative information that could hinder or halt a student's understanding of a particular religious belief. This then affects students' spiritual development in that they are basing their belief structure and understanding of other faiths on a singular representation or

perspective.

The findings from this study indicated that media potentially influences students subconsciously. As media serves as a learning tool both in and outside of the classroom, it also affects the way in which students communicate their feelings, ideas, beliefs, and understanding of their own religious and spiritual practices, as well as the religious and spiritual practices of others. Parks (1986) says that students develop the ability to articulate their life experiences through their use of language and narrative and that an individual defines his or her perspective in the context of another person's perspective. She further suggests that while developing the ability to articulate their life experiences, they do so through their use of language. Day (2001) supports this notion and claims that speech, language, and narrative should serve as the focal point for understanding faith development. These perspectives reinforce the role that communication plays in Perry (1970), Belenky et al., (1986), and Gerbner (1978) theories.

The use of language is one of the areas that popular culture has affected students today, specifically when talking about God. In articulating their ideas about God, the participants used popular movies and actors to describe what they understood to be the attributes of God. Students specifically referred to actors and actresses that have play God in movies, and they utilized ideas, concepts, and images from film to articulate their own understanding of their religious or spiritual perspective. This is showing that students are taking the images that they see on TV and in the movies, and they are applying it to their everyday lives, in their everyday language, and their everyday understanding of who or what God is. Taking popular culture and incorporating it into their everyday language and practices shows that student are drawn to certain films, actors, ideas, and representations. It also shows that each of these forms of media in some way reaches

and connects with students. How students incorporate and use language from media blurs the lines between the learning *tool* (movies, music, TV) and what the learning tool is *teaching* (religious and spiritual ideas). Like Gerbner's et al. (1978) ideas of blurring, blending, and bending reality, students are also blurring, blending, and bending their ideas of religion and spirituality with the ideas and language used in the media.

Media Influence on Students' Belief Structures

Like the literature reflected, and as this study supported, one of the first things that draws a student to the movies, the television set, or to a magazine rack, is the feature of famous faces, directors, and or companies that are affiliated with the media. Cressey (1934) indicated that in order to gain audience interest, the media selects alluring plotlines and famous faces. He states that it is the drawing power of the stars within the film that acquire a large audience base. It is in these famous faces that students today are finding authority figures and role models that affect students' everyday practices and beliefs. The participants indicated that some stars serve as trusted figures, and because of this, it is more likely that someone would model their behavior. In modeling these behaviors, students imply that these icons are authority figures and that subsequently, pop icons are influencing students' ideas, perceptions, and understanding of the religious and spiritual ideas around them. This influence of their ideas, and the shaping of these ideas plays a role in how students develop intellectually, ethically, and in their faith identity development. This is because how students are informed intellectually, ethically, or spiritually shapes how he or she understands his or her own morality, intellectualism, ethics and spirituality.

Pop icons are potentially influencing the intellectual, ethical and faith identity development in that the iconic figures that the students deem authoritative lead students to

believe one certain idea over another, challenge existing ideas by presenting students with new information, and normalize and reinforce the current ideals that students hold to be true. Though the potential for influence for each of the participants was dependant on viewer lens, and the stages of intellectual and ethical development that each participant was in, the challenge and support provided by the media also provided the forum for a students' intellectual, ethical, and spiritual identity to potentially shift.

The effect that the media has on the participants' belief structures is correlated to the specific behaviors modeled within the media. Smith (1959) claims that students model the behaviors of those represented in popular culture. This imitation of the behavior of the stars and other producers of popular media potentially affects the identity development of students while he or she is engaging with the media. Perry (1970, Belenky et al., (1986), and Fowler, (1981) suggested that while moving through stages, a person will move from an imitative phase reliant on imagination, on to modeling the behavior of an authority.

Furthermore, Blumer (1933) noted that one of the major pieces needed for media to have a lasting effect on students, was measuring the level of interest that a viewer had in the media. He noted that the viewers' interest in the topic played a large role in how much the movie affected them. Zukin and Snyder (1984) also found that varying interest levels determined the individual's tendencies to absorb the information projected by the media. Participants in this study supported findings of these studies, as they indicated that the appeal of the media, and the connection they have with the ideas depicted play a significant role in determining their interest,. Because of the interest in the media, it was shown that it is more likely that media affects the students' behaviors, decision-making processes, and perceptions of religious and spiritual

ideologies and practices if the student can relate to the media, or the popular icon that has a role in developing the media.

How Students Process through the Information Disseminated from Popular Media

After students learn about religion and spirituality from popular culture, they process the information in different ways. Some students talk with their friends, some students adapt to or change their behaviors, and some students absorb the information and don't do anything with it. The different avenues of processing this information resonate with Perry's (1970) and Belenky's et al. (1986) theories of intellectual and ethical development because it discusses the role that communication, authority, and interpersonal relationships have in developing a student's identity.

Through observing a group of students interact with one another after they had finished watching a television show together, it was clear that students talk about religion and spirituality with their friends after being confronted with it through the media. They ask each other questions, and they relate the information back to their own lives. In discussing the media with their peers, they are permitting their peers to serve as authority figures in that particular discussion because they are utilizing their peers' perspectives in changing, reinforcing, or sustaining his or her own ideas about what was presented. This relates with Perry's (1970) and Belenky's et al. (1986) ideas of how peers play a role in a student's identity development but also, in how student's work through understanding multiple perspectives, from multiple authorities.

As the literature and observations showed, religion and spirituality are represented in the media. As this study also showed, media serves as an influencer that potentially shapes the

intellectual, ethical, and spiritual identities of students today. Because of this, it is clear that religion as it is represented in the media could affect students' perceptions of and understanding of religion and spirituality as it pertains to their own beliefs and practices and the beliefs and practices of others. This study found that media exposes, and potentially influences, teaches and shapes students' ideas about religion and spirituality. It also found that media represents religion and spirituality in a way that reinforces spiritual development within students today because media serves as an authority in the lives of students today. As an authority, the media play roles in influencing the varying identity development that students are experiencing while in college.

Implications for Practice

Though this study is a small scale and limited due to the small number of participants, the findings from this study support Gerbner et al. (1978), Cressey (1934), Romanowski (1996), and Parenti (1992) in their claims that media affects students and serves as an a learning tool. This study reiterates that it would be beneficial for faculty to incorporate media in classroom more frequently as students both learn from and relate to media. Utilizing media as a form of teaching concepts would keep the students interested and engaged while encouraging the students to bring their "in the classroom" learning into their "out of the classroom" experiences.

Popular media as an educational tool used in the curriculum would be most effective in liberal arts classes such as religion, English, general humanities, and history classes. Using media in the classroom should be supplemented with intentional discussion and reflective writing. In using media in the classroom, this teaching technique could benefit many religious studies courses in that it provides the opportunity to help students visualize the religious practices, break stereotypes of religious practitioners, and open the door to a common ground for

dialogue. The use of popular media is a way to make concepts and ideas relatable to students so that they themselves can think about complex concepts and ideas in a familiar way. Though this may not work for every course, or for every faculty member, it does take into account different learning and teaching styles in the classroom.

Another implication for in the classroom learning is incorporating religion and spirituality into the discussion and assignments where possible and appropriate. As many teachers are hesitant to discuss religion and spirituality in the classroom, it is a topic that holds students' attention. To successfully incorporate these dialogues, a faculty or staff member should create an open and safe environment for students to express their religious perspectives, while keeping the classroom an academic setting that does not support one perspective over another. As this is a fine line to walk, having assignments and conversations that relate to the topic of religion and spirituality are small steps toward incorporating religion and spirituality into the classroom setting. Using film, television, and books that depict positive and appropriate representations of specific religions, spiritual practices, and philosophical ideologies can also facilitate this type of educational conversation.

Along with faculty members, student affairs professionals and campus organizations can utilize this same approach. As student leaders, campus groups, and staff on campus incorporate media into programming efforts, this could boost attendance at programs and bring new students to each event and or organization. Popular culture is a common, accessible way to make students feel comfortable while experiencing new things. Moreover, the use of media could be very beneficial to many religiously and philosophically affiliated organizations such as Hillel, Campus Crusade, Self Knowledge Symposium, and other Student Unions because the media

makes religious and philosophical ideologies accessible, relatable, and understandable to students.

However, as staff, faculty, and student leaders are incorporating popular culture into the curriculum and programming agendas, it is important to provide the appropriate resources for students to process the information depicted through the media. Whether these resources come in forms of supplemental books, reflection journals, continued programming, group meetings, or one-on-one meetings, it is important to challenge and support students as they are exposed to religion in the media and as they act on the information provided to them.

It was shown that authority figures like professors, parents, popular icons, and some peers play an important role in students' multiple identity developments. While students are experiencing identity development in college, it is important to provide students with an authority figure that has the ability to connect with, relate to, and engage in dialogue with students about religion, spirituality, and popular media. Understanding that media is influential in students understanding of religion and spirituality, and subsequently plays a role in students' spiritual development, provides an opportunity for campus leaders, counselors, faculty, and staff to engage in discussion with students as their spiritual identities are challenged and supported through the media.

The media provide a common ground for discussion when it comes to religion and spirituality. Whether a representation is accurate or inaccurate, the media provides a common language for faculty and staff to communicate with students about the religious and spiritual ideas presented in the media. This common language is important as it serves our students in creating the environment for students to participate in a holistic education concerning religion

and spirituality. Using media to reach students spiritually also provides the opportunity for faculty and staff to reach, teach, and engage students in a more personal, meaningful, and spiritual way. This could help students to understand their religious and spiritual perspective as well as the religious and spiritual perspectives and ideas of others.

Helping students to understand their own religious perspective, as well as the religious perspective of others is related to how students understand, perceive, come to know, and synthesize information, distributed from the media, together. This study supports Gerbner et al. (1986) but goes further to say that as students' perceptions are potentially shaped by the media, this is because students are finding authority figures within popular media, and furthermore, that these authority figures have the potential to influence students' spiritual development. This correlates with Perry's (1970) and Belenky's et al, (1986) theories in identifying authority figures, and how authority figures affect student identity development, and in this case students' spiritual identity development.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, a larger and broader sample population should be used because it will assess if religion in the media affects students from varying backgrounds at all or in different ways. It is also recommended that there be multiple focus groups held as well as multiple meetings and interviews with those students participating in the interview portion of the research. Multiple focus groups would provide the opportunity to see multiple perspectives from many different people, while providing information about how students interact with their peers when discussing religion and spirituality. Participant reflection journals would also provide an opportunity for students to navigate through their thoughts and reflect on if or how religion and

the media affects them. Including these components would provide more information over a longer period of time, allowing for a deeper assessment of the experiences of each participant.

A second recommendation for further research is to explore the use of social interaction theories, faith development theories, and other media, communication, and intellectual and ethical development theories. The further exploration of these theories could bring a broader understanding of student development as they move through their college experience, communicate, and engage with media while interacting with authority figures and navigating varying personal relationships. They could also inform this area of research by providing another lens through which to examine the role of media in the lives of students today. They could also help to assess the stages of development that students are in while assessing if media affects students in certain stages of their development, rather than in all stages of their development.

An opportunity for continued research in this area is in measuring the direct effects that popular culture has on students today. This could be done by measuring the actual affects of the media verses students' own perceptions of the role media plays in their lives as this study has. This would bring less bias and more thorough understanding of the actual role that media is playing in the development of students. Such an approach could prove to be more conclusive than participants articulating their perceived understanding of media's role.

Another considerations that should be navigated through future research is that in the area of student learning styles, developmental level, emotional intelligence, and other intelligence. Student learning and identification of authority figures, as well as how students incorporate media into their own lives could be linked with students' learning styles, level of development, intelligence, and general exposure to the world around them. As Perry (1970) and Belenky et al.

(1986) have identified how students understand authority, this developmental level potentially impacts how students incorporate media into their lives. In understanding that students may incorporate media into their lives, it is also important to take into consideration how students learn and if media is an effective learning tool for some rather than others. If so, does one's learning style have an influence on the affect that media may or may not have one one's faith development.

Lastly, to gain another perspective on this topic, a quantitative research project could bring statistical, generalizable findings to the table, as well as indicate more areas for future research. This is important because a quantitative analysis could help to identify further implications for practice as well as implications for continued research and investigation.

Conclusion

The research conducted has shown that religion and spirituality are in the forefront of students' minds. As students engage with everyday media they are learning and shaping their values and belief systems through the teachings of those they themselves deem authoritative. As some students are learning actively, and others are learning passively from media, it is clear that popular culture is influencing students on multiple developmental levels. These levels include intellectual, ethical, moral, and spiritual. This study serves as a starting point for dialogue among researchers, practitioners, faculty and staff who are interested in engaging and educating students intellectually, ethically and spiritually. This study serves as a proposal for more research and investigation on the topic of religion in the media, the media and students, and the overall influences on students' spiritual development.

As a student's religious and spiritual identity are shaped throughout his or her

relationships, environment, and education, it is important to be aware of the information shared with each student while the he or she is exposed to or engaged in that experience. As media can play a role in each of those experiences, it can also aid in shaping the thoughts, ideas, and belief structures that students develop while attending college. As educators, it is important that we understand the multifaceted role that media plays in the lives of our students, and it is more important that we understand the role that it plays in their overall identity development, specifically our students' religious and spiritual identity as this identity shapes many of their attitudes, morals, ethics, and decision-making processes.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Focus Group Instructions

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this Focus group today. Before we begin, I would like to give you the opportunity to read and sign the consent form.

[After form is collected] As you know from reading the consent form, this study is intended to shed light on where students are learning about religion and spirituality and the role that popular media may or may not play.

This conversation is strictly confidential and care will be taken to exclude all names and identifying characteristics/information from the data. It is important that you do not use any names during this focus group as their privacy is important as well. I would like your permission to record our conversation on tape so that I can more accurately reflect your thoughts and experiences.

This conversation will focus on your perceptions of spirituality, religion, and faith in your life and in the media. There are no right or wrong answers, and you are welcome to answer questions you feel comfortable discussing and passing on any that you would rather not discuss.

During the Discussion, please be respectful and remember that all information, opinions, and ideas discussed here are confidential and that you must not discuss others' comments outside of this focus group.

Focus Group Survey 1

Focus Group: _____

Are you Religious, Spiritual, or both? Why or Why not?

Do you identify as any specific religion? Why or Why not?

How often do you think about Religion/Spirituality? Why?

What do you think about…
     Agnosticism
     Atheism
     Buddhism
     Christianity
     Hinduism
     Islam
     Judaism
     Paganism
     Scientology
     Spirituality
     Wicca

Name as many Books, Movies, Television Shows, and Songs that touch on Religion/Spirituality.

What influence do you feel media has on people's personal philosophies?

How do you think Media represents the following…
     Agnosticism
     Atheism
     Buddhism
     Christianity
     Hinduism
     Islam
     Judaism
     Paganism
     Scientology
     Spirituality
     Wicca

Are there any Religious/Spiritual groups are incorrectly portrayed in the media? If so, How?

Are you offended by any of the portrayals of a specific Religious/Spiritual group?

Do you think media is an effective tool for educating people about Religious/Spirituality? Why?

Focus Group Survey 2

Focus Group: _____

After seeing the clips, do you feel that media influences ideologies? If so, how and what specifically?

How did the scenes represent religion and spirituality?

Commercials

Fight Club

The Matrix

O Brother Where art Thou?

Movie Trailers

Montage

Do you think media affects people before it is pointed out to them, or does it have to be pointed out to them in order for a person to be affected?

In seeing the beginning montage, what stuck out at you, what did it make you think about?

General Comments:

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview today. Before we begin, I would like to give you the opportunity to read and sign the consent form.

[After form is collected] As you know from reading the consent form, this study is intended to shed light on where students are learning about religion and spirituality and the role that popular media may or may not play.

This conversation is strictly confidential and care will be taken to exclude all names and identifying characteristics/information from the data. It is important that you do not use any names during this interview as their privacy is important as well. I would like your permission to record our conversation on tape so that I can more accurately reflect your thoughts and experiences.

This conversation will focus on your perceptions of spirituality, religion, and faith in your life and in the media. There are no right or wrong answers, and you are welcome to answer questions you feel comfortable discussing and passing on any that you would rather not discuss.

Participants Past Religious and Spiritual Experiences
1. Tell me about your religious/spiritual background then and now…
2. How do you define religion, spirituality, faith, God, and beliefs?
    a) Are there attributes that you assign to God? If so, what are they?
    b) Does God play a role in your faith? If so, what is it?
3. Do you ask yourself questions about your religion, spirituality, faith, ideas about God or beliefs? If so, what are they?
4. Does religion, spirituality, faith, ideas about God and beliefs play a role in your daily life? What role?

Where Participants learn and connect with others about Religion and Spirituality
5. Have your religion, spirituality, faith, ideas about God or beliefs changed since attending college? How?
6. Where or how do you learn about your religion, spirituality, faith, ideas about God and beliefs?
7. Who do you look to for spiritual and or religious direction or insight? Why?
8. Is there a significant time in your life where you felt spiritually connected to someone, something?
9. Is there a moment that has had the greatest impact on your religion or spirituality that you would like to share? Explain?

Participants Understanding of Popular Culture and Religion and Spirituality
10. Does popular culture play a role in your religion, spirituality, faith, ideas about God and beliefs? If so, What role?
    a) Does popular culture change the way you view others' or your own religion, spirituality, faith, ideas about God and beliefs? If so, how?
11. Is there a film, television show, commercial, book, etc that you feel represents your religion

appropriately? Inappropriately?

12. What does this picture/object make you feel, or think about?
13. Did these prompt any other thoughts, ideas or opinions that you would like to discuss?
14. Is there something else that you thought we were going to talk about?
15. Can you identify where the following images are from? What are their significance?

Religion in the Media

1. Have you seen religion, spirituality, and faith, or God represented in media? If so, how?
2. Do you think that religion, spirituality, faith, and God are represented in the media fairly or unfairly? Explain
3. Is there one ideology or idea that is represented appropriately or inappropriately? Which and Why or Why not?
4. Do you feel that your religious, spiritual, and or faith identity are represented appropriately though the media? Why or Why not?
5. What do you think the media says about Agnosticism, Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Paganism, Spirituality, and Wicca?
6. How many hours a day would you say you engaged in media before our first interview? After?
7. Can you identify where the following images are from? What is their significance?

The Participants thoughts on what and or who is most influential on students religious ideas

8. In college, who do you think is the most influential person on a college student's spiritual identity?
9. What do you think about Madonna, Mel Gibson, and Tom Cruise and how their practice of their religion is depicted? Why?

The Participants Understanding of other students' ideas about Religion and the Media

10. Do you think this is something that students notice? Understand? Care about?
11. Do you think that religion, spirituality, faith, and God represented in the media affects college students understanding of other religions? His or her own? How?

Appendix D

General Survey Questions

What is your age? _____ **What is your gender?** _____ **Classification?** _____

What is your race? _____ **What is your religion?** _____ **Hometown?** _____

Do you identify as religious, spiritual or both? Please explain.

Where have you learned about religion, spirituality, and God? Please explain

Have you learned about religion and spirituality since attending college? Have your own ideas and thoughts changed since college? If so, how?
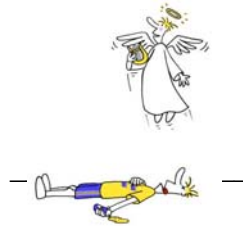
Do you learn about religion, spirituality, and or God in the classroom? If so, how?

Is religion, spirituality, faith, and God a part of popular culture (movies, TV, books, music, magazines etc.)? Please explain

What religion are the following people?

_____ _____ _____ _____ _____

What are the following images advertising and what are they representing?

_____

From what are the following images taken and what are they representing?

_____ _____ _____ _____

_____

What is the significance of the following images, Do you know where each is from?

_____
_____

What is the significance of the following statements?

"Most students get their news from John Stewart"

_____
_____

Who said the following statement? Is it significant, why or why not?

"If I rap about Jesus my record won't get played"

_____

List as many movies, television shows, songs, videos, magazines etc. that relate to religion and spirituality.
_____

Appendix E

North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
SUBMISSION FOR NEW STUDIES

Title of Project: Religion and Spirituality: How and where students find authority in popular culture

Principal Investigator   _Jennifer Ofstein_   Department   Adult and Community College
                                                                                                  Education

Source of Funding (**required** information): Jennifer Ofstein

(if externally funded include sponsor name and university account number)

Campus Address (Box Number) 1112 Pullen Hall Box 7315, Raleigh NC, 27695

Email: Jennifer_Ofstein@ncsu.edu   Phone: 919 515 1846   Fax:

RANK: ☐ Faculty
         ☒ Student: ☐ Undergraduate; ☒ Masters; or ☐ PhD
         ☐ Other (specify): _____

As the principal investigator, my signature testifies that I have read and understood the University Policy and Procedures for the Use of Human Subjects in Research. I assure the Committee that all procedures performed under this project will be conducted exactly as outlined in the Proposal Narrative and that any modification to this protocol will be submitted to the Committee in the form of an amendment for its approval prior to implementation.

Principal Investigator:

Jennifer Ofstein
(typed/printed name)   (signature)   (date)

*As the faculty sponsor, my signature testifies that I have reviewed this application thoroughly and will oversee the research in its entirety. I hereby acknowledge my role as the **principal investigator of record**.*

Faculty Sponsor:
Alyssa Bryant
(typed/printed name)   (signature)   (date)

PLEASE COMPLETE IN DUPLICATE AND DELIVER, ALONG WITH A PROPOSAL NARRATIVE, TO:
Institutional Review Board, Box 7514, or email as an attachment to debra_paxton@ncsu.edu
****
****
For SPARCS office use only

Reviewer Decision (Expedited or Exempt Review)
         ☐   Exempt   ☐   Approved   ☐   Approved pending modifications   ☐ Table

Expedited Review Category: ☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5   ☐ 6   ☒ 7   ☐ 8a   ☐ 8b   ☐ 8c   ☐ 9

INTRODUCTION

1. **Briefly describe <u>in lay language</u> the purpose of the proposed research and why it is important.**

   Through the conceptual frameworks of William Perry (1999), Mary Belenky, et al. (1997), and George Gerbner (1978), I will be examining the means through which students learn about religion and spirituality from popular culture and its subsequent mediums. The aforementioned theories used as conceptual frameworks discuss how men and women develop intellectually and ethically. It also discusses how people who are exposed to certain forms of media interpret that same media and incorporate it into their ethical and intellectual development.

   The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions:
   1. Do college students today learn about religion and spirituality from popular media, if so, what and how?
   2. Where are students finding the authority to believe what they are practicing, or not practicing?
   3. What, if anything, from popular media has influence over students' belief structures?
   4. How are students processing through the information disseminated to them through varying forms of popular media?

   This is important because it will aid in understanding how and where students are learning about Religion and Spirituality, as well as provide a foundation for future research. Most importantly, this will provide a starting point from which educators may begin to understand students' faith development and ways in which these educators can aid in students' religious and spiritual education and development while in college. As religion and spirituality are becoming increasingly more important to students today, it is also important that the students' educators be prepared to help students through their religious and spiritual quests.

2. **If student research, indicate whether for a course, thesis, dissertation, or independent research.**

   Masters Thesis

SUBJECT POPULATION

1. **How many subjects will be involved in the research?**

   There will be a total of 54 traditional aged college students participants.
   6 participants involved in two individual 2-hour interviews
   12 participants involved in one 2-hour focus group comprised of 6 members in each group
   36 participants involved in a two-page survey taking roughly 30 minutes

2. **Describe how subjects will be recruited. Please provide the IRB with any recruitment materials that will be used.**

   Resident Advisors, Religious Organizations, and Hall Directors will refer students to me. There will also be flyers posted in academic buildings, residence halls, student centers, restrooms, and posting boards around campus. E-mails will also be sent out to campus organizations inquiring about interest. The flyer to be posted is enclosed.

   The e-mail sent to organizations is below:

   Dear Student Leader!

   I am writing to personally invite you to participate in an important assessment project here at NC State. My name is Jennifer Ofstein and I am conducting a research project on religion,

spirituality, and popular culture. As a participant you will be a part of a study that will advance research by providing valuable information about student's spirituality, religious ideologies, and the role media plays in students' identity development. If you are interested in discussing religion, spirituality, and popular culture than this is the opportunity for you! You could participate in one of three ways: individual interviews, a focus group, or a survey. If you would like to participate, please contact Jennie Ofstein at Jennifer_Ofstein@ncsu.edu.

I am looking forward to hearing from you!
Jennie Ofstein

3. List specific eligibility requirements for subjects (or describe screening procedures), including those criteria that would exclude otherwise acceptable subjects.

All participants must fall in the age range 18 - 26 years and they must attend NC State, UNC, or Duke University. Participants will then be selected on first come first serve (18 from each institution) basis so as to not exclude any particular groups and as to not skew any of the participant involvement by being hand selected by the investigator.

4. Explain any sampling procedure that might exclude specific populations.

The students must be between the ages of 18 and 26 years old because this is the age range of traditional aged college students and is the sample population most involved with popular media.

The students must attend NC State, Duke, or UNC because these are the three institutions wherein the study is taking place as it is on a small scale. These institutions each offer different educational styles, which will help in putting the students into context of their environment, teaching styles of each of the institutions

5. Disclose any relationship between researcher and subjects - such as, teacher/student; employer/employee.

The subjects could potentially live on the campus or in the residence hall where the researcher is currently residing as the hall director. The participants could also serve as Resident Advisors on the campus or in the Hall where the researcher is currently residing as the hall director. This means that there is an opportunity for the researcher to supervise or indirectly supervise any of the participants who attend NC State but the researcher will have no prior relationship to students at Duke or UNC.

6. Check any vulnerable populations included in study:

X Other vulnerable population.

If any of the above are used, state the necessity for doing so.

Some of the students participating in the study may be students on the campus where the researcher is a low level administrator and they may also live in the building where the researcher is an administrator and potentially they could work directly or indirectly for the researcher.

Other vulnerable populations include students who are adjusting to college, moving through varying developmental stages, struggling with authority, struggling within their own religious,

faith, spirituality, and or personal ideologies and philosophies.

Please indicate the approximate age range of the minors to be involved.
No minors will be involved.

PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED

1. **In lay language, describe completely all procedures to be followed during the course of the experimentation. Provide sufficient detail so that the Committee is able to assess potential risks to human subjects.**

   Surveys: 36 students will fill out a 2 page survey about religion, spirituality, faith, beliefs, popular culture, religious and spiritual leaders as well as where students could potentially learn about religion and spirituality (ie: in the classroom, family, peer group etc.)

   Focus Groups: 12 students will participate in 2 separate focus groups (6 in each group). These focus groups will have a pre-survey and a post-survey (very brief). Each focus group will watch movie or television clips and discuss the clip in detail about what it is saying about varying religions and spiritual identities as well as how they are interpreting it. Also, during the focus group, students will participate in an activity using magazine and newspaper images to identify religious representations etc. and discuss the significance of the image (if it has one) as well as the role that each play in the participants lives as well as how they think the media influences college students in regards to religion and spirituality. The sessions will provide a venue for students to express their understanding of how popular culture and religion are seen by college students today, as well as if they play a role within the college, as well as the purposes and people it serves, and how responsive the students are to the media's messages. This will also allow students to reflect on personal experiences however they are mostly intended to gauge general perceptions of the culture that students encounter.

   Individual Interview 1: This interview will serve as an "introduction" interview. Learning about the participants religious and spiritual identity, family background, peer group, academic goals, life goals, experiences throughout their lives before and after college, as well as their initial ideas about religion, spirituality, ideas about religious and spiritual authority, understanding of where they initially have learned about religion and spirituality, as well as the role popular media is currently playing in the participants life, and his or her understanding o religion and spirituality in the media. This interview will also provide an initial and unfiltered reaction to thinking about religion, spirituality, popular media, and the actual role (if any) it plays in their own life and that of other college students.

   Journaling between Interviews: Reflect on how media plays a role in their daily lives, images, comments, representations that they note or hear people discussing, general thoughts as the participant has been thinking about the initial interview, follow up responses to questions raised in Interview 1, any feelings or beliefs that want to be noted and discussed after the topic of religion and spirituality is brought up and explored, chronicling feelings, questions, interactions, etc.

   Individual Interview 2: This interview will serve as a follow up interview to the 1st interview and the journaling that the participants will do. This will provide the opportunity for the participant to discuss his or her thoughts since the initial interview, follow up on questions raised, discuss behaviors, images, representations of religious and spiritual images as well as any noted authority that each participant may or may not have noticed. This interview will also provide the researcher the opportunity to ask any follow up questions, and more in depth questions about the participants experience as they have had a longer opportunity to think about their religion, spirituality, and ideas in context of popular culture.

2. **How much time will be required of each subject?**

   Each participant will be a part of the Survey, one focus group, or two individual interviews.

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The Survey should not take more than 30 minutes for each participant
The focus group should take roughly 2 hours (2 different groups made up of 6 people)
Each individual Interview will take 2 hours with two hours of journaling between the interviews (totaling 6 hours for the participant)

POTENTIAL RISKS

1. **State the potential risks (physical, psychological, financial, social, legal or other) connected with the proposed procedures and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.**

    The potential risks involved with this study are potentially playing a part in a student's spiritual and religious quest. This is because religion and spirituality are personal topics, some participants may be uneasy about discussing some of the questions in the interview protocols.

    Participants will be advised that they can choose to not answer any questions with which they are uncomfortable and still remain a participant in the study and in order to minimize the risks, I will ensure a safe environment for the participant, ensure their privacy (change their names etc in the reports) and I will have resources on site to provide for the student. Resources such as locations of varying religious and spiritual institutions, contact numbers for religious leaders in Raleigh, contact information for the counseling center on campus, as well as names of helpful books for supplemental reading.

2. **Will there be a request for information which subjects might consider to be personal or sensitive (e.g. private behavior, economic status, sexual issues, religious beliefs, or other matters that if made public might impair their self-esteem or reputation or could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability)?**

    Yes, students will be asked to discuss his or her religious, spiritual and faith related beliefs as well as discuss where, how and who has impacted their spiritual, religious and faith identity. This should not place the students at risk of criminal or civil liability.

    a. **If yes, please describe and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.**
    N/A

3. **Could any of the study procedures produce stress or anxiety, or be considered offensive, threatening, or degrading? If yes, please describe why they are important and what arrangements have been made for handling an emotional reaction from the subject.**

    Some of the questions asked, and images shared could produce stress or anxiety and some of the pictures may be seen as offensive. These images include images from movies like The Matrix, Fight Club. What Dreams May Come, Joan of Arcadia, Dogma, Family Guy, Superman, and music videos such as Jesus Walks, and Like a Prayer. Some of these scenes are slightly violent as where others pose thoughtful questions and also represent religions and spiritualities in a light that may not be respectful. In preparing for this, I will make sure each student is aware of the content they are about to see and make sure that they are still willing and prepared to participate in the study. Should a student feel uncomfortable to the point of needing to stop, we will stop the interview or focus group and contact any resources that may be wanted by the participant or needed by the researcher.

    Discussing one's own religion, spirituality, faith, and ideas about God can be an emotional time. Discussing representations of one's own religion, spirituality, faith, and ideas about God can be as equally hard. These are important areas to discuss because the information assessed from these conversations will aid in understanding how media affects the ideas, perceptions, understanding of religion and spirituality while media further represents people in either an appropriate or inappropriate light.

In trying to understand where students are learning about religion, spirituality, faith, and ideas about God as well as what students find authoritative, it is important to understand what is challenging them and making them feel philosophically uncomfortable (or not).

4. **How will data be recorded and stored?**

Data will be recorded via a digital voice recorder and then transferred onto a computer for transcription. Transcription will then take place on the same computer and the files will be kept in a protected database on a password-protected computer. Any hard copies will be kept in file folders in the researchers office in a locked filing cabinet.

a. **How will identifiers be used in study notes and other materials?**
Participants will be given different names and participant numbers as to keep the identity of the participant anonymous. The Transcripts will have pseudonyms used instead of the actual participants names. The identifying information will be kept on a hard and soft copy in the researchers office (both on a password protected computer and in a locked filing cabinet)

b. **How will reports will be written, in aggregate terms, or will individual responses be described?**

The reports will be written in both aggregate terms and in individual responses. The Interviews and portions of the focus groups will have individual information provided in the findings as where the information gathered from the surveys will be discussed as a group instead of on an individual basis.

5. **If audio or videotaping is done how will the tapes be stored and how/when will the tapes be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.**

There will be audio recording of the focus groups as well as of the individual interviews. The recordings will be kept on file (digitally) on a disk for 1 year and will be destroyed thereafter by erasing the data. Until the destroy date, the disks will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office.

6. **Is there any deception of the human subjects involved in this study? If yes, please describe why it is necessary and describe the debriefing procedures that have been arranged.**

No.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS
This does not include any form of compensation for participation.

1. **What, if any, direct benefit is to be gained by the subject? If no direct benefit is expected, but indirect benefit may be expected (knowledge may be gained that could help others), please explain.**

The indirect benefit gained from participating in this study is in the opportunity to explore one's own spiritual and religious identity and thoughts, discuss one's own ideals, and begin/continue to look at the world around each participant in a different light. By participating in this study students will have the opportunity to share their religious and spiritual thoughts as well as have the opportunity to see what else is out there.

COMPENSATION
1. **Explain compensation provisions if the subject withdraws prior to completion of the study.**

There will be no penalties for a participant withdrawing from the study as it is voluntary.

2. **If class credit will be given, list the amount and alternative ways to earn the same amount of credit.**

There will be no class credit given for participation in this study

COLLABORATORS

1. **If you anticipate that additional investigators (other than those named on Cover Page) may be involved in this research, list them here indicating their institution, department and phone number.**

There will be no other researchers or investigators.

2. **Will anyone besides the PI or the research team have access to the data (including completed surveys) from the moment they are collected until they are destroyed?**

No

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. **If a questionnaire, survey or interview instrument is to be used, attach a copy to this proposal.**

Included:
Focus Group Questions
Survey
Interview 1,2, and Journaling Questions
Advertisement

2. **Attach a copy of the informed consent form to this proposal.**

Included Below

3. **Please provide any additional materials that may aid the IRB in making its decision.**

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

<u>Title of Study:</u> Religion and Spirituality: How and Where Students Find Authoity in Popular Culture

<u>Principal Investigator</u>   Jennifer B. Ofstein   <u>Faculty Sponsor (if applicable)</u> Dr. Alyssa Bryant

We are asking you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the role that popular media plays in the religious and spiritual lives of college students today.

INFORMATION
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in either a survey, focus group with 5 other participants, or in 2 individual interviews. The information gathered from the focus groups and individual interviews will be employed in the study. The amount of time required of you is dependant upon the activity.

Participants will participant in ONE of the following activities:
1. <u>Survey</u> (total 30 minutes): a two-page survey that will take roughly 30 minutes to complete.
2. <u>Focus Group</u> (total 2 hours): a two-hour group meeting with 5 other participants. During this meeting, you will fill out a brief questionnaire before and after the meeting. During the meeting, you and the other 5 participants will watch clips from movies, television shows, commercials, music videos etc. and discuss the content of each of the pieces of media.
3. <u>Interviews</u> (total 6 hours)
   Interview 1 – This will take roughly 2 hours. During this time you will be asked questions pertaining to your religious and spiritual identity as well as questions about your experiences at college in relation to how to you identify religiously

   Reflection Writings – This will take place between the Interviews. During this time, you will reflect on your experiences since the first interview as well as note any significant behaviors that you yourself have observed about yourself, peers, family, media etc.

   Interview 2- This will take roughly 2 hours. The participant will be asked follow up questions to his or her experiences from the first interview as well as from his or her journaling experiences. This interview will be a little more discussion based as the participant will have been thinking about the questions asked during the interview 1 and journaling exercises.

RISKS
During this study you will be asked to reflect upon your religious, spiritual, and faith experiences. This may cause some discomfort as you may be asked difficult questions about your religious, spiritual or faith identity and experiences. I will make sure that there are resources available to you, should you need to talk with a counselor or a local religious leader of any faith background. You will also be asked to watch portions of movies, television shows, and commercials as well as to listen to certain songs or view certain articles and or paintings. Some of the content may be abrasive, occasionally violent, or in some cases offending. If at any time you would like to stop, you simply need to say that you need a break, and or that you need to stop permanently.

BENEFITS
From the findings of this study, there will be research written about how students learn about religion and

1

spirituality, the role media plays in the religious and spiritual lives of college students and provide a foundation for future research on the effect media has on college students in general and further information about religious and spiritual development. Though there is an indirect benefit for participants in that he or she will have the opportunity to navigate through his or her own religious ideas, the majority of the benefit is directly related to the fact that knowledge may be gained that could help others.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely in a locked office on a password-protected computer with hard copies stored in a locked filing cabinet. Your name will not be used in the report and will be changed so that your identity will be kept confidential. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study.

COMPENSATION (if applicable)
For participating in this study you will have the opportunity to explore your religious and spiritual identity. No compensation will be given for participation in this study. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, there will be no penalty for you. You will not be eligible to receive class credit for participating in this study.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT (if applicable)
There will be no compensation for medical treatments for any emotional or physical needs.

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Jennifer Ofstein, at Jennifer_Ofstein@ncsu.edu, or 919 515 1846. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. David Kaber, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-3086) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148)

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed at your request.

CONSENT
"I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time."

Subject's signature_____ **Date** _____

Investigator's signature_____ **Date** _____

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