Factors contributing to a spiritual but not religious belief system: A grounded theory study

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Abstract
This dissertation is a qualitative study using grounded theory methodology. The purpose of the study was to investigate the belief systems and practices of a growing segment of the population who identify as being spiritual but not religious (SnR). Thirteen participants who self-identified as holding SnR belief systems were interviewed regarding their experiences with religion and spirituality. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and condensed into narratives depicting the participants’ spiritual development across their lifetimes. For added validity, a second reader also independently read and created themes based on three of these interviews. The resultant grounded theory is referred to as the Generalized Path of a Spiritual Quest, and it contains descriptions of processes that the participants encountered at various phases of their spiritual journey utilizing key quotes from the participants’ interviews. The model describes the participants’ spiritual development across their lifetimes, and processes include Religious Upbringing; Taking Perspective; Parting from Religion of Origin; Broad Search for Meaning; Adopting a Spiritual Worldview; Spiritual Growth; and Death, Rebirth, and Continuation of the Cycle.

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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO A SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS BELIEF SYSTEM: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

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MICHAEL CROCKETT

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DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a qualitative study using grounded theory methodology. The purpose of the study was to investigate the belief systems and practices of a growing segment of the population who identify as being spiritual but not religious (SnR). Thirteen participants who self-identified as holding SnR belief systems were interviewed regarding their experiences with religion and spirituality. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and condensed into narratives depicting the participants’ spiritual development across their lifetimes. For added validity, a second reader also independently read and created themes based on three of these interviews. The resultant grounded theory is referred to as the Generalized Path of a Spiritual Quest, and it contains descriptions of processes that the participants encountered at various phases of their spiritual journey utilizing key quotes from the participants’ interviews. The model describes the participants’ spiritual development across their lifetimes, and processes include Religious Upbringing; Taking Perspective; Parting from Religion of Origin; Broad Search for Meaning; Adopting a Spiritual Worldview; Spiritual Growth; and Death, Rebirth, and Continuation of the Cycle.

Keywords: Spirituality, religion, qualitative research, spiritual but not religious, grounded theory
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INTRODUCTION

Religion and spirituality are among the most influential forces shaping the human experience, and they impact functioning on a variety of physical, psychological, and behavioral levels (Corrigan, McCorkle, Schell, & Kidder, 2003; George, Larson, Koenig, & McCullough, 2000; Lukoff, 1998; Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003; Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006). However, the study of religion and spirituality in the field of psychology has largely been neglected (Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006; Shafranske, 2011).

Between 19% and 39% of the population in the United States have identified as being spiritual but not religious (SnR). In addition, there has been a noticeable trend in Western society whereby people are moving away from traditional religions and embracing an alternative and eclectic form of spirituality, and those who identify as SnR are intimately connected with this trend (Fuller, 2001; Hill et al., 2000; Lukoff, Lu, & Yang, 2011; Marler & Hadaway, 2002; Newport, 2006). Not much research has focused on the SnR group, which represents a significant and growing proportion of people in this country whose belief systems are not adequately understood (Fuller, 2001; Gockel, 2009; Marler & Hadaway, 2002).

Gockel (2009) called for additional qualitative research with those who identify as SnR and suggested grounded theory as a methodology that could build upon previous studies of this group. Stringham (1993) also identified qualitative methods as appropriate for investigating abstract processes and generating theories on spiritual topics. Given the

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1 The SnR acronym is borrowed from the Zinnbauer et al. (1997) study described in the literature review, and its usage in designating the spiritual but not religious group is consistent throughout this dissertation in describing findings in other studies.
importance of the topic area, the prominence of the group of interest, the shortage of research on both, and the call for qualitative studies to address all of these, a grounded theory study of the SnR seemed an appropriate topic for a dissertation. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation was to expand upon the existing qualitative literature by conducting a grounded theory study that would identify factors that contribute to a SnR belief system.
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Although there is much more research on religion and spirituality than the articles reviewed here, in order to limit the scope of this dissertation only studies that are relevant to the SnR group will be included. However, before research findings on the SnR can be discussed, it is necessary to understand how the terms spirituality and religion have been conceptualized empirically. These studies suggest that numerous differences between the concepts of religion and spirituality exist in the minds of both laypeople and researchers. Additionally, I briefly discuss the history of religious and spiritual studies in the field of psychology, current sociocultural trends changing the public attitude towards religion and spirituality, and researchers’ understanding of these trends.

*Spirituality, Religion, and the Field of Psychology.*

Lukoff (1998) wrote that “religious and spiritual dimensions of culture are among the most important factors that structure human experience, beliefs, values, behavior, as well as illness patterns” (p. 3). Religious and spiritual beliefs provide a paradigm from which individuals make sense of death and create a purpose in life, find relief from existential anxiety, draw moral conclusions, and connect with one another through a shared system of values (Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006). In addition, religious and spiritual beliefs have a powerful effect in recovery from physical injury and illness, including life-threatening diseases, as well as in symptom reduction and coping for those with severe mental illness (Corrigan et al., 2003; George et al., 2000; Powell et al., 2003). Despite this powerful influence on the human condition, the study of religion and spirituality has largely been neglected by the field of psychology (Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006; Shafranske, 2011).
Although many early prominent psychologists, including Freud, argued that religion and spirituality needed to be considered for a complete understanding of a person (Hill et al., 2000), following Freud’s attacks on religion as immature wish fulfillment there was little exploration of the relationship between religion, spirituality, and psychology (Peteet, Lu, & Narrow, 2011). The emergence of behaviorism (Hill et al., 2000) and the establishment of a scientific psychology modeled after physics may have deterred researchers away from topics considered too philosophical or too theological (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Spirituality and religion were subsequently conceptualized in a negative manner or ignored by the field of psychology; however, in the last 20 years there has been increased interest in researching these topics and a shift in attitude to one of acceptance and appreciation (Aten & Hernandez, 2005). Evidence indicates that this field of study has undergone a paradigm shift and has progressed beyond focusing on measurement as its primary concern (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Despite the reemergence of the study of religion and spirituality and a better development of the research base, there are still a small number of credible research contributors, and the discipline remains relatively overlooked by the whole of psychology (Hill et al., 2000). Given that topics of spirituality and religion interface with nearly all areas of psychology and that research is growing internationally and cross-culturally, the importance and influence of this field of study is only going to increase (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003).

An increase in the publication of journal articles, presentations, and books in the areas of religion and spirituality already became noticeable after the establishment of American Psychological Association (APA) Division 36, Psychology of Religion in 1976.
(Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Following this, the APA Task force on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994)* accepted the Religious and Spiritual Problem diagnostic category (Code V62.89) after reviewing a proposal that cited research on the frequent occurrence of religious and spiritual concerns in clinical practice (Lukoff, 1998). Lukoff (1998) noted that, although 72% of psychologists reported addressing religious or spiritual issues with clients and at least one in six patients presented with issues directly involving religion or spirituality, 85% of psychologists reported rarely or never addressing religious or spiritual issues during training. One potential explanation for religious and spiritual matters being overlooked in research, training, and in clinical practice is that psychologists themselves tend to be considerably less religious than what is typical in the general population (Hill et al., 2000). However, psychologists have an ethical responsibility to be knowledgeable of social and cultural factors that may affect assessment and treatments and to provide services within their boundaries of competence. The addition of a V-Code in the *DSM-IV* was intended to increase awareness of religious and spiritual issues and to support training and research in this area of clinical practice (Lukoff, 1998).

The current Religious or Spiritual Problem V-code evolved from a proposal for a V-Code labeled “Psychospiritual Conflict” that was based on research conducted by the Spiritual Emergence Network and was submitted to the *DSM-IV* task force with the intention of raising clinicians’ awareness of spiritual emergencies and distress resulting from spiritual practices (Lukoff, 1998). This proposal included four types of religious problems (loss or questioning of faith, change in denominational membership, conversion [Type text]
to a new faith, and intensification of adherence to religious practices and orthodoxy) and
two types of spiritual problems (near-death experiences and mystical experiences; Lukoff
et al., 2011). The task force accepted the proposal with some modifications. The title was
changed to “Religious or Spiritual Problem” and the category included two of the four
proposed religious problems (loss or questioning of faith and conversion to a new faith);
in addition, a general statement describing spiritual concerns was included, as follows:
“questioning of other spiritual values which may not necessarily be related to an
organized church or religious institution” (Lukoff et al., 2011; American Psychiatric
Association, 1994, p. 685).

In Religious and Spiritual Issues in Psychiatric Diagnosis: A Research Agenda
for DSM-V, Peteet et al. (2011) described research on the myriad ways that spiritual and
religious beliefs influence psychological disorders, including chapters on depression,
psychotic disorders, substance use disorders, anxiety and adjustment disorders,
posttraumatic stress disorder, child and adolescent psychopathology, and personality
disorders. Peteet et al. argued that although the current V-code for Spiritual and
Religious problems gave clinicians a category for non-psychopathological issues related
to these areas, the as-yet-unpublished revision of the DSM (the Diagnostic and Statistical
Manual for Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition; DSM-V) should include more information
about the role religious and spiritual problems play in Axis I and Axis II disorders. One
suggestion the authors highlighted based on expert consensus was to expand research
findings regarding religious and spiritual factors in the “Age, Gender, and Cultural
Considerations” as well as the “Differential Diagnosis” sections of the DSM-V. Inclusion
of this information would help clinicians (a) recognize how spiritual and religious beliefs
[Type text]
can either impede or promote recovery, (b) conceptualize how patients understand and approach their emotional difficulties, (c) take these considerations into treatment planning and goal setting, and (d) understand diagnostic categories within their historical, philosophical, and cultural contexts.

Shafranske (2011) stated that “understanding the religious or spiritual sources of psychological conflict or mental distress serves as an important locus within clinical practice and contributes to the larger examination of associations between spirituality (in its many forms), coping, impairment, and health” (p. 203). Although spiritual and religions identities can be a source of strength for clients, various expressions of religion and spirituality can also be characterized as pathological, and researchers have cautioned against conceptualizations of religion and spirituality that are wholly good or wholly bad (Hill et al., 2000). An extreme example of a problem related to spirituality or religious beliefs is falling prey to illegitimate and manipulative spiritual leaders of sects or cults that violate social and moral norms; however, distress and conflict can arise from more commonplace sources, such as questioning of faith, shame and guilt over behaviors that deviate from religious ideals, or ideological disagreements with the decisions of respected religious leaders. In addition, certain spiritual practices, such as qi gong or intensive Zen meditation, can catalyze intense spiritual and mystical experiences that can potentially be either enlightening and positively transformative or disorienting and frightening; with the increased popularity of these spiritual practices may also come an increase in patients with symptoms that resemble psychotic disorders, such as visions, euphoria, and derealization, and that come to the attention of clinical psychologists and psychiatrists (Lukoff, 1998; Lukoff et al., 2011). Clinicians should take care to distinguish these
spiritual emergencies from mental disorders and utilize alternative approaches to
treatment when appropriate.

Societal Trends

A number of social trends pertaining to spirituality and religion are important for
psychologists to be aware of when considering how the larger historical and cultural
contexts apply to their clients. Marler and Hadaway (2002) described religious changes
in American society since the 1950s, such the decline of the Protestant hegemony and an
increase in both interfaith marriages and Americans claiming no religious affiliation.
Results of a 2010 Gallup poll indicated that the percentage of Americans stating that they
did not have a specific religious identity has grown steadily from near zero in the 1950s
to nearly 16% in 2010 (Newport, 2010). However, it is important to consider that
religious identity is a concept that is independent from beliefs or membership with a
religious institution. Fuller (2001) wrote that, although surveys have shown that upwards
of 90% of Americans believed in some kind of Higher Power, only 62% actually
belonged to a church or synagogue, leaving 38% who had no connection with organized
religion. Despite not attending religious services, many of these same individuals
claimed to be strongly religious or spiritual on a personal level (Fuller, 2001).

A Gallup poll published in 2006 indicated that 15% of Americans had changed
religious preference in the course of their lives, and 10% had moved away from religion
altogether (Newport, 2006). In this poll, the major reasons for switching or dropping
religion, in order of percentage of importance, were as follows: disagreement with the
teachings, finding a more fulfilling religion, dissatisfaction with local church, politics
within the religious institution, marriage to someone of a different religion, and moving
to a different location. Previous research had shown that, historically, people switched religions for more practical reasons, such as marriage to someone of a different religion; however, the 2006 poll suggested that more people were switching or walking away from religions due to dissatisfaction, disconnection, or ideological disagreements with their faith than for reasons of convenience (Newport, 2006). Conclusions drawn from this poll are supported by other sources. For example, Lukoff (1998) wrote, “On virtually all measures, there has been a major decline in the strength of the mainstream religious institutions and confidence in religion and religious leadership in American culture” (p. 15).

The public’s growing dissatisfaction with organized religion has not gone unrecognized by religious institutions. For example, researchers on Christianity have observed a generation of 20- to 30-year-olds who have left the church and not returned as previous generations had upon completing higher education or bearing children (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007). The Barna Group (2009) found that, although teens reported that they embraced spirituality, six out of 10 teens who were active in the Christian church as adolescents failed to return during early adulthood, and the researchers concluded that a return to the church as an adult was no longer the norm. Similarly, the 2006 Gallup poll indicated a trend in age groups such that younger people were more likely to abandon religion than were older age groups: 19% of people between the ages of 18 to 29 reporting moving away from religion altogether, compared with 10% between the ages of 30 and 49, 9% between the ages of 50 and 64, and 6% of those aged 65 and older (Newport, 2006). The reasons for declining attendance and loss of faith in religious
With the decline in organized religious affiliation, there is a concurrent trend toward increased participation in noninstitutional and nontraditional forms of spirituality, suggesting that, while Americans are becoming less religious, they are simultaneously becoming more spiritual (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). Interest in Eastern spiritual practices such as yoga, meditation, qi gong, and tai chi has steadily increased since the 1960s (Lukoff et al., 2011). Adoption of indigenous spiritual practices such as sweat lodges, drumming circles, and chanting has also increased significantly during the past 25 years (Lukoff, 1998). There has also been a surge of interest in spiritual schools and New Age Groups, some of which involve participation in shamanic rituals and pagan traditions to induce mystical and esoteric experiences (Lewis & Melton, 1992). The evolution of new spiritual practices in American culture has been identified as a growing “megatrend” (Hill et al., 2000, p. 60) that can be traced back to the Reformation’s promotion of having a direct and personal approach to God without the necessity of having a church or clergy as a mediator.

However, not all researchers agree that Americans are becoming more spiritual. Marler and Hadaway (2002) discussed the possibility that Americans are simply becoming less religious, stating that “the real anomaly in American religious history might be the period of unprecedented institutionalization between the World Wars rather than the dissipation that occurred afterward” (p. 298). The authors noted that the majority of Americans see themselves as both religious and spiritual and, although there may have been an increase in certain spiritual practices, with the sharp decline in...
relational involvement comes a net effect of America becoming less spiritual as well as less religious. There has also been debate over whether the movement toward spirituality has represented a movement away from traditional religion or an increased respect and emphasis on the inner, contemplative practices of traditional religious systems (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003).

Fuller (2001) described a long-standing “unchurched” spirituality” (p. 7) tradition in American history that has roots in Colonial times and that was held by founding fathers of the country, such as Thomas Jefferson, who supported a separation of church and state. Fuller suggested that secular spirituality was not a particularly new trend in America, and recent surges of interest in alternative spiritual practices may simply represent the latest turn in the evolution of those beliefs. A major thesis in Fuller’s book was that this undercurrent of unchurched spirituality has been “gradually reshaping the personal faith of many who belong to mainstream religious organizations” (p. 9). Hill et al. (2000) also asserted that the current trend toward emphasizing spirituality may be viewed as a push to reconceptualize and bring about another reformation in religion, rather than to replace religion altogether.

Fuller (2001) described three types of unchurched Americans who should be given different consideration from followers of religions. First are those who are not religious at all, comprising 8-15% of the total population; these individuals reject any

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2 The terms “church,” “churched,” and “unchurched” are used throughout this dissertation in keeping with the language of the researchers and the findings of the cited studies. The meaning of the terms can be interpreted as “a place of worship or a religious institution,” “affiliated with a religious institution” and “not affiliated with a religious institution (though may or may not have been affiliated with a religious institution at a different point in time.)” The frequency of their use in literature reflects the large Christian religious majority in the United States; however, the terms “religion” or “religious” are not limited to the Christian church and encompass a broad range of organized denominations and their followers.

[Type text]
supernatural reality beyond scientific understanding and could be considered neither religious nor spiritual. A second group of unchurched Americans have an ambiguous relationship with organized religion, and it is more difficult to define or estimate the percentage of people who comprise this group. This second group may include those who attend religious services infrequently (and who thus may frequently be counted among the religious in polls) but who do so more because of social or family connections than because of belief in the religion’s teaching. However, this second group also contains those who strongly identify with a religion’s teachings but who do not attend services due to factors such as disagreeing with the politics within the church or with decisions made by religious authorities.

Fuller’s (2001) third group of unchurched Americans, who can be described as SnR are the focus of this dissertation. Gockel (2009) reported that upwards of 39% of people identify as being SnR, though this percentage may be a bit inflated given that multiple large-scale survey studies found that 19% of respondents in the United States endorsed being SnR (Marler & Hadaway, 2002), and Fuller (2001) used 20% as a rough estimate. Fuller observed two important ways that the SnR differ from the religious: The SnR have often grown dissatisfied with religious institutions to the point of breaking away from them, and they also show a greater interest in personal religious experience. Fuller wrote that the SnR find religious organizations stifling because the SnR value curiosity and intellectual freedom, and they relate spirituality to private reflection and personal experience rather than to public ritual. In addition, Fuller noted that the SnR frequently hold metaphysical beliefs and contended that this mystical dimension of unchurched spirituality meets an important need of the SnR to have a felt sense of the
sacred. Although there is variance in the degree of importance spirituality plays in the lives of the SnR, Roof (1993) estimated that at least half of the SnR could be characterized as “highly active seekers” who view their lives as a spiritual journey, refer to a variety of religious sources in hopes of gaining new insights, and “for whom spiritual and metaphysical concerns are a driving force” (p. 79). The SnR group was chosen as the focus of this dissertation because they are representative of cultural trends in Western society of dissatisfaction with the church and pursuit of an individualistic, secular spirituality (Hudson, 2007).

Spiritual versus Religious Constructs

Fuller (2001) wrote that, colloquially, religion and spirituality were once considered synonymous but that over time the term spiritual came to denote a private, personal, internal experience, whereas religion became connected to public worship, church membership, formal rituals, and official denominational proceedings and set beliefs. Other researchers have also suggested that the schism between the terms religion and spirituality is a more recent abstraction resulting from the growing disillusionment with religious institutions and corresponding rise of secularism in the latter half of the 20th century (Hill et al., 2000). The effect of these trends is the present-day distinction between spirituality, which has the positive connotation of promoting personal experiences of the transcendent, and religion, which has negative associations of being overly demanding of tradition and a hindrance to spiritual growth. As the distinction between spirituality and religion expanded, elements formerly included within religion were subsumed by spirituality, leading to a definition of religion that is narrower and less inclusive than it was in the past (Hill et al., 2000).
Religion and spirituality have been commonly discussed together in psychological literature and are often erroneously treated as unitary aspects of individual differences by psychologists in practice (Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006). Empirically, religious problems have received much more attention than spiritual problems; for example, numerous handbooks and journals have been devoted to religious studies, whereas no journals have spiritual problems as their focus (Lukoff, 1998). One major problem is a lack of consensus on how to define or make distinctions between religion and spirituality, making it difficult to know with any precision or reliability what meaning researchers attribute to them (Hill et al., 2000). Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) noted that “in order for progress to occur in a scientific discipline, there must be a minimum of consensus concerning the meaning of core constructs and their measurement” (p. 381). Various proposed definitions have subsumed religion under spirituality, or spirituality under religion (Lukoff et al., 2011). For example, Marler and Hadaway (2002) noted that in social science the term spirituality has often been used to refer to the functional, intrinsic dimensions of religion, whereas religion has represented the more substantive, extrinsic ones.

Hill et al. (2000) cautioned against the use of definitions that are either too narrow and restrictive, thereby yielding research with limited value, or overly broad, thereby robbing the study of religion and spirituality of their distinctive characteristics. Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975) defined religion as “a system of beliefs in divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such as power” (p. 1). Although this is a clear definition, there is nothing explicit in it that could be used to differentiate it from spirituality. A slightly more specific definition of religion
by Dollahite (1998) is “a covenant faith community with teachings and narratives that enhance the search for the sacred and encourage morality” (p. 5). This definition provides a more clear reference to a community with specific beliefs that could serve as one point of difference between religion and spirituality. Scottman (2011) suggested using a definition of spirituality that did not assume a belief in a higher power, such as “the realm of the human spirit, that part of humanity that is not limited to bodily experience,” specifying that “spirit is the classic term for what we now call consciousness, a sense of self-awareness capable of observing both itself and things outside” (p. 200). However, a definition this broad would be difficult to translate into a research program and may not be thematically in keeping with the origins of the term (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Vaughan (1991) defined spirituality both specifically and succinctly as “a subjective experience of the sacred” (p. 105).

A plethora of other definitions of religion and spirituality have been proposed. The author of a content analysis of 31 definitions of religiousness and 40 definitions of spirituality that have been used in social scientific writing in the 20th century found that definitions of religiousness and spirituality were more or less evenly distributed over nine content categories (Scott, 1997, as cited in Hill et al., 2000). These content areas included (a) experiences of connectedness or relationship, (b) processes leading to greater connectedness, (c) behaviors in response to the sacred versus the secular, (d) systems of thought or sets of beliefs, (e) traditional institutional or organizational structures, (f) pleasurable states of being, (g) beliefs in the sacred, or the transcendent, (h) attempts at or capacities for transcendence, and (i) concern with existential questions or issues. This analysis demonstrates the substantial diversity in the content of religious and spiritual
definitions and the lack of comprehensive theories in the social sciences that account for the multifaceted nature of either religion or spirituality (Hill et al., 2000).

Hill et al. (2000) noted that a sense of the sacred is central to the experience of both religion and spirituality and is an essential element to include definitionally because without this sense there would be nothing to differentiate religious and spiritual activities from other activities, or from other areas of study. The authors discussed that what is considered sacred is influenced by cultural and social forces and may include people, principles, objects, the self, or concepts that transcend the self. They asserted that association with a divine quality is what provides something with a sacred designation and that the perception of the sacred invokes feelings of respect, reverence, and devotion.

Although not explicitly mentioned, the sense of the sacred is also captured in how William James distinguished between spiritual and secular orientations to life. According to James (1902), spirituality “consists of attitudes, ideas, lifestyles, and specific practices based upon a conviction that (1) the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance, and (2) that union or harmonious relation with this ‘spiritual more’ is our true end” (p. 382). Similarly, Fuller (2001) wrote that “spirituality exists wherever we struggle with the issue of how our lives fit into the greater cosmic scheme of things” and “when we become moved by values such as beauty, love, or creativity that seem to reveal a meaning or power beyond our visible world” (pp. 8-9). Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) wrote that conceiving spirituality “in terms of an ability to imbue everyday experiences, goals, roles, and responsibilities with sacredness” (p. 382) could provide a new direction for empirical exploration.
Hill et al. (2000) resisted proposing a formal definition of religion and spirituality and instead offered three criteria that should be included in any working definition of these terms. Spirituality and religion have the first of the three criteria in common, and criterion (A) was defined as:

The feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred. The term “search” refers to attempts to identify, articulate, maintain, or transform. The term “sacred” refers to a divine being, divine object, Ultimate Reality, or Ultimate Truth as perceived by the individual. (p. 66)

The remaining two additional criteria apply only to religion, and the authors defined criterion (B) as “a search for non-sacred goals (such as identity, belongingness, meaning, health, or wellness) in a context that has as its primary goal the facilitation of (A)” and criterion (C) as “the means and methods (e.g., rituals or prescribed behaviors) of the search that receive validation and support from within an identifiable group of people” (Hill et al., 2000, p. 66). The authors delineated four key concepts contained within the criteria: (a) the concept of the sacred, (b) a search process, (c) the concept of the non-sacred, and (d) the degree to which the search process is supported by a community. The sacred core and a dynamic search process may represent the common ground between spirituality and religion, and this view may facilitate investigations that seek to understand the influence of these two constructs in everyday life (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003).

Zinnbauer et al. (1997) conducted a mixed-methods study including both a quantitative analysis, in which they correlated participants’ answers to self-rated religiousness or spirituality questions with demographic and predictor variables, and a qualitative content analysis of participant’s definitions of religion and spirituality. The
authors recruited 346 participants from 11 groups, including various churches, institutions, and age groups, in order to include a wide range of religious backgrounds that would yield differences in definitions and self-reported levels of religiousness and spirituality. Questionnaires consisted of (a) numerous measures of religious and spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, (b) forced-choice and Likert-type items designed by the authors to assess the participants’ beliefs in God, their concepts of religiousness or spirituality, and the participants’ self-assessment of their level of their religious or spiritual involvement, and (c) an open-ended question asking the participants to write their own definitions of religiousness and spirituality. The authors found that 41.7% of participants viewed religion and spirituality as overlapping but different concepts, 38.8% believed that spirituality was a broader concept than religion that included religion, 10.2% believed that religion was a broader concept than spirituality that included spirituality, 6.7% felt that religion and spirituality were different and non-overlapping concepts, and 2.6% believed that religion and spirituality were the same concepts (i.e., they completely overlapped).

Zinnbauer et al. (1997) found that 93% of respondents identified themselves as spiritual and 78% identified themselves as religious. When broken down further, 74% of participants endorsed being both spiritual and religious; 19% stated they were spiritual but not religious; 4% stated they were religious but not spiritual; and 3% stated they were neither spiritual nor religious. The authors conducted a correlational analysis based on self-rated religiousness and self-rated spirituality and identified numerous significant positive and negative correlations with predictor variables, including a significant positive correlation between self-rated religiousness and self-rated spirituality.

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Zinnbauer et al. (1997) performed a supplemental $t$-test analysis comparing the spiritual and religious (S+R) group with the spiritual but not religious (SnR) group across these same predictor variables. This analysis indicated that the S+R group was significantly higher than the SnR group on measures of church attendance, frequency of prayer, parents’ church attendance, self-rated religiousness, positive evaluation of religiousness and spirituality, intrinsic religiousness, religious orthodoxy, right-wing authoritarianism, self-righteousness, interdependence with others, and self-sacrifice for others. The SnR group was significantly higher than the S+R group on measures of group experiences related to spiritual growth, New Age beliefs and practices, mystical experiences, and independence from others. In addition, there were some nonsignificant differences between the SnR and the S+R groups. In the SnR group, there were significant positive correlations between self-rated spirituality and the predictor variables education, income, and hurt by clergy, and significant negative correlations between self-rated spirituality and the variables evaluation of spirituality as potent (i.e., constricted, constrained, and severe), and individual competitiveness. These correlations were not present between self-rated religiousness and predictor variables in the S+R group.

Zinnbauer et al. (1997) performed a content analysis in which participants’ definitions of religiousness and spirituality were coded across two dimensions: overall content (e.g., personal beliefs, organizational practices, personal growth) and the nature of the sacred (e.g., traditional concepts of Christ, Holy, Divine, or nontraditional concepts of transcendent reality, ground of being, Nature). The authors found a significant difference in content between definitions of religiousness and spirituality, and they concluded that “both definitions share some features in common, but they diverge in the
focus of religiousness on organizational or institutional beliefs and practices, and the focus of spirituality definitions on the personal qualities of connection or relationship with a Higher Power” (p. 557). However, the authors did not find a significant difference between the definitions of religiousness and spirituality in terms of the nature of the sacred, because both definitions incorporated traditional concepts of the sacred such as references to God, Christ, and the Church. The authors also compared the definitional content of S+R and SnR groups and found that there was no significant difference in terms of their definitions of spirituality or nature of the sacred, but that there was a significant difference between the groups’ definitions of religiousness. More members of the S+R group than of the SnR group identified religiousness with belief or faith in a Higher Power of some kind, whereas more members of the SnR group than of the S+R group identified religiousness with commitment to organizational beliefs or negative means and ends, such as gaining extrinsic rewards, feeling superior to others, or avoiding personal responsibility. Zinnbauer et al. concluded that the terms religiousness and spirituality described different but not fully independent concepts and that, although both S+R and SnR participants described themselves as spiritual, the participants may have attached different subjective meanings to this term, as well as to the term religious.

Marler and Hadaway (2002) described results from their previous qualitative and quantitative studies in which they explored what Protestants in Americans meant when they said that they were spiritual or religious and how they viewed these concepts as definitionally or operationally different. In one previous study, the authors conducted a poll asking participants about the relationship between being religious and being spiritual, finding that a majority of people polled (71%) believed that there was a difference [Type text]
between the two concepts. When the sample was broken down further, the authors found that those who were both religious and spiritual and those who were neither spiritual nor religious were less likely to say there was a difference between the two concepts, whereas those who said they were either SnR or religious but not spiritual were more likely to say that there was a difference between the two concepts. The authors also found that religion and spirituality were correlated with both traditional and nontraditional measures of religiosity, whereas only spirituality was correlated with nontraditional beliefs and practices such as New Age experimentation with crystals or Eastern spiritual practices.

Marler and Hadaway (2002) also discussed a previous qualitative study of theirs in which they interviewed “marginal Protestants” (participants who responded that they “attend church several times a year or less”; p. 294) about the differences between spirituality and religion. Through cluster analysis, the authors found that 63% of respondents viewed religion and spirituality as being different but interdependent concepts, 28% believed them to be the same concept, and 8% believed they were different and independent concepts. The respondents in this study described spirituality as a broader concept than religion that included religion and denoted a connection between the individual and a larger reality. Religion was seen as “organized spirituality,” “the practice of spirituality,” or “that part of spiritual experience that is institutionalized” (p. 295) and that serves to strengthen and direct the internal moral compass that is spirituality.

Saucier and Skrzypinska (2006) conducted a large-scale survey study of American adults that focused on the role personality factors play in subjective spirituality and tradition-oriented religiousness. The authors adopted Vaughan’s (1991) concise
definition of spirituality as “a subjective experience of the sacred” (p. 105) and investigated subjective spirituality (SS) as a narrower, less inclusive concept than spirituality in general, one more closely related to mysticism. Saucier and Skrzypinska proposed that the term mystical was more closely aligned with the term spiritual than was the term religious. (Although no explicit definition was offered by the authors for the term mystical, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary [2011] defines it as “having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence,” and defined mysticism as “the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience.”) The authors speculated that individuals who indicated they were SnR likely had mystical preferences but chose the term spiritual over mystical because spiritual has more favorable connotations than mystical, which is shrouded in stigma. They based this line of reasoning on a variety of studies that indicated a higher incidence of mystical experience in individuals who self-identified as spiritual compared to those who are religious.

Saucier and Skrzypinska (2006) hypothesized that the main difference between spirituality and religion resides in the concept of traditional-oriented religiousness (TR) versus the concept of SS. The authors stated that TR was characterized by an exoteric, orthodox, and fundamentalist school of thought with a literalistic dogma that was reliant on trusted sources of authority; On the other hand, SS was more esoteric, mystical, metaphysical, and valued contemplation, questioning, and individual discovery through one’s own experience over strict adherence to religious teachings. A second hypothesis was that the term mystical would correspond closely with SS, but not with TR, and that

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the SS and TR would be highly independent dimensions illustrated by a number of predictor variables and reflected in personality scales.

To test these hypotheses, Saucier and Skrzypinska (2006) collected responses on Likert scales for the terms Religious, Spirituality, and Mystical, as well as various personality measures from 375 participants. Of this group, 55% endorsed having a religious background, 20% indicated they were SnR, 6% chose “other,” and 16% chose none. Results supported the hypothesis that the term Mystical would be more associated with SS than with TR, and that the term “Spiritual is somewhat intermediary between the other two concepts, whereas Religious and Mystical have more independent denotation” (p. 1270). They recommended using caution in the use of the word Spiritual in survey items because it leads to more confounds with TR and SS than do terms such as religious or mystical.

Also as hypothesized, Saucier and Skrzypinska (2006) found that SS and TR were highly independent dimensions with quite different correlates that were substantially intertwined with commonly measured personality traits. They found that SS represented a brand of beliefs in which an individual’s subjective experiences were highly prized, and that SS was associated with absorption, fantasy-proneness, dissociation, magical beliefs, and personality traits of eccentricity and high openness to experience. In contrast, TR represented a brand of beliefs with high reliance on tradition, obedience to religious authorities, shared practice of rituals, and rules surrounding social and sexual behavior. The authors found that TR was associated with authoritarianism, traditionalism, collectivism, and low openness to experience. Saucier and Skrzypinska suggested that TR and SS represented two highly independent (though not opposite) dispositions related
to social attitude factors and that they did not fit neatly within the Big Five framework. This finding supports growing evidence that spirituality may represent an unacknowledged sixth major dimension of personality (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003).

Hill et al. (2000) wrote that although the multidimensional constructs of religion and spirituality were distinct in some regards they also had much in common, and the authors suggested that viewing them solely from the standpoint of how they differ would miss a potentially rich and dynamic interaction. Both spirituality and religion deal with the sacred and represent a meaning system through which people make sense of the world and their life experiences (Gockel, 2009). Although researchers have found differences between SnR groups and spiritual and religious groups, Zinnbauer et al. (1997) found a positive correlation between self-rated religiousness and self-rated spirituality, and Marler and Hadaway (2002) found that the majority of respondents viewed religion and spirituality as being different but interdependent concepts. Given the large and complicated overlap between religious and spiritual constructs and differences in definitions for these terms found between both spiritual and religious and SnR groups (Zinnbauer et al., 1997), it may be more important to understand the subjective understanding of these constructs as held by members of these groups than to produce concrete categorizations of what is spiritual and what is religious.

*Call for Qualitative Research*

Although quantitative studies can produce interesting and useful findings, survey studies are somewhat limited in providing a rich understanding of religion and spirituality and the meaning of these experiences to the individuals. For instance, surveys have provided data regarding how religion and spirituality are used in self-identification
without clearly delineating how people think about the relationship between religion and spirituality (Hill et al., 2000). Using a Gallup poll published by Newport, Agrawal, and Witters (2010), I will demonstrate how purely quantitative studies are limited both in the amount and type of data gathered, and in the interpretation of that data. Problems stemming from the underlying theoretical assumptions or researchers’ preconceived notions (in this case treating religion and spirituality as a unitary construct) can arise from the outset of survey studies by influencing both the design of the study and how the constructs are measured by the survey. This can result in neglecting to obtain valuable sources of information and forcing respondents into theoretical categorizations for analysis that may not best reflect their stances on a subject. In the process of highlighting these limitations, additional factors that clinicians should consider with clients in the separate but overlapping constructs of religion and spirituality will be discussed.

A Gallup poll was conducted between January 2009 and July 2010 in which over 550,000 participants were interviewed on multiple dimensions of well-being; in this poll, correlations between religion and mental health were explored (Newport et al., 2010). The researchers broke down each religious group polled (Jewish, Mormon, no religion/atheist/agnostic, Roman Catholic, other non-Christian, Protestant/other non-Catholic Christian, and Muslim/Islam) into three subgroups (very religious, moderately religious, and nonreligious) using responses to two questions: (a) the importance of religion in the respondents’ daily lives, and (b) the frequency of religious service attendance. Using these criteria, they found that 43.7% of the respondents were very religious; these individuals considered religion to be an important part of daily life and attended services almost every week. The researchers found that 29.7% of the sample

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were nonreligious; that is, religion was not an important aspect of their daily lives, and they very seldom attended religious services, if ever. The remaining 26.6% of respondents were considered moderately religious because they did not fall neatly into either the religious or nonreligious subgroups but gave valid responses on both religious questions.

Newport et al. (2010) found a statistically significant difference between very religious and moderately religious or nonreligious groups across all six sub-indexes of the well-being index: life evaluation, emotional health, physical health, healthy behaviors, work environment, and basic access. This difference was found for all religious groups polled, and it held after controlling for age, gender, race and ethnicity, region and state of the country, socioeconomic status, marital status, and child-bearing status, which previous researchers have found to be related to religiosity. Differences between the moderately religious and nonreligious groups were non-significant in the overall index. However, an interesting pattern emerged in the emotional health index when looking at its various components: For this index, the very religious subgroup showed, as expected, a significantly lower percentage of lifetime depression, worry, stress, sadness, and anger than did either the moderately religious or nonreligious subgroups. However, the finding that the moderately religious subgroup was consistently higher than the nonreligious subgroup in all of emotional health index areas was unexpected, and it suggested a more complex pattern of interplay between religion and emotional well-being than in the other indexes of well-being.

Although no explanation was offered by Newport et al. (2010) for this complex relationship, one possibility is that individuals in the moderately religious subgroup were
engaged in a process of religious questioning, transition, or loss of faith. This process is stressful in and of itself, but it can also make dealing with other life stressors more difficult in that the social support, trust in God, and other faith-related beliefs that help the religious subgroup cope are not accessible to this moderately religious subgroup. The nonreligious subgroup, on the other hand, may have already gone through this transition and found (or may have always relied upon) other means of coping with life’s difficulties outside of religion.

Although the 2010 Gallup poll demonstrates some of the benefits of being religious on well-being, the researchers unfortunately did not examine the interplay of spirituality and religion and thus failed to account for individuals who consider themselves to be SnR. In addition, the poll did not distinguish the SnR from those who identify as neither religious nor spiritual. Inclusion of these factors would likely have yielded a different grouping system and an analysis scheme that may have potentially better accounted for some of the findings. Marler and Hadaway (2002) described a frequent problem in polls that force respondents to identify as being either religious or spiritual but that do not allow for both or neither. The authors suggested that surveys should account for all possible variations of these interrelated concepts so that people can choose between being religious, being SnR, being neither spiritual nor religious, or being both spiritual and religious.

The 2010 Gallup poll did, however, include a no religion/atheist/agnostic category and, interestingly enough, broke this group down into very religious, moderately religious, and not religious subgroups using the same criteria as were used for the other religious groups. Even more interesting is that they found the same pattern of results as
seen for the Jewish, Mormon, Roman Catholic, other non-Christian, Protestant/other non-Catholic Christian, and Muslim/Islam categories, in which the very religious subgroups scored higher on all well-being scales than did the nonreligious subgroups. Not only did the pattern of results hold true for the no religion/atheist/agnostic category, but its very religious subgroup members, in fact, scored second only to the very religious Jewish subgroup members on the overall Well-Being Index Composite Score. Newport et al. (2010) commented that individuals in this “group that includes atheists and agnostics, also appear to reap the positive wellbeing effect of religiosity” and suggested that this result indicated “a wellbeing benefit to the church-/synagogue-/mosque-going experience that is independent of religious faith, but instead may capitalize on the social aspects of attending religious institutions” (p. 1).

However, this explanation is speculative and perhaps incomplete. Although there may be a strong social component to the well-being effect of regular attendance to religious institutions, Newport et al. (2010) did not explain why individuals in a group that identified as no religion/atheist/agnostic would have attended religious services and/or have attended these services largely to socialize with members of that religion. Another explanation that should be considered is that the no religion/atheist/agnostic group was actually largely composed of those who would have preferred to endorse being either SnR (some of whom may have taken offense at being grouped with atheists) or neither spiritual nor religious (some of whom may actually identify as atheists). This possibility illustrates the danger of combining groups with disparate beliefs.

The very, moderately, or not religious subgrouping scheme may very well still apply to those who identify as SnR based upon a question about the importance of their
beliefs in their daily lives. This group would also likely vary in “religiosity” (or rather, should a new term “spiritualisity” be introduced?) according to how frequently they engage in their spiritual activities such as yoga or meditation. Those who engage in their spiritual practice regularly (or “religiously” in the secular sense of the word, that I define as something akin to “performed regularly and almost without exception, due to personal importance”) would then constitute a very spiritual subgroup and those who do few, if any, spiritual activities would fall in a nonspiritual subgroup that more closely resembles a neither spiritual nor religious group.

Another question unexplored by the researchers in discussing the results of the Gallup pole was the following: Why would people continue to endorse belonging to a religious group, despite indicating that it is not important in my daily life and attending services very infrequently or not at all? The answer to this question may reside in the overlap of culture, values, and religion. This topic was pondered by French philosopher Comte-Sponville (2007), who grappled with the question “Can atheists be spiritual?” in The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality. Comte-Sponville wrote about how he had gained insight from a group of friends he knew to be nonreligious but who still endorsed being Jewish. As Fuller (2001) described about his second group of unchurched Americans (who had an ambiguous relationship with the church) some members of religious groups may identify with the cultural values and traditions they were raised with, yet still may not regularly attend religious services themselves.

Although the focus of the 2010 Gallup poll was on well-being rather than religion and spirituality, it could have benefited from the addition of spiritual as well as religious response options to aid in group analysis of that facet of the study. In addition, the
authors demonstrate a generalized well-being effect of religion (and potentially spirituality, though this cannot be determined with any certainty from the available data) across multiple domains, but their analysis revealed very little about where this benefit was coming from, such as the impact religion has on the lives of the respondents. Qualitative research can help place quantitative research findings in context by describing how people make meaning of their world (Gockel, 2009). For example, Zinnbauer et al. (1997) wrote:

To say that members of one group rate themselves as more spiritual than another group is not very informative without knowledge of what spirituality means to each group. Likewise, it is difficult to interpret differences within groups or among individuals in these self-ratings without explicit understanding of the meanings attributed to these terms. (p. 562)

By including a qualitative analysis in their mixed-methods study, Zinnbauer et al. were able to incorporate the meanings of the participant into their group analysis.

In qualitative studies researchers allow the data to speak through the voice of participants (Aten & Hernandez, 2005) and categories evolve through the interpretation of the participants’ experiences, as opposed to surveys in which categories for analysis are formulated by the researcher a priori and participants are forced to choose between options that funnel data through a fixed interpretive scheme (Hudson, 2007). Therefore, qualitative studies may overcome the limitations just described in quantitative studies and may help to more fully reveal the meaning of religion and spirituality in the lives of individuals. In the next section, I review qualitative studies that reveal more about the role spirituality plays in the lives of the SnR and discuss recommendations these researchers have made for future qualitative studies on spirituality and religion.
Qualitative Studies

Researchers in the area of spirituality and religious studies in psychology have made a call for more qualitative and mixed method studies (Aten & Hernandez, 2005; Gockel, 2009). For example, Fuller (2001) wrote:

Finally, we also know a few things about today’s unchurched seekers as a group. They are more likely than other Americans to have a college education, to belong to a white-collar profession, to be liberal in their political views, to have parents who attend church less frequently, and to be more independent in the sense of having weaker social relationships. Quantitative data about how those who are “spiritual, but not religious” differ socially and economically from their churched counterparts is helpful. But it is difficult to move to a more qualitative understanding. We don’t fully understand how unchurched Americans assemble various bits and pieces of spiritual philosophy into a meaningful whole. We are even further from understanding how to compare the overall spirituality of unchurched persons with that of those who belong to religious institutions. (p. 7)

Aten and Hernandez (2005) stated that, because religious and spiritual experiences are highly individualistic and personal, qualitative research is “uniquely suited for exploring spiritual phenomena and improving mental health professionals understanding of spiritual issues” (p. 276). In addition, qualitative studies are appropriate to explore topics that are not well understood and can help to elucidate important factors that may be missed using quantitative designs (Aten & Hernandez, 2005). As such, qualitative methods are a good fit for investigating abstract processes and generating theories on spiritual topics (Stringham, 1993), which can then be tested and generalized (Gockel, 2009).

Aten and Hernandez (2005) searched for qualitative studies on spirituality published in psychologically oriented journals, reviewed 2,726 titles published in seven journals, and found only 22 (0.8%) qualitative articles. They divided these qualitative studies into clusters based on the general themes of the studies, organizing them into
eight categories: (a) marriage and family studies, (b) women’s studies, (c) counselor studies, (d) religious experience studies, (e) ideological studies, (f) religious leader studies, (g) faith community studies, and (h) community service studies. The authors briefly described the findings and methodology of each of the qualitative studies they reviewed and made recommendations for researchers interested in utilizing qualitative methods to study spirituality and religious topics. These recommendations included the following: (a) utilizing method-appropriate techniques to demonstrate rigor and credibility; (b) clearly specifying the details of the design, research questions, and methods used, and using rich descriptions of the results obtained; (c) utilizing a greater diversity of qualitative approaches; (d) utilizing a mixed-method approach; (e) describing the social context of the participants, including any necessary background information about the group’s belief systems; and (f) inclusion of greater diversity in participants. Since the publication of this article, additional qualitative studies have been published in the area of spirituality and religion.

Gockel (2009) conducted a narrative qualitative study to examine the experience of 12 participants who self-identified as drawing on spirituality for healing. The author used spirituality as the broader category that would capture both religious and non-religious contexts, defining it as a “vivid, vital and personal lived experience of the divine and one’s relationship to it” (p. 219). The term divine was intended to capture the nature of the sacred for both traditional and nontraditional conceptualizations of a deity. However, participants were encouraged to define the meaning of spirituality in their own words, according to their own understanding. Gockel videotaped semi-structured interviews in which participants shared their stories of drawing on spirituality to address
mental or physical health problems, and then engaged in a dialogue with the researcher who asked clarifying questions. The researchers used a holistic content and formal analysis to code the interviews for emergent themes in the content, linguistic, and conceptual structure of the narratives. These themes were compared and contrasted to reveal deeper layers of meaning in the way participants constructed their experiences, resulting in a meta-narrative that described common themes and explored differences. Rigor was established to ensure that the results accurately reflected the participant’s stories through the researcher’s reflexivity in journaling each step of the data analysis process, as well as incorporating feedback from each participant and making corrections when necessary.

Gockel (2009) found that 11 of the 12 participants in the study identified as SnR, though four of these also attended formal religious services, and the remaining participant identified as a spiritual and religious Buddhist. The participants reported drawing on spirituality to help them with a wide variety of mental and physical health problems, such as addiction, grief, traumatic brain injury, and depression. Gockel identified a seven-step process in the narratives of the participants, in which they reframed their problems as opportunities for spiritual growth, began using both traditional religious and nontraditional spiritual practices to search within and connect with the sacred, and ultimately centered their lives and worldviews around this connection. Central to the healing process of these participants was the use of spiritual coping strategies such as spiritual reappraisal (viewing the self as a spiritual being having a human experience), meditation, prayer, acceptance, and intentionality (the purposeful setting of awareness towards a desired outcome) to gain insight into and undo maladaptive patterns of
thoughts and feelings involved in their suffering. Gockel discussed spirituality as “essentially a meaning system” through which “participants viewed their experiences of healing as emerging from transformations in meaning” (p. 227). As participants underwent a transformation in their spirituality, they also experienced a transformation in their meaning systems, perception of themselves and the world, and corresponding changes in feelings, goals, and behaviors that contributed to their healing process.

Another qualitative analysis was conducted by Hudson (2007). For her dissertation, titled *Spiritual but not Religious*, Hudson completed a phenomenological study of spirituality from a feminist perspective, with the goal of understanding the experience of spirituality in the everyday lives of younger women in Australia. Hudson noted social trends in Australia that were similar to those in America, where more people were dissociating from traditional forms of institution religion but endorsing being SnR and seeking contemporary spirituality. Hudson interviewed 11 Australian women aged 18-38 years who identified as SnR, with the broad assumption that “women’s experiences and understanding of spirituality needed to be told as articulated by women themselves, and not judged or assessed in any way in relation to some yardstick as to what constituted spirituality” (p. 130). Interview questions centered on the women’s life experiences, perception of themselves, beliefs and values, and how all of these are connected with their sense of spirituality.

Hudson (2007) found three main themes: painful experiences, searching, and meaning and purpose. In addition to the core themes, Hudson also found four basic commonalities underlying most (but not all) of the accounts that provided further foundation in understanding the women’s experiences: difficulty describing themselves [Type text]
and certain aspects of their lives, defining themselves in relation to traditional female social roles, busyness and demands of responsibility, and inclusion of beliefs and values as a core part of self-perception.

Hudson (2007) identified four subthemes in the painful experiences theme: (a) difficult experiences that included traumas in childhood or adolescence, such as the loss of a parent or sibling, parental divorce, or sexual abuse, (b) limited social support and being let down by traditional sources such as counselors, health professionals, church officials, and family or friends, that led to solitary methods of coping, (c) incompatible church experiences wherein the women’s lived experiences or beliefs were not congruent with Christian religious practices or the women had had other experiences that alienated them from the church, and (d) influential female relationships that served as role models or mentors and were key figures in spiritual development. Hudson concluded that the pain, loss, and grief of significant events and the subsequent search for meaning making were turning points in the spiritual lives of the women. The women often had to find ways of dealing with their painful experience on their own, after being let down by social supports that did not fulfill their need to be listened to and need for guidance during these troubling times. Although many of the women had a religious upbringing, they described being bored in church and not feeling connected with the teachings because the doctrines did not seem relevant to their lives. When significant events occurred and they sought help, these women did not find the church to be a place of solace, and some described being put off by hypocrisy they perceived in the church. The women also described a strong need to understand and make sense of their experience of pain, and they found

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spiritual guidance and support from a significant female figure in their lives who displayed congruence between beliefs and behavior.

In the second main theme, searching, Hudson (2007) described factors that stimulated and supported the women’s spiritual search, the process through which they sought new information from a variety of spiritual and religious practices, and how these practices enabled the women to form their own direction through extended periods of self-directed exploration. Factors influencing the spiritual search included having a foundational female relationship with either a family member or spiritual mentor, and having a profound mystical experience, such as insights through dreams, speaking in tongues, psychic experiences, or supernatural encounters with spirits or ghosts. The women discussed a self-directed exploration process that involved reading books of a spiritual nature, music, poems, and engaging in a multi-religious reflection focusing on the spiritual messages of various religions. Through this exploration the women came to form an integrative spiritual practice involving dream interpretation, yoga, meditation, exercise, and being in nature. Hudson found three subthemes in how the women described their spiritual practice: (a) connecting with self in order to find balance, remaining grounded and deal with daily life, and creating a space for reflection and contemplation that was facilitated by emersion in nature, (b) connecting with a non-material realm to receive guidance and a sense calmness, peace, or unconditional love, and (c) regularity of practice (daily/weekly/as often as possible). Hudson concluded that the various spiritual practices the women integrated tended to validate their lived experience and were empowering.
The third main theme Hudson (2007) described was attaching meaning, forming beliefs, and establishing purpose. This theme pertained to how the women made sense of themselves and the world through a system of beliefs that served as a framework for interpreting their experiences. These beliefs aided the women in decision-making and served as a guide to navigate future events and relationships with others. Hudson described four key themes for attaching meaning: reflection and reflexivity, attributing meaning and purpose, forming supporting beliefs, and enacting belief systems. The women reflected on their past as a means to guide future behavior, and they viewed key events that shaped who they are through a spiritual lens. During this process, the women attached a spiritual lesson or meaning to the events and developed a system of core beliefs that guide their interpretation of events and actions. Personal beliefs were formed about the issues of pain and suffering, the nature of existence, and death, and the women took stances on beliefs about a transcendental world, God or a higher power in the Universe, guardian angels or spiritual guides, and reincarnation or a life after death. Core beliefs were enacted in dealing with painful experiences such as the loss of a loved one, and in everyday decision making regarding the women’s roles in relationships, ethics, and work and family. Hudson concluded that notions of a higher power, guidance, and healing facilitated the development and enaction of the belief systems, though in the women’s stories there was no clear distinction between the sacred and secular.

There are many similarities in the results of Hudson’s (2007) and Gockel’s (2009) qualitative studies of spirituality. Central to the participants’ experiences in both studies was (a) a reciprocal process that involved the strengthening of their spirituality identities in overcoming and processing difficult life experiences, as well as drawing strength from [Type text]
spirituality to cope with difficult life experiences; (b) a search process involving both looking within and seeking out knowledge from a variety of external sources; (c) having a transformative experience or paradigm shift in which they began viewing themselves as spiritual beings; (d) utilizing spirituality as a meaning-making system and seeing spiritual significance in life events; and (e) connecting to the sacred through nature and through a regular, integrative, and highly personalized spiritual practice. Although it was not universally reported, many of the participants in both Hudson’s and Gockel’s studies discussed having mystical experiences, negative experiences with organized religion, or both. In addition, both authors observed that the participants had difficulty expressing their experience of spirituality and struggled with the limitations of language in articulating their subjective experience as well as the lack of a common vocabulary for describing their spirituality. The commonalities in Hudson’s and Gockel’s studies echo discussions by Hill et al. (2000) and Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) regarding the nature of the sacred and a dynamic search process as central to conceptualizing spirituality, suggesting that research in this area is converging on a common foundation that future studies can expand upon.
METHOD

Grounded theory methodology was chosen because it allows psychologists to study aspects of human experience that are inaccessible to traditional verification methods and to describe how interpersonal processes develop, are maintained, and change (Charmaz, 2008). Data were generated through interviewing participants who were recruited from online spiritual meet-up groups. In grounded theory, data analysis begins early in the data-gathering process, and the emerging analysis shapes the data collection process. The initial interviews were transcribed immediately after the interview and analyzed for emerging themes; in subsequent interviews, questions were added or modified to follow up on leads and gather more data surrounding emerging themes. Through this simultaneous data collection and analysis process categories were developed that reflect the interactions between the observer (i.e., the researcher) and the observed (i.e., the participants; Charmaz, 2008). As categories were further developed, the research focus shifted from getting a broad understanding of the phenomena to the development of an explanatory theory based upon leads that developed in the emerging data. Throughout the process a research notebook was utilized to reflect on how my own beliefs and background were influencing the data analysis, to capture my rationale for the emerging categories and theory, and to record any important decisions made about the data or data-gathering process. After the analysis a second reader was given three unedited transcripts to review, and she offered her own impression on potential themes and categories, which were then incorporated into the grounded theory.
Research Questions

The following questions are considered the impetus of this study: How did participants who identify as SnR arrive at this viewpoint; for example, did key events, life experiences, or other influencing factors lead them to this belief system? What are these participants’ experiences of spirituality, religion, and the sacred? What role does spirituality play in the lives of the SnR? Because this was an exploratory study, a hypothesis was not formed prior to data collection.

Participants

Participants were selected using a theoretical sampling method and only individuals who self-identified as being SnR and who were willing to talk about their beliefs at length in an audio-recorded interview were asked to go forward with the interview. Participants were recruited from online spiritual meetup groups operating within a 1-hr driving distance of Portland, Oregon, and through referrals from other participants. Spiritual meetup group organizers were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the dissertation study (see Appendix A). Meetup group organizers and other referrals were asked to answer the following screening question:

Select one of the following options:
   a) I am both religious and spiritual.
   b) I am spiritual, but not religious.
   c) I am religious, but not spiritual.
   d) I am neither religious nor spiritual.

Only respondents who identified as being SnR were e-mailed the informed consent documents to preview and asked to select a location for the interview (see Appendix B). Throughout the course of the study, a total of 30 spiritual meetup group organizers were e-mailed and seven organizers responded to this initial e-mail; of these
respondents, three identified as SnR and were interviewed, two identified as SnR but declined to be interviewed, one identified as both religious and spiritual and was not interviewed, and one identified as SnR and declined to be interviewed but sent referral information for a contact at a Unity Church. After being interviewed, meetup group organizers posted information about the study to other group members and also provided me with referral information for non-group members whom they thought would be interested in the study. All referrals identified as being SnR and included five additional participants from one meetup group, two participants from a Unity Church, two participants from a natural medicine doctoral program, and one additional participant not affiliated with any meetup groups.

A total of 13 participants were included in the final sample. I met with participants at a mutually agreed upon location for the interviews. Seven interviews took place in participants’ homes, with three taking place in study rooms of public libraries, two taking place at a Unity Church office, and one taking place in a private conference room at the participant’s place of employment. Prior to conducting the interview, the informed consent document was reviewed and signed, and participants were asked to complete a demographics form (see Appendix C). Demographic information provided by participants is summarized in Table 1. All participants were Caucasian.

Interviews lasted from 45 min to 2 hr and resulted in transcriptions ranging from 16 to 35 double-spaced pages. After Participant 13, I concluded that data saturation (a point at which interviewing more participants no longer resulted in new insights or categories; Charmaz, 2008) had been achieved and stopped recruiting participants. No
new themes had emerged after Participant 10, and the final three interviews confirmed
pre-existing trends in the data and the developing grounded theory model.

Table 1  
Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Religious Upbringing</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Income</th>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>Jehovah’s Witnesses</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(M = 53\)

*As completing all demographic information was optional, not all forms were completed in entirety.

Interview Questions

In grounded theory methodology, the questions asked to participants evolve as the
qualitative data are obtained and analyzed (Charmaz, 2008). The initial questions asked
may be modified or refined, and additional questions may be formulated over the course
of several interviews to test the emerging theory. The preliminary questions posed to the
first participants included the following:

Do you identify as being spiritual but not religious?
  Define what this means for you.
  What has been your experience of spirituality?
  What has been your experience of religion?
  What specific factors or events have influenced these experiences?
  How did you arrive at being spiritual but not religious?
What other factors have contributed to the development of your SnR orientation? (e.g., people you have met, books you have read, living in this region of the United States, interpersonal factors, intrapersonal/personality factors)

Are there any other terms you would use to describe your belief system? (e.g., Agnostic, Atheist, Christian, etc.)

If so, describe how these fit with being SnR.

What is at the core of your SnR belief system?

What role does spirituality play in your everyday life?

What do you consider as sacred?

What has been your experience of the sacred?

Have you had any experiences you would describe as mystical?

If so, describe them.

These initial questions were refined to follow up and expand upon themes and topics that emerged during the initial interviews. Specifically, questions were added to further inquire about participant’s worldview and identity, how he or she utilized spirituality to overcome difficulties, and how spirituality had changed him or her over time.

Data Coding and Categorization

The analysis process entailed several iterations of coding, utilizing the constant-comparison method (a continuous process wherein new data are compared with previous data, data are compared to concepts, and concepts are compared with each other for similarities and differences) derived from Charmaz (2008). Initial coding involved line-by-line analysis of transcripts in which incidents of defining actions or events were noted and paraphrased by the researcher next to their occurrence in the transcript. Focused coding was used after some insights into the data had been gained and there was a direction to synthesize and explain larger segments of data. In focused coding, the most significant or frequently used codes from line-by-line coding were used to sort data across interviews, compare people’s experiences, and aggregate these data into more
conceptual categories. After focused coding, axial coding was used to sort, synthesize, and organize large amounts of data, linking categories with sub-categories and explaining how they are related. This coding process moved the analysis forward into a grounded theory by capture patterns in themes observed in the data and creating an analytic framework that explains and makes predictions about processes observed occurring with participants. Because grounded theory methodology involves simultaneous data collection and analysis, more specific details about the data and process are given in the following results section to help illustrate how the grounded theory was formed.

Second Reader

After data collection was completed I selected three of the participant’s transcripts to send to the second reader. I selected transcripts based upon the richness of content and representativeness of all the participants as well as selecting interviews that were conducted in early, middle, and later phases of data gathering to reflect changes in the focus of questioning that occurred in pursuing leads. The second reader’s feedback largely supported the grounded theory model that was in the works, and captured similar themes and categories that I had expressed (see Appendix D). Although no major changes were needed based on her feedback, the second reader’s overarching theme was used to clarify the overall grounded theory, and her subthemes were used to refine the phases of the model by further highlighting categories we had both noted as important.

Research Notebook and Reflexivity

The research notebook was used to provide reflexivity during data gathering and analysis, and to record changes as the grounded theory evolved. The notebook was helpful because I initially had two competing models for the grounded theory; I was able
to identify that I was trying to force the data to fit into one model and that the other was more emergent from and therefore grounded in the participants’ data. The second reader’s themes also helped me incorporate the pieces of the competing model that naturally fit into the grounded theory and shift the ideas that were more speculative into directions for future research in the discussion section.

Throughout the study, I reflected on my own religious and spiritual beliefs and experiences so as to be aware of how these might influence data collection and analysis. I was raised in a religious home and my mother was the daughter of a Lutheran minister who was excommunicated after a lifetime of ministry for writing and self-publishing a controversial book, titled *Christianity’s Unknown Gospel*, that presented an interpretation of the Gospel that differed from the Church’s officially sanctioned views (Bretscher, 2001). I found that, although my religious upbringing had been more positive than what many of the participants described, I was sympathetic toward and agreed with many of the views expressed by the participants. I was partially drawn to this research topic out of an interest in spirituality and Eastern thought that I had set aside in the pursuit of graduate school. Therefore, this dissertation was also an opportunity to revive this interest and vicariously explore spirituality through the participants’ accounts. I also found that, more than having my own preconceptions creeping into the emerging themes and categories, the participants’ accounts and views on spirituality influenced my own thinking, and spurred me to keep a more regular practice of yoga and meditation. Due to this influence it is difficult for me to separate my own beliefs from the understanding of a SnR worldview that I gleaned from taking on the participants’ points of view, suggesting that the two are now very much in line; although I am not ready to publicly declare that I
am SnR, I will say that I have become more spiritually oriented as a result of pursuing this dissertation. Although this dissertation is completed, the notebook lives on so that I may continue to explore my own stance.
RESULTS

Construction of the Grounded Theory

The initial line-by-line coding of the transcripts produced an enormous amount of data; in order to work with this much data I had to find a way or organizing it in a meaningful way. As part of the analysis (focused coding), the transcriptions were condensed into four- to five-page narrative summaries and rearranged according to general topic area to be more linear. In creating the summaries, I attempted to preserve each participant’s meanings in the concepts expressed by using each participant’s own language in writing about his or her backgrounds and beliefs as much as possible, and by including key quotes to further preserve the participant’s voice and expressed meaning. Creating the narratives served to carry the grounded theory forward, as the process of creating them required continual analysis of the interview data utilizing the constant comparative method, and also helped to organize these data in a meaningful way. An example of one of the narratives is shown in Appendix E.

In creating the narrative summaries, many similarities between the participants’ stories of their spirituality were noted. The narratives convey several types of information: (a) participants’ backgrounds with religion and their process of coming to be SnR, including mystical and other significant events that influenced their spirituality; (b) participants’ beliefs about the self and the world; (c) an overview of their spiritual practices; (d) a description of how participants’ spirituality is reflected in their lives; and (e) goals of their spirituality. Axial coding was used to describe how the participant’s beliefs developed, how the participants were changed or affected by experiences, what
the current spiritual understanding and practices of the participants are, and the direction in which they saw their spirituality going. Throughout the analysis process, I maintained close adherence to the participant’s data by reviewing the transcripts time and time again to pool a collection of quotes from all participants that expressed the central ideas from each of these processes.

From these data, I created the grounded theory: a cycle I describe as the General Path of a Spiritual Quest (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The General Path of a Spiritual Quest (GPSQ) depicts a generalized model of spiritual development across a lifetime, capturing phases of change that participants tended to encounter at various points in their life. I refer to this as a generalized model, because there is no exact path, time frame, or sequence of events that all participants followed in reaching their current spiritual understanding of the world. For instance, not all participants had a major conflict with religion in adolescence, and not all engaged in a secular search for meaning before pursuing spirituality as young adults. However, there were many similarities in the processes participants engaged in, and the GPSQ can provide a useful framework to understand how the SnR participants’ spiritual understanding continued to change and evolve over the course of their lives.

The GPSQ should be interpreted as a series of growth processes that participants experienced and that continued to promote their development, rather than concrete stages with distinct endpoints that must completed in order to reach the next. Because most participants believed that spiritual development continues across multiple lifetimes, the model depicts this trajectory and takes on a spiral form. The spiral form also represents how these phases are not mutually exclusive; the smaller arrows between phases
demonstrate the interrelatedness of all phases in the model, and indicate how processes build upon and interact with each other. There is much blending and cross-over across phases, participants engaged in these processes time and time again, and the phases don’t necessarily have to follow a particular order or sequence.

*Figure 1.* General path of a spiritual quest; top view

Figure 2 presents a different vantage point of the GPSQ such that Figure 1 can be interpreted as a top view and Figure 2 a side view. From the side view it may be easier to see how the participants’ life events continued to shape their spiritual development over time; rather than discrete milestones, these phases are interconnected parts of a larger journey that participants continuously drew from. Again, the small arrows between Taking Perspective, Broad Search for Meaning, and Spiritual Growth demonstrate a few
of many possible interactions between processes. I wanted to highlight this example in particular because these processes build from each other and align quite well; Participants often used reflection in their spiritual practices to take perspective, find meaning, and grow spiritually. Although smaller arrows could be drawn between any of the phases, only this one example is depicted in Figures 1 and 2 for the sake of visual clarity. Other examples are how participants viewed the karmic influence of previous lives acting upon their present life, or could look back and see the lessons of various life events after adopting a spiritual worldview, taking away a new meaning from past experiences. Each part of the model will be explored in greater detail utilizing quotes from the participants that best illustrate the themes and processes involved.

*Figure 2.* General path of a spiritual quest; side view
Religious Upbringing

All participants had at least some religious upbringing in their childhoods and reported a variety of positive, negative, and neutral experiences with their religion. The intensity of their exposure to religion ranged from loose family affiliations to being fully involved in the religious community. Participant 1 reported a more neutral, less involved experience of his religion of origin:

I got baptized, [received] communion, [had] confirmation; my family and I would go to church on Easter, and Christmas and weddings and whatever. I didn't really have too much a problem with it, but we weren't going too much and I didn't care to go to church and things.

The three participants with more neutral experiences did not feel especially connected to their religion of origin, often finding religious services boring or irrelevant to them as children. Participant 12 stated, “Maybe I was unfulfilled as a child, with [the Methodist Church] - I felt a deeper connection with God and my whole self than I did with the religious practice I was raised in… I didn’t feel a depth to it.” Participants with neutral religious upbringings did not get a strong sense of spirituality from within their religion of origin.

Seven participants reported negative early experiences with religion. These participants reported that they did not have a choice and were forced to adhere to the family’s religious beliefs. These participants had a more authoritarian and aversive experience of religion, as was the case for Participant 6:

The religion was all hell and damnation, and as long as I lived under their [parents’] roof I had to go to church every Sunday, I had to go to Sunday school, I had to join the youth group and all of that, and it wasn't like I got to have a choice.
For these participants, failure to adhere to religious practices was associated with threat of punishment (from family and/or in the afterlife) rather than any sort of spiritual fulfillment. Negative early experiences of religion also stemmed from parochial schools and summer camps. Participant 13 reported his experience of being bullied:

So right away, early, it occurred to me that, wow - here I am at this mainstream religion where people are supposed to have good values, and, you know, goodness, and my parents always told me that going to Catholic grade school would be a better education and you’re going to get some religious teachings thrown in there, and it was one of the worst experiences I ever had in my life.

Negative experiences created an aversion towards religion and raised questions in participants’ minds about the value of organized religion. As with participants who had neutral experiences, a sense of what spirituality was really about was missing in these cases.

Three participants reported positive experiences of their religion of origin. These participants found support and comfort in their religious community, enjoyed the traditions, and had fun playing with friends at Sunday school. Participant 7 reported a more diverse and unique religious upbringing than is typically the case:

I was raised in a, I guess what you would call a religious home, but it was very broadminded, and I was exposed to all the world’s religions. My mother was a volunteer for church women, and she worked with international students, so as I was growing up we had [hosted] people from every faith and culture and continent. So I learned very quickly that everyone’s the same and that there isn’t a right way or a wrong way to believe. And that people are people, and that they are actually genuine and caring when you meet them one on one.

This early exposure to and acceptance of many different religions was a very healthy influence on this participant’s spiritual development, and she went on to pursue religious studies later in life. Although these participants received a good basis for their spiritual development early on from their religion of origin, they were also left with a
sense that there was something more to spirituality than what they had been exposed to or experienced. For instance, Participant 3 stated, “The whole time I was in Catholic school and doing all the traditional things, there was this voice inside of me that says, ‘This is wonderful, but there’s more,’ and I kept myself open to that all the time.” This sense of something more sparked the participants to search different avenues of spirituality later in life.

Six participants reported that they were very curious about their religion as a child and asked a lot of questions. These questions were about religious teachings, rituals, and other traditional practices that might be considered part of the church’s culture, such as why women could not hold the same positions as men in the church. However, these questions were often dismissed or left unanswered, as Participant 3 indicated:

I was the one who would say “But, sister-” and I would ask the questions and then they’d look at me and they’d say, “That’s okay, one day you will understand,” and I never did understand… and so I kept asking the questions and I wouldn’t get the answers, and I’d think, “Oh, that’s okay, there’s more.”

Participants with negative early experiences reported that questioning was strongly discouraged and that they failed classes in parochial school because many principles were supposed to be accepted on faith alone, and they had questioned religious teachings or the explanations they had been given. Participant 6 stated that she was told that she would go to hell for questioning the preacher’s interpretation of the Bible. Similarly, three participants stated they were very curious about other religions from a young age but discouraged from investigating them. One participant was even forbidden from attending services with a friend who went to a different church within the same branch of Christianity.
Regardless of whether their early experience had been positive, negative, or neutral, all participants reported that they could not accept some fundamental aspect of organized religion from an early age. Participants reported feeling connected to spirituality from a young age but also having a sense that religion did not have it quite right. Participants stated that they had been turned off by messages that only their religion’s teachings were correct or that only people who held certain beliefs would get into heaven. Participant 4 stated, “It never, from a very young age, it never made sense to me that there was only one church, one God, only one path.” Even participants who had largely positive experiences of religion stated that they could never adopt certain beliefs or teachings espoused by their religion. For example, Participant 7 described an early conflict she encountered between religious messages and her personal conceptualization and understanding of the divine: “I said God is Love and I will not accept that there’s the haves and the have-nots, and if you didn't know about Jesus you were going to hell; I just could not accept that.” All participants’ sense that their religion was missing something continued to grow as they entered adolescence.

*Taking Perspective*

In the next phase of the model, Taking Perspective, all participants began to view religion from a more expanded point of view. This process seemed to coincide with an adolescent’s increased capacity to think and reflect more broadly about him- or herself and the world. During this period, participants noticed problems or inconsistencies within their and other religions, leading them to have more dissonance with religion as a whole. For instance, Participant 8 reported being turned off by the role limitations imposed on women in the Catholic church she grew up attending: “So there really was no
place for women in that church, and I understand that it has changed, but it was the beginning of a discontent.” Participants commented that they began to see hypocrisy in their religious community, noticing that members would act one way in church and another way the rest of the week. Four participants cited hypocrisy as a major factor that pushed them away from religion, as was true for Participant 13:

So a lot of the people were hypocritical - in church they were very involved and they were the ones with their eyes closed and down on their knees praying and coming early, and so it was an interesting hypocrisy / dichotomy. And it kind of raised my awareness up to “What’s going on here?”

Participants commented that this hypocrisy was especially apparent to them regarding issues of racism and in a lack of acceptance of people outside of their own religion. Participants saw this lack of equal treatment and vehemence against other religions as a direct contradiction to the spiritual messages about love and inclusivity they had received, which was something that they could not tolerate.

During adolescence, participants also began looking beyond the religious systems they were raised with, gaining perspective on the concept of religion as a whole. In this process, participants began making comparisons and contrasts between religions and looking for common elements. This early interest during adolescence led participants to begin asking broader questions about the role of religion and spirituality, as illustrated by Participant 12:

And so, when I went to Catholic school - even more so than Methodist - I appreciated the depth of the traditions and so that sort of jump started my exploration of many different religious traditions. Those made me realize that there’s so many, they’re so numerous, so like what’s beneath that? Like what is beneath the traditions, what’s beneath the practices? And why is it that there is so much power in that - the power of healing and prayer? And yeah, exploring that I guess.
These questions reflect the adolescent’s striving to understand religion and its connection to spirituality, and the impact these have on them and society. This type of questioning ultimately led participants to identify spirituality as the common element and to pursue it in greater depth, as will be illustrated in later phases of the model.

Going along with the adolescent’s increased ability for reflection is a drive for freedom and individuation. Both participants who had neutral and negative early experiences of religion reported that they had to conform in order to get through parochial school or to avoid conflict with their families (e.g., going to church, participating in religious rites such as confirmation, etc.) despite internally questioning or disagreed with their religion’s teachings. Participant 2 came to a point where he could no follow his mother’s religion:

Basically, when I was 15 I rebelled from that [Jehovah’s Witnesses], I started thinking, I started questioning things, and understanding that this cannot be the truth, you know, one set of people cannot have the truth, everyone else is damned to hell or to oblivion, there’s got to be something else besides that, so I moved in with my father after that.

Through questioning and seeing problems within their religion, participants started coming to their own conclusions about religion and spirituality. Although they did not know exactly what truth they were seeking, participants firmly believed that religion just did not have it right. Participants also had a sense that there was something more to spirituality than what they had experienced in their religion of origin, which set the stage for pursuing spirituality in other contexts later in life.

Parting from Religion of Origin

Through the process of Taking Perspective, participants came to the next phase of the general path: Parting from Religion of Origin, wherein participant stopped
adhering to the religion they were raised with for different reasons. For 10 participants, this step occurred during adolescence or early adulthood when life changes such as going off to college or living on their own provided them with the freedom to choose whether or not they wanted to continue to affiliate with the religion in which they were raised. With this new independence, participants, such as Participant 11, no longer needed to conform to the religion they were raised with:

But after I left the house, at age 18, I was able to make my own decisions and that was one of them that I made, was not to participate in organized religion. I didn’t see a lot of value in it, and so as soon as I got out on my own I stopped going to church - I don't think I ever looked back at organized religion as really an option for me again.

Participants who had a negative religious upbringing rebelled against their religion of origin upbringing and stopped participating as soon as they had the freedom to choose to do so. Participants with more neutral experiences of religion never had a particularly strong family affiliation with their religion of origin, did not connect with a religious identity, and thus, did not pursue religious involvement on their own. The three participants had a positive experience of their religion of origin eventually encountered philosophical differences that caused them to move on from it at a later point in life.

For three participants, a departure from religion was sparked by a specific negative event that pushed them away. For Participant 9, this involved feeling judged and pathologized by her religion for an inherent aspect of herself:

By the time I was 12, I knew I was gay, and it scared me because of everything I was taught was that it was wrong - I was not allowed to be open to anything like that… I remember going to confession and telling the priest that I thought I was gay, and literally he said, “It’s a sin, get over it, pray, you'll be fine.” (Laughs). Ok. That was the last day I ever went to a Catholic church.
Participant 13’s negative experience of being bullied at parochial school kept him from pursuing further involvement with Catholicism after graduation. Participant 6 experienced the tragic loss of her brother and was angered by the pastor’s eulogy, wherein he referred to the brother’s death as the result of his being a sinner:

And when I was 13 my little brother was killed and he was a year younger than me. And um, what I realized is that - what I made up when I was 14 was that they have the wrong God. No God would just mow somebody down at that young age just to punish somebody. You know, and that my God didn't do that. And so I started reading when I was 14 about the different principles of Judaism, of Buddha, of Daoism, and all these different philosophies and trying to figure out who was the right God, or how I could find a belief that I could live with. Because I couldn't live with the one my parents had. Totally pushed me away from religion.

Rather than being comforted by religion and finding the religious community a place of refuge, these participants felt judged and unsafe. Due to their negative experiences of religion, these participants temporarily put spirituality as a whole on hold along with religion and went out to experience the world without it.

The three participants who had a positive experience of religion during upbringing reported that their religion of origin served as a springboard to pursuing other avenues of spirituality later in life. These participants reported that their religion of origin planted a spiritual seed that continued to grow as they moved on to explore other spiritual practices. Participant 3 stated:

I liked the symbolism, because ever since I was I child I got the symbolism; I never took any of that stuff literally. I knew that it was symbolic, and I was able over the years as I grew older, to look at the symbolism and expand my mind as to what it meant to me, and to use it as guidance.

Participants reported that they held onto ideals of serving the community, valuing the institution of marriage, following the golden rule (love thy neighbor as thyself/treat
others as you wish to be treated), and other key principles from their religion of origin. Rather than having a specific negative experience with religion, these participants reached a point at which they felt that their spiritual growth was being constricted by the structure rather than nurtured by it. Participant 10 reported, “I outgrew it [religion of origin] and decided to go look for other things, and I’ve come back to my church and, understanding its limitations, I still find that basis of that spiritual connection.” These participants viewed the limitations of religions as primarily laying in the dogmatic belief systems and the fixed methodologies they felt put spirituality into a one-size-fits-all box. In response to these constrictions, the participants sought a more individualized spiritual path and pursued a personal connection to the divine.

Whereas positive experiences of religion served as a launching pad for further spiritual exploration, negative early experiences of religion pushed participants away from both religion and spirituality. Those who had positive experiences would go on to immediately investigate other religious and spiritual systems in their quest for meaning and growth. Participants who had a negative experience that pushed them away from religion would initially try to make sense of the world from a secular point of view. However, after a period of struggle, these participants who diverged from a spiritual path would eventually be reintroduced to spirituality outside of a strictly religion context and discover communities where they felt more supported and accepted. Regardless of their early experience of religion, all participants went on to explore alternative beliefs from those they were raised with in their religion of origin. These beliefs would be tested to see what did and did not work for them in the next phase: Broad Search for Meaning.
Broad Search for Meaning

In the next phase of the model, Broad Search for Meaning, participants went out and experienced the world, learned life lessons, and attempted to understand the big picture by seeking knowledge from a variety of sources. In this phase, participants explored many spiritual traditions but were less guided by spirituality than they would be later in life. Participants engaged in a trial-and-error approach to life that often landed them in trouble or was otherwise unfulfilling. However, through their experiences participants discovered what they did and did not believe in, and they became more oriented in their view of life and how to go about living. Rather than a distinct stage with an endpoint, the broad search for meaning is a continuous endeavor, driven by being open to new ideas and a desire to understand more about the world.

For nine participants, this search for meaning was not so much a conscious or deliberate choice so much as a result of gaining life experience. These participants took up academic studies in college or began their career paths, whereupon various experiences and encounters with others continuously shaped their understanding. However, for four participants, this search for meaning was very purposeful. These participants took up philosophical and religious studies, desiring to gain an understanding of the bigger picture. For Participant 2, seeking to understand the world was a very deliberate process:

I saw this diagram, as a true philosopher what you would need to do, what kind of knowledge you would need to accumulate to get a grasp on what is truth. It was like four or five years of studies, thousands of books, all these sciences, all these philosophies, so I thought, “Oh - I better get started.”
Regardless of approach, the participants’ curiosity about life fueled a drive to gain a big-picture understanding of the world. Participants reported being voracious readers of a wide variety of subject areas, including biology, philosophy, psychology, and physics.

Participants who had negative early experiences that pushed them away from religion also set spirituality aside and instead pursued a scientific or philosophical understanding of life. These participants rebelled against their religious upbringing, experiencing family conflict regarding their decision to leave the religion. They reported enduring much angst as they struggled to find purpose and direction without any sort of guidance. This was true for Participant 6, who left her religion of origin on bad terms:

I went through a period when I was floundering and pretty lost and not really sure there was any meaning to anything. And it was that younger period, and I think it was that that pushed me to read all those books and all those truths that everybody else was feeling to see if any of that really sticks.

Before rediscovering spirituality participants reported that they were unwittingly creating problems for themselves through lacking a source of guidance. Participant 4 reported that “then [I] was unchurched for many years…. and basically was living my life through my own will power, and of course I created all kinds of messes, because I was truly disconnected from my internal sense of higher power.” Participant 2, who had received more extreme religious messages from a young age, reported that it took him several years to become fully deprogrammed from the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which he described as a culture of fear that harms many people who are haunted by prospects of Armageddon and hell if they were to leave the religion. Despite a period of absence, at some point (discussed in the next phase of the model, Adopting a Spiritual Worldview...
and Identity) spirituality became the central source of guidance in each of these participants’ lives.

All three participants who had positive early experiences with religion reported that they continued to explore spirituality after moving on from their religion of origin, though in a less focused manner than they would later in life. These participants were especially attracted to commonalities in the spiritual messages they discovered within a variety of religious sources including, but not limited to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. Participant 5 talked about the journey that ultimately led him to the interfaith path:

I was really caught up in Buddhism for a while, then I went to Kabbalah, then I really loved Native American, then I loved studying quantum physics, then I got involved with Jungian work and dream interpretation, and to me those were all aspects of my spirituality. It was an expansion of my own understanding of the divine, in helping me be both the iceberg and the ocean simultaneously, and I’m still working on it.

Throughout their search for meaning, participants sought to remain open to a diversity of spiritual beliefs and practices, investigating and trying them before deciding whether to incorporate them into their belief systems. All three participants who had neutral early experiences of religion also later explored spirituality outside of religious contexts. Participant 11 discussed how she became attracted to more esoteric spiritual ideas:

After reading that book [*The History of Magic*], I kind of found other people in the community at college and we would go to a friend’s house who channeled this other being and they would do readings, and that was fascinating to me, and it sort of opened up this whole different world.

The participants’ openness and acceptance of mysticism facilitated their interest in the teachings of Hinduism, Daoism, Sufism, Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, and
Shamanism. Their pursuit of more a mystical and metaphysical understanding is one example of how the participants’ spiritual practice branched out from their religion of origin, where these concepts are less discussed or accepted.

Participants who had negative early experiences of religion and temporarily set all things spiritual aside were later reintroduced to spirituality outside of religion by another person. These participants referred to a specific person who broadened their awareness of spirituality and led to it becoming more central in their lives, as was the case for Participant 13:

I saw this man who was so disciplined, doing all the things he was supposed to do - and how it netted in [his] life was an example to me; he was just an outstanding example of someone who followed a spiritual path and how it played out in a positive way in his life.

Other participants regained interest in spirituality after being given a book that particularly resonated with their beliefs and expanded how they viewed things. Although certain aspects of religion had pushed them away, the concept that spirituality can exist both within or apart from religion drew them in. Participant 8 expressed a common sentiment among participants about what attracted them to the idea of spirituality outside of a religious context:

Well, the appeal to me was that I didn’t need to go through anyone to get to God, I didn't need anyone’s forgiveness, and I didn’t need any salvation. That God was a personal entity, a personal part of me and I was a part of God, and that idea of, you know, being so close to God and not having to go through any third party, spiritual Earth-based entity to get to God made a lot of sense to me.

In their broad search, all participants sought to identify how spirituality fit into their lives and into the bigger picture of reality. To do this, participants reengaged in processes of taking perspective to give them direction in their search for meaning.
Participant 4 described how she learned to take a step back to reexamine what was going on in her life: “The question I ask myself is: What’s in this for me and what’s the learning? What am I to learn from this? So always going to the learning - that’s something that I’ve had to train myself to do.” This process of introspection and gaining perspective continued to evolve and expand throughout the participants’ lives, as they became more and more oriented to a spiritual understanding of the world.

Adopting a Spiritual Worldview

Adopting a Spiritual Worldview marks a turning point wherein spirituality became central to each of the participants’ identities, and the primary vehicle they used in trying to understand the world. After this paradigm shift, spirituality became the vantage point from which participants perceived the world and interpreted events in their lives and, as spirituality came to define them more and more, it had a positive transformative effect on them. All participants found that spirituality filled a missing hole in their lives, providing direction, meaning, and a resource for coping with difficulties. For eight participants, a mystical experience provided experiential proof of a larger spiritual truth to reality. The other five participants regarded overcoming difficulties as essential points in which they began trusting their connection to the divine for guidance.

Spirituality served participants as a great source of strength in overcoming difficulties, and they all referred to it as key to their mental well-being. Participants regularly drew upon their spiritual practice to stay centered and to find guidance. Participant 9 described how she often took short breaks throughout the day to meditate and regroup: “There’s always things that are challenging, but if I can pull myself back into my center, I feel like I can deal with the challenge and have a good outcome.”

[Type text]
Participant 3 described calling upon guidance from a higher power in times of need, allowing the divine to work through her and help her to resolve difficult situations. Participants described how their spiritual practice created a reservoir that prevented them from being completely drained by life’s difficulties. In addition to acting as a buffer, spirituality also served as a coping tool to process difficult emotions like grief, as was the case for Participant 7 who lost her husband at a young age: “I found an inner strength in that prayer and in that meditation, and in the willingness to go through my grief I found that inner strength and felt even closer to spirit than I did before that experience happened.” Participants discovered that they could rely on their connection to a higher power to persevere, and, in doing so, their spirituality became inextricably infused with their identity. Participant 3 reported, “I began to trust it [spiritual guidance] and I began to know that it was a way for me to have guidance in life that I wouldn't get anywhere else.” As participants learned to utilize spirituality to help them through a difficult period, this trial in turn served to temper their spirituality.

Having a mystical experience was another paradigm shifting experience that led participants to realize a spiritual identity. All but one participant reported having at least one and often several mystical experiences that profoundly affected them. Participant 1 described an event that he likened to being struck by lightning, which reignited his interest in spirituality and caused him to choose to pursue a higher degree: “It was something more powerful than something I’ve worked with ... I was thankful and happy for and it felt right, so I attributed that to like, God.” Mystical experiences forced a change in the participants’ worldviews, creating a fundamental shift in their core beliefs.
about the nature of reality and how they perceive it. For Participant 2, having an out-of-body experience changed the direction of his search for meaning towards spirituality:

I had never heard of out-of-body experiences or near-death experiences, you know, but after that [out-of-body experience], I just started reading about near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences and my whole angle or vision changed, and I realized that philosophies are well and good, but they don’t explain this other part of us. So I started searching for answers, I guess you could say, that would explain that experience.

After having a mystical experience, participants began looking more into mysticism and were more open to metaphysical concepts such as telepathy, extrasensory perception, and other ideas related to consciousness not being limited to the physical body. Other mystical experiences reported by participants included having visions of spiritual entities, being surrounded and comforted by a divine light, having clairvoyant experiences, or having prophetic dreams. For Participant 5, a mystical experience provided insight into what it is like to be a part of the infinite divine: “I had what some people would call a Samadhi experience, an epiphany, I felt this overwhelming sense of calm, and immense sense of love for everything; I was more or less a by-product of the experience.” Sometimes mystical experiences were ego-shattering and disorienting, requiring participants to pick up the pieces of their lives and reconstruct both notions of reality and of who they were. Although mystical experiences were often far from ordinary, they could also encompass anything that reminded participants that they were not separate from God and creation. Other examples included feeling connected to nature or receiving answers to questions and prayers in the form of signs and coincidences.

Having a mystical experience provided participants with experiential proof of the validity of esoteric spiritual beliefs such as mysticism. After participants had such an
experience, they came to experience spirituality as core to their being and inherent to their identity. Participant 4 discussed how her experience informed her beliefs:

In terms of building a belief, I believe that when it’s based on our own personal experience then it’s unshakable; it means that when I know, it’s because I know, not because I read it in a book, not because somebody told me it was true. I know because I know, because it’s my own personal experience.

Participants who had mystical experiences identified as being spiritual beings having a human experience and also held that the true nature of reality was spiritual or metaphysical (energetic) rather than material. The one participant who said that she never had a mystical experience, Participant 9, was also the only participant who stated that she was a human being who was spiritual, rather than identifying as a spiritual being temporarily housed in a human body. She also differed in that she did not believe in reincarnation or her continued existence beyond her one life on Earth. The participants who did have mystical experiences also held beliefs in past lives and the karmic cycle of death and rebirth in which spiritual growth continually progresses across multiple lifetimes.

Once spirituality became more central to their identities through helping them overcome adversity or having a mystical experience, participants also integrated a spiritual worldview. Rather than being one of many aspects of their lives, the participants' understanding of reality became spiritually centered and the way in which they perceived all things. Participant 12 described how her worldview was not merely informed by her spirituality, but that “I think it [spirituality] actually is my worldview, because for me, it’s like the web of the world, it’s the reason for everything.” With a spiritual worldview, participants firmly held beliefs that spirituality represents the true
nature of the self and the world, and they began viewing things from that vantage point. Participant 1 stated that he believed that “when we perceive in this world, we think it’s coming from the world, but it’s really coming from us - coming from that relationship with God and us, which is inside of us, which is not in this world.” For participants, a spiritual worldview involved a dynamic interaction between perception and their beliefs that involved a choice in how to view things.

All participants described how adopting a spiritual worldview was empowering for them. Rather than a passive process in which reality is simply perceived and accepted, participants identified having a number of vantage points and choice in how to see, interpret, and respond to things. Participant 6 described how she learned to employ this choice continuously in her life:

It’s not something that shows up on Sunday, it’s something that shows up with every choice, with every experience … and my theory when I walk out the door is I get to choose if I’ll be blessed by this rain and enjoy it or if I will see it as torturer. So, I’m walking around with these dogs and it’s pouring and people are saying, “You’re from California; you must be really hating this.” No – it’s refreshing, it makes me feel alive. It’s weather, you actually have, you know, the clouds coming in and the sun going out and you have all these changes and it’s exciting, and so it’s different — that approach that I get to choose if I’m being beaten or blessed, it’s like minute-to-minute things.

Participants all described how choosing to take an optimistic view, such as looking for the goodness in others or finding the blessing in difficulties, served to keep them happy and positive. Participant 13 reported seeing a choice in how to feel about any given situation and described how he would pause and observe negative emotions such as anger, identify the ego’s role in creating these feelings, and choose to take a more expanded vantage point. As part of adopting a spiritual worldview and identity, participants sought to identify with a higher, spiritual self, and to de-identify with the
ego, which they characterized as a manipulative influence clouding their perception of
the true, divine nature of reality.

Participants sought to eliminate incongruities between their belief systems and
their spiritual worldview. Participants described how belief systems had a powerful
effect upon their worldview, acting as an automatic filter or lens that primed them to
interpret situations in a certain way based upon past experiences and personal biases. To
avoid holding beliefs that might have a negative influence on how they perceived things,
Participants frequently examined, reflected upon, and revised their beliefs, viewing this
as a lifelong process. Participant 9 described how she first engaged in this process:

Okay - this is what my Mom taught me, this is what the church taught me, this is
what I believe; this is how I'm going to live. This is what I’m going to teach my
family, my friends, this is what I’m going to exhibit when I walk around the earth.
And it’s a long process. I’m 53, I’ll be 54 this year, and it’s still a process
because I don't shut out stuff unless I just can’t grasp it.

Understanding the impact of beliefs upon worldview, participants prioritized
reflecting upon their emotional reactions and judgments towards others, remaining open
to new perspectives, and trying to see the sacredness in everything and everyone.
Participant 9 expressed a common sentiment among the participants in talking about the
adaptability of her worldview: “I have a core of beliefs, but I would say that there’s an
outer layer that is fluid because I'm always learning — always experiencing something
new and exciting that I can pull into myself and become part of me.” When exposed to
new ideas, participants learned to tentatively hold beliefs as working hypotheses until
they were personally validated, whereupon these beliefs could become integrated as core
beliefs and shape their worldview in a desired way. Any beliefs that did not fit in with
their spiritual identities and worldviews were modified, replaced, or abandoned.

[Type text]
There were many similarities between the participants’ belief systems resulting from their adoption of a spiritual worldview. All participants believed in a higher power and that everything is interconnected. All but one participant believed that nothing exists apart from God, that divine energy is the only thing that actually exists and that all manifestations of matter are just this same energy vibrating at different wavelengths. Nine participants expressed belief in a principle called the law of attraction whereby an individual is thought to have some degree of influence over the unfolding, or manifestation, of life events. Participant 11 described how she employed the law of attraction in her daily life to attract more fortuitous outcomes:

It’s sort of looking for the positive in your day all the time, and if I’m not finding a whole lot of positive things, then I’ll start going, “I’m grateful that I’m breathing today, I’m grateful that the sun is shining, I’m grateful for the beautiful green trees,” and I’ll just go on and on and on about what I’m grateful for, even if it just seems like small things, just to get my energy field in a really positive place, and just keep it there.

Spiritual interpretations of principles derived from quantum physics, such as the observer influence and the wave/particle duality of light, were linked in the participants’ metaphysical belief systems with what they referred to as spiritual laws, such as the law of attraction. By remaining open to new beliefs and new experiences, participants received the experiential confirmation they needed to solidify their belief systems.

After pursuing spirituality and having confirmatory experiences that strengthened their beliefs, a spiritual perspective became the participant’s dominant view of reality. Once participants came to hold this spiritual worldview, they saw it reflected more and more in their lives. Participant 5 stated, “Probably spirituality is —to really understand it, you have to experience it. So, the more I comprehend about the spiritual bigness about
life, the easier it is to see the patterns. So, looking back, I see spirituality in everything.”

Spiritual Growth involves a further exploration and expansion of this spiritual worldview, wherein the participant’s beliefs define their reality and guide their actions.

**Spiritual Growth**

Having found their spiritual identities and adopted a spiritual worldview, participants continued to build upon this orientation to the world as represented by the Spiritual Growth phase. Spiritual Growth is a continuous process whereby beliefs and practices are constantly explored, adapted, and deepened. During this phase participants placed spirituality as their highest priority, often making dramatic changes to allow it to become the central driving force in their lives. As Participant 1 stated, “Everything I do is to get more spiritual freedom.” Participants abandoned the pursuit of power or material wealth and changed the direction of their lives; they chose to pursue higher degrees, volunteer at spiritual centers in India, and/or give up long-held career paths to obey a spiritual calling that to others seemed like folly. Participants changed from lifestyles focused on their own external comfort to modest ones in which they found more fulfillment and meaning in serving others, sharing their spirituality, and pursuing inner growth.

After adopting a spiritual worldview and identity, all participants began referring to their spiritual practice as their primary source of guidance, further facilitating their spiritual growth. Participants all referred to spirituality as coming from within and sought to connect to a higher power for guidance by focusing their attention on their internal experience during meditation and prayer. Participant 10 reported, “In my daily practice I connect into this universal consciousness and it informs me of my life path, my
soul calling, how I relate to people, myself, my environment.” Participants received guidance in a variety of ways, including hearing voices, experiencing powerful internal feelings, and seeing signs from God in the form of coincidences. Over time, participants learned to make decisions informed by their spirituality, finding that they had achieved better results when they followed this inner guidance. For example, Participant 4 reported:

I guess the best way to put it is, when I follow my internal “Yes,” I thrive, things flow with ease, the right people are in the right path at the right time, the right resources show up, it’s just faith in the invisible and it just shows up. When I’m working through my own willpower and I heard a No, but it’s like I’m going to make it happen, it’s strife. There’s conflict, contentious people show up, resources just seem to not appear or go away, or it costs me in some way shape or form.

Participants reported experiencing greater life satisfaction when they listened to their inner guidance and allowed this to influence their actions and life decisions. Participants described this guidance as a feeling-based intuition coming from their heart center, gut instincts, or higher selves. They distinguished this guidance from the demands of their egos, which they characterized as ever-present chatter that was a protective but self-serving defense mechanism that fears change and was a hindrance to growth. In order to discern the difference between these competing messages, participants utilized various forms of meditation that helped them achieve an inner silence so that they could create a space for the divine. Participant 13 referred to “ego” as an acronym for “Edging God Out.” Participant 8 reported that when she knowingly or unknowingly gave in to the demands of the ego, she experienced increasingly more physical ailments until she made the necessary change in her life.
In putting spirituality before everything else, all participants sought a greater alignment between their beliefs and their actions. From a broad search where many different religious and spiritual traditions were studied, spirituality became a more focused way of life for participants. Participant 2 found a spiritual teacher and way of living he described as a direct pursuit:

So I do believe that there is a path back to God and a way of living a life that is conducive to that development in that sense, so it isn't a broad area for me anymore; I think there is a very direct way back there, and through that direct experience that we have we can grow back to that, but not before - it’s not a speculation, but really a direct pursuance of that experience.

Participants sought ways to bring a closer connection between their spiritual beliefs and how they lived their lives, seeking to reduce hypocrisy. Participant 7 described how this principle was embodied in the Unity Church: “It’s not going somewhere to practice; spirituality is about living your lifestyle spiritually, and that’s what Unity is, we call it a way of life: Living a life of integrity with your divine nature.”

Participants identified spiritual principles to live by, such as the golden rule and the law of attraction, and sought a way of life that would contribute to their spiritual development. Helping others through community service and sharing their spirituality so that others could benefit from their life lessons became a focus for participants.

In Spiritual Growth, all participants deepened the various beliefs and practices they had acquired over the years in more cohesive ways. This involved creating a personalized approach to spirituality in which practices from different traditions were combined to meet individual needs. Participant 10 stated:

I had to figure out how to express how I integrate these three or four different avenues, and I called them a spectrum of oneness…Each one of those answers a portion of me that I need. One refers to the earth itself, one the body, one the
mind, one the spirit. There’s not just one practice I do, but I do combine them… with an intention behind it.

Over time, participants tried different practices to find what worked for them, found the consistencies between them, and created their own integrated spiritual practice and belief system from a number of traditions. Participants recognized the value of adhering to one tradition but chose to pursue a variety of experiences and connect to the divine on their own terms. They drew from many sources in creating their belief systems, holding onto views that resonated with them while shedding those that did not feel congruent.

For 11 of the participants, sharing their spirituality and seeking out others who had similar beliefs to connect with became a priority for spiritual growth. Some participants became Unity Church or ordained interfaith ministers, or quit high-paying jobs for less demanding ones that would allow them to do more volunteer work, such as teaching inmates how to meditate. Participants took on other leadership roles, creating meetup groups where participants could discuss their spirituality, meditate together, and share stories and lessons they had learned. Connecting with others served a variety of purposes for participants, as Participant 11 stated:

I get a lot of really great ideas - other people tell you about people on YouTube, and tell you about other people to look up, and you get sort of a confirmation that maybe you’re not crazy, and some people would think you were.

Three participants reported that they had experienced judgment from others regarding their spirituality, so having a safe environment where they could speak with others who held similar beliefs and who had similar mystical experiences provided comfort and reassurance. Participants viewed sharing their spirituality as important to
their own spiritual growth, and they also found fulfillment in facilitating the spiritual development of others.

Participants all reported that discussing differences was helpful in clarifying their own worldviews. Rather than arguing with other people over whose beliefs were right or wrong, participants valued when another’s point of view challenged their own, as this could bring new insights. Participant 10 described talking with others who hold different beliefs as a necessary part of spiritual growth: “So it begins to challenge us — that’s an important step when we get our belief systems get challenged. To really step back and look at those and say how can we dismantle this?” Participants held as part of their belief system the importance of staying flexible and welcomed change as a hallmark of the growth process. Like many participants, Participant 13 reported that this happened to him quite frequently:

So in my spiritual undertaking, right, your belief structure changes a lot if you really look at your spiritual nature and all the spiritual stuff that’s out there - it will change a lot. You have to ask yourself what serves you - physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally - you have to ask yourself what serves you.

Participants reported that this growth was sometimes a painful process for them, as they learned to let go of their ego’s attachments to long-held beliefs and judgments surrounding themselves and others. However, participants learned to look for the beauty behind painful experiences and to be grateful for them. Participant 13 stated, “I feel that I’ve had a really full and colorful life that has given me a lot to explore and has shifted my perceptions pretty frequently.” Participants embraced a willingness to see things differently, accept that they may not be right, and be sympathetic to another’s point of view.
Each participant had his or her own way of describing spiritual growth, and they a variety of vivid imagery, similes, and metaphors to express either the whole process of growth or one aspect of it. Participants described the overall process of spiritual growth as expanding one’s capacity to understand or merge with the infinite divine, surrendering the ego, and as moving from lower energy vibrations associated with negative emotions and the physical plane of existence to higher energy frequencies associated with love and the ethereal plane of existence. Participants also stressed the importance of particularly powerful experiences, such as mystical experiences, that dramatically altered their perception, gave them insight into the spiritual nature of reality, and shifted their beliefs. Participants described these periods of rapid spiritual growth by comparing their experience to becoming vulnerable in order to grow like a lobster shedding its shell, being cracked open and flooded by the infinite divine, discovering an inner beauty through a painful experience like an ugly mandrake root coming to flower, experiencing the dark night of the soul and integrating the shadow side of the self, and polishing tarnish off silver to see the true sacred reflection of themselves in others.

Participants all described being changed by their spirituality throughout their lives. Participant 5 stated that “spirituality and my life are one and the same now; I have become more open, more loving, more compassionate, more curious about others’ points of view.” Participants reported that their spiritual practice left them with a deeper understanding of themselves and others. Participant 6 reported, “Certainly all the meditations and study has given me a deeper sense and a deeper confidence in who I am. Yeah, it changes who I am ongoingly.” A few participants held concrete goals for their spirituality, such as writing a book, completing a project, or finding more time to
meditate each day. However, most participants preferred not to think of spirituality in terms of goals, but as a general direction in which the aim was simply to stay on the spiritual path, keep up their practice, and learn and grow from the experience.

Throughout their spiritual development, participants’ views surrounding spirituality and its relationship to religion continued to evolve, and they saw both the positive and negative aspects of religion. For instance, participants saw that although religion provided a structured way for people to access spirituality, this same structure could limit understanding and create division. Along these lines, Participant 10 stated, “Beliefs are part of a whole system - that’s what religion is - a system of beliefs... they can be limiting and yet they can also be a tool.” There was a large overlap in the participant’s views about the differences between religion and spirituality (see Table 2). Participants viewed spirituality as the broader construct upon which religions were originally founded, that can exist either as part of religion or independent from it. Whereas they saw spirituality as an innate connection to the divine, with the freedom to question, discover, evaluate, and change beliefs, they saw religion as external human-made systems of immutable beliefs wherein the messages handed down by clergy were expected to be accepted as truth. Participants believed that, as a human-made system, religion was imbued with ego and had become political and controlling, producing shame and guilt through judging those who questioned the teachings or strayed from the norm. In contrast, they saw spirituality as an individual’s personal relationship with God and a growth process of seeing beyond the ego, rather than seeking to control the ego. Participants believed that, in holding that there was only one right way to worship God, religions created division and conflict, whereas they saw spirituality as a shared journey
that looked different for everyone and facilitated becoming more accepting and loving of others. Participant’s beliefs about the differences between religion and spirituality hinted at why they chose to describe themselves as SnR.

Table 2

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<tr>
<th>Participant Views on Religion vs. Spirituality</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
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<td>Human-made</td>
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<td>Externally structured</td>
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<td>Told what to believe</td>
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<td>Fixed dogmatic beliefs</td>
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<td>Truth passed down from clergy</td>
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<td>Political and controlling</td>
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<td>Members actively converted</td>
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<td>One right way to practice</td>
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<td>Divisive</td>
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<td>Separation of God and self</td>
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<td>Intermediary needed</td>
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<td>Process of taming the ego</td>
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<td>Involves judgment, shame, and guilt</td>
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Death, Rebirth, and Continuation of the Cycle

The final segments of the model – Death, Rebirth, and Continuation of the Cycle – represent the belief held by nearly all participants (with the exception of Participant 9) that spiritual development continues to progress over multiple lifetimes. Since participants could not directly report on past or future lives, these portions of the model are projections based wholly upon participants’ beliefs. They are included to help reflect these participants’ beliefs and illustrate their worldview. Participants who identified as spiritual beings believed that death only occurs to the physical body and that the higher spiritual self continues on to be reborn into a new form. Participant 11 expressed these beliefs as follows:
First, I believe that we don't really die. Just our physical body dies. But all of our spiritual, all of our beliefs and practices and knowledge go with us and go into the next life, so it’s just an ongoing journey. I think the human piece of our experience is so minute, and we're creating from just a much bigger place than us.

Participants also believed that the process of birth and death was not limited to the human form and could include animal forms on Earth, and one participant mentioned that this could also occur as life forms on other planets. Participants who believed in the cycle of death and rebirth also held beliefs in karma; that is, the idea that events that took place in a past life may impact them in this life, that interactions with others they knew in past lives could be affecting current relationships, and that actions taken in their current life will influence spiritual growth and events in their next life. Participants believed that the cycle of birth and death would continue until they reached a state of full self-realization or enlightenment, or evolved into spiritual entities in higher realms of existence. For Participant 4, getting beyond this cycle of death and rebirth in a physical form was a goal she held for her spirituality: “Long-term goal is ascension; I personally feel that Christ came to show us that we can get beyond karma, beyond the cycle of birth/death, and that we too have the power to ascend.” As expressed in Figures 1 and 2, the cycle is better represented by a spiral than by a loop, as each lifetime yields different experiences and is a progression rather than a repetition.
DISCUSSION

The GPSQ is a general model for understanding how people may arrive at a SnR belief system and what this orientation to the world means for them. A generalized model is necessary because people’s experiences of religion, spirituality, and every other facet of life vary greatly, and any number of religious and spiritual paths are possible. Although it provides a descriptive and explanatory framework for patterns seen with participants in this study, it is not meant to be a stage-wise model of development that can be universally applied to all. Rather than distinct stages that must be completed to move on to the next one, the model is more indicative of processes that one may engage in during the course of one’s spiritual development. Although there was a tendency for these processes to be first encountered at certain points in life, such as adolescence (e.g., Taking Perspective) or early adulthood (e.g., Broad Search for Meaning), this may not necessarily be the case for everyone. In addition, there is a large degree of overlap among these processes and they may be regarded as continuous and progressive; although the gathering of information from life experiences and the assessment and revision of beliefs never ends, the participants came to a point (often through an intense, paradigm-shifting experience) at which the focus of these processes became spiritually centered (i.e., Adopting a Spiritual World View). From this point forward (as reflected in Spiritual Growth), spirituality became the driving force of the participant’s exploration and the organizing principle of the participant’s belief system.

Taken as a whole, the model is reflective of what many participants referred to as their spiritual quest, the heart of which is exploration and growth. The model’s spiral
form depicts the belief held by the majority of participants that spiritual development continues over the course of many lifetimes, such that development processes (potentially, but not necessarily described by the GPSQ), could be engaged in time and time again within the context of different life circumstances.

The GPSQ may be regarded as a generic example of spiritual development for someone who identifies as SnR. The GPSQ is not universally applicable to everyone’s spiritual development, and not all of the processes in the model are necessarily encountered by everyone who identify as SnR. For example, although it was not the case for any of the participants in the present study, it is conceivable that an individual may be brought up in a household that is neither spiritual nor religious yet may discover spirituality at some point later in his or her lifetime, either through religion or apart from it. Individuals not raised in a religious household may encounter and engage with it at later points in life and have a fundamentally different experience of religion. It also seems quite plausible that someone could be raised from birth in a SnR household, which would also circumvent the Religious Upbringing and Parting from Religion phases of the model. If the SnR trend continues, this scenario could become increasingly likely as more and more people learn spirituality outside of religious traditions.

Some processes described in the GPSQ may also be encountered by those holding other worldviews, including individuals who identify as religious and spiritual, religious but not spiritual, atheistic, and agnostic. The spiritual quest of someone who is both religious and spiritual may contain many of the same elements as those encountered by the SnR participants. Examples of this could be having an early conflict with religion (though perhaps returning to it at a later time) or a strengthening of faith following the
use of spiritual coping tools to help oneself through difficult times. There are likely many similarities between the spiritual paths of these groups, and in the end, the method of connecting to the divine may be a very insignificant and superficial detail. Both SnR and religious and spiritual individuals may hold spiritual worldviews and identities as central to their being; in this regard, atheistic and agnostic individuals may have less in common with the SnR than the religious and spiritual do. However, atheistic and agnostic individuals may still have had similar paths to the SnR participants up through the Broad Search for Meaning phase, perhaps arriving at worldviews and identities centered around materialism and beliefs that there is no God (atheist) or that God could exist, but that this cannot be known (agnostic). Other points of departure from the SnR view could be the absence of a mystical experience or the interpretation of meaningful life circumstances as mere coincidences rather than indications of a divine order to things. Individuals with a religious but not spiritual identity likely also went through the Religious Upbringing phase but may differ from the SnR participants in that they view God as a separate entity from themselves (dualism) or hold religion as more of a system of values to live by than a means of connecting to the divine.

In this dissertation I describe how religion and spirituality were highly influential in the participants’ lives, impacting them on a variety of levels. The participants gained strength and resilience through arriving at a well-integrated belief system that held spiritual core beliefs as central to their identities and inherent in their worldviews. The participants’ spiritual worldviews contain the idea that what we think and believe will affect our experience of life and our approach to living. Participants learned to recognize when automatic negative thoughts were impacting them, challenged these judgments of
people and events, and identified more adaptive vantage points. The participants assessed and revised their beliefs to align with their spiritual worldview, and they sought to live their lives more closely aligned with their beliefs, eliminating behaviors that contradicted these beliefs and caused them additional suffering. To this end, the participants found a method of handling life’s difficulties through introspective spiritual practices that served them very well psychologically.

Comparison with Prior Literature

One impetus for this study was to understand the subjective understanding of spiritual and religious constructs as held by those who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. Participants viewed much of spirituality as ineffable in that language is incapable of adequately describing it, and they saw formal definitions of spirituality as being too limiting and incomplete. However, participants clearly viewed spirituality as the broader construct from which religious systems draw. Additionally, participants connected religion with dogmatic belief systems and practices, whereas they connected spirituality with the subjective experience of a connection to a higher power that is the universal thread running through all religious systems (see Table 2). The participants’ views corroborate findings of previous studies wherein the majority of participants viewed spirituality as the broader construct to religion (Marler & Hadaway, 2002; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). The participants’ conceptualizations of the differences between religion and spirituality also echo Zinnbauer et al.’s (1997) content analysis of participants’ definitions of religion and spirituality, in which religion was connected with institutional beliefs and practices and spirituality was connected with an inner connection with a higher power.
Although the current interview questions were not intentionally designed to do so, the interviews in the present study covered all nine of Scott’s (1997) content categories. Scott’s content areas included (a) experiences of connectedness or relationship, (b) processes leading to greater connectedness, (c) behaviors in response to the sacred versus the secular, (d) systems of thought or sets of beliefs, (e) traditional institutional or organizational structures, (f) pleasurable states of being, (g) beliefs in the sacred, or the transcendent, (h) attempts at or capacities for transcendence, and (i) concern with existential questions or issues. Participants described feeling connected to the divine and pursuing spiritual practices to strengthen this connection. They discussed the sacredness of life and ways of living that respect and reveal the sacredness of all things. Participants talked about forming their own belief systems, rather than adopting traditional religious ones, and about their own frustrating experiences with religion. Participants described having profound experiences of being one with the divine and pursuing practices to increase their capacity to have these experiences and understand the true spiritual nature of the world.

Fuller (2001) wrote that “If any one individual has ever personified what it means to be ‘spiritual but not religious,’ it was William James” (p. 130). Much of William James’s (1902) descriptions of spirituality were true of the participants and their experiences. In James’s lectures XVI and XVII on mysticism, he described four marks of mystical experiences: (a) Ineffability: being outside the realm of normal experience and difficult to adequately describe to others, (b) Noetic quality: being imbued with knowledge and a deep importance that the individual carries with them afterward, (c) Transiency: lasting only a short period of time, and (d) Passivity: being overtaken by a
superior power that modifies the inner life of the person who experiences this in lasting ways. Participants described being profoundly changed by brief but intense mystical experiences that gave them glimpses of insight into the true nature of the world that forever changed their understanding of reality. True to James’s definition of a spiritual orientation to life, all but one participant held that the physical or material world was just part of a larger spiritual reality, and the aim of their spiritual practice was to pursue a closer alignment with this realm of being. James convincingly argued that personal mystical experiences are the heart of religion, whereas theology, doctrines, and rituals are peripheral to authentic spirituality (Fuller, 2001).

Consistent with Saucier and Skrzypinska’s (2006) study describing subjective spirituality, participants in this study had a high affinity toward esoteric, mystical, and metaphysical concepts. The participants in this study also aligned with the author’s description of subjective spirituality in that they valued contemplation, questioning, and individual discovery through one’s own experience over strict adherence to religious teachings. Saucier and Skrzypinska described openness to experience as a personality factor associated with subjective spirituality; Openness to experience seemed to fit participants in this study, who valued exploration and remaining open-minded about new concepts and other’s beliefs. Saucier and Skrzypinska also discussed the likelihood that individuals who self-identified as spiritual experience higher incidences of mystical experiences compared to those who self-identified as religious; this study supported that notion, as almost every participant (with the exception of one) described having one or more mystical experiences. A strong alignment with mysticism seems a central characteristic of the SnR that differentiates them from the more traditionally religious.
Another purpose of this dissertation was to expand upon the existing qualitative literature by conducting a grounded theory study to identify factors that contribute to SnR belief systems. The present study had much in common with Hudson’s (2007) qualitative study of Australian women aged 18 to 38 who identified as spiritual but not religious. Although the present study included both male and female participants aged 28 to 64 from the United States, there were many commonalities between the participants’ accounts, including difficulty describing themselves and certain aspects of their lives and the inclusion of beliefs and values as a core part of self-perception. The three main themes described by Hudson’s participants – painful experiences, searching, and meaning and purpose – were also discussed by participants in the current study. Hudson found that painful experiences can strengthen spirituality, and the subthemes the author described for painful experiences were also similar to the accounts of the participants in the present study: (a) experiencing a difficult or traumatic experience, (b) feeling unsupported by the church, (c) incongruence between personal beliefs and religious beliefs, and (d) being significantly influenced by others on the spiritual path. Participants in both the present study and Hudson’s engaged in a search for meaning that ultimately led them to identify with a spiritual understanding of the world, were influenced by mystical experiences, integrated multiple spiritual and religious sources in their own spiritual practice, connected to the divine for guidance, and found validation of their experiences and empowerment through spirituality. Hudson’s description of how her female participants made sense of themselves and the world through a system of beliefs that served as a framework for interpreting their experiences was consistent for both male and female participants in the present study and is captured within the GPSQ.
model in the Adopting a Spiritual Worldview phase. In both studies, participants viewed events through a spiritual lens, and these belief systems provided meaning and purpose as well as guidance for decision-making.

The results of the present study are also consistent with Gockel’s (2009) narrative qualitative study of participants who described how they drew upon spirituality for healing and largely identified as SnR. Participants in both studies described spirituality as key to their well-being and stated that it helped them get through difficult life experiences as well as gave them direction and purpose. Similarly, participants in both studies utilized practices of going within to connect with the divine and found that using spiritual coping tools to help them through difficulties strengthened their spirituality. Participants in both studies came to prioritize spirituality in their lives, to identify as spiritual beings having a human experience, and to hold a spirituality centered worldview. Participants in the present study also discussed using some of the same spiritual coping tools described by Gockel: reappraisal (e.g., choosing how to view a situation), meditation, prayer, acceptance, and setting of awareness towards a desired outcome (e.g., utilizing the law of attraction). Gockel discussed how participants underwent a transformation in their meaning-making system as they grew in their spiritual identities and how this transformation changed how they perceived themselves and the world. A transformation in core beliefs and identity was also described by participants in the present study and was a central process of the GPSQ.

The strong convergence in themes between Hudson’s (2007), Gockel’s (2009), and the present study of SnR participants suggests that the results from these qualitative studies are robust. In all studies, a search for meaning led participants to the pursuit of
spirituality. The participants’ spiritual beliefs were tempered by struggles and mystical experiences that strengthened their spiritual identities. The participants’ pursuits of spirituality changed how they viewed themselves and others, and how they went about living their lives. The GPSQ is a framework for understanding spiritual identity development, with a particular focus on processes that can lead to a SnR belief systems. The GPSQ provides a description of how a spiritual quest and the integration of a spiritual identity into one’s core beliefs can result in a shift in worldview that provides for growth, meaning, and resilience in the face of life’s difficulties.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Because this study involved qualitative methodology, the grounded theory that followed from the interviews was filtered through my own subjective impressions and interpretations of the data and thus is imbued with my own thinking about the subject matter. Another researcher potentially could have asked different questions, come to different conclusions, and assembled the data into a different looking theoretical construct. However, the robustness of these results was also supported by having a second reader, who described similar themes based upon reviewing three of the participant’s transcripts, identifying a central theme of “Spirituality as a journey that becomes a core essence of life / a way of life” (see Appendix D).

Although other possible models could have been developed with the data obtained, the results are consistent with the results of previous qualitative studies. In addition, the GPSQ is well-grounded in the participants’ data, as was indicated by the quotes provided. Most participants did not require much prompting, and the questions I asked were general in nature, thereby not designed to elicit any particular responses. A
sample size of 13 may seem small, but there was a high degree of commonality in the participants’ accounts, suggesting data saturation had been achieved; after Participant 10, no new themes emerged and the final interviews confirmed pre-existing trends.

One weakness of the study was the homogeneity of participant demographics. All participants in this study were Caucasian. It is unclear if this was due to the geographic region where the study took place (in the vicinity of Portland, Oregon) or if other minority groups would more readily identify with being both religious and spiritual or other designations. Although participants hailed from Protestant, Lutheran, Methodist Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Unity Church upbringings, the majority of participants had Christian upbringings, and other world religions such as Hindu and Islam were not represented. In addition, six of the 13 participants were recruited from the same meetup group and likely had prior contact with one another that may have contributed to the similarities in their beliefs.

The participants in this study could be characterized by Roof’s (1993) description of “highly active seekers” and most were middle aged or older. As such, they may represent a subset of individuals who have explored much more about spirituality and be further along in their spiritual development than the majority of those who state that they are spiritual but not religious. In terms of the general population, there may be many more younger SnR people who are earlier on in their spiritual quest and have not fully adopted a spiritual worldview or identity and are still in the process of discovering and assessing what they do and do not believe. There are likely to be varying degrees to which individuals who identify as SnR will pursue spirituality, and it may be a much smaller part of some people’s lives and worldviews than it was for the participants in this
study. Another limitation was not interviewing people who are both religious and spiritual, or religious but not spiritual as points of comparison. Although I did see meetup groups with a “Spiritual Humanist” designation that may be considered SnR from an atheist or agnostic point of view, I was also unable to interview any participants who came from this perspective.

Although most participants described mystical experiences as pleasurable and transitory experiences, three participants also described being disoriented by their experience and having to reconstruct their notion of who they were. One of these participants continued to hear voices and have visions regularly over the course of a year, and her day-to-day functioning was impaired during this time. Mystical experiences may sometimes resemble symptoms of mental illness; thus, another weakness of this study is that participants were not given a formal assessment to determine whether they had ever experienced any form of psychosis. Although it is possible that some participants had experienced psychotic symptoms, I believe the participants’ accounts that these experiences were spiritual rather than psychotic in nature should be given credence. All participants were able to clearly articulate their past and present experiences, and all were oriented to person, place, time, and purpose during the interviews. In addition, all participants described how they were able to process these experiences and resume normal functioning. By their own report, all were functioning well in their daily lives (e.g., they worked or attend school), and the fact that they participated in meetup groups or were referred by leaders of such groups suggests that their functioning was at least within normal limits.
Directions for Future Research

Future researchers are recommended to consider spirituality as the broader construct to religion, and to use the concept of inner experience for spirituality versus institutional values and practices for religion as a means of categorization. As participants described, spirituality can be seen as the core essence of all religions and can exist independent of religion. As there are many religions with different traditions and beliefs, it is harder to argue that religion could exist without spirituality or that it is the core essence of spirituality. Religious beliefs and rituals encourage respect for the sacred, contemplation, and powerful inner experiences of the divine. This inner experience is what participants describe as spirituality. Participants’ frustration with religion arose from its follower’s over-focus on the outer aspects of the method, at the expense of cultivating the inner experience of the sacred and working on one’s self. This focus on the what of tradition instead of the why of tradition resulted in division between people over who’s doing it right, and hypocrisy among many strict adherents. In response to these affronts, participants took matters into their own hands and found methods of going within that worked for them. Differences participants in this study described between religion and spirituality (see Table 2 in Results section) could be further explored in future studies.

Future researchers could further pursue spiritual identity development as compared with other models of identity development. Studies could identify common processes encountered by both SnR as well as spiritual and religious populations, as well as differences, such as personality factors, that might exist between these groups. Future qualitative researchers could interview participants who identify as both religious and
spiritual, religious but not spiritual, as well as those who identify as agnostic or atheist to see similarities and differences between members of these groups. Those who identify as both religious and spiritual might have the most in common with SnR, though the path of their spiritual quest might look somewhat different. For example, they may or may not have had a break from organized religion or explored and incorporated teachings of other spiritual or religious traditions. However, they may be similar in that they may have had mystical experiences, underwent difficult life experiences that strengthened their spirituality, and used practices of going within to connect with the divine and receive guidance and support. The religious but not spiritual may differ from the SnR in regard to personality characteristics such as openness to experience, and may be less accepting or tolerant of other religions than the SnR. Religious but not spiritual individuals may have a fundamentally different relationship to their beliefs than the SnR, holding them as less fluid and adaptable and more concrete or dogmatic. Agnostics could be conceptualized as having set spirituality aside in the broad search for meaning and not yet picked it back up; although not being interested in pursuing spirituality, he or she may leave this path open as a possibility in the future. Atheists may also be in a search for meaning but not be open to any sacred or metaphysical concepts; they may identify with materialism as a core belief. It seems likely that the religious but not spiritual, agnostic, and atheistic would all have less interest in mystical or metaphysical concepts than the SnR, would endorse never having had a mystical experience, and also would not identify as being spiritual beings having a human experience.

Though personality characteristics were not formally assessed, participants in the present study seemed to demonstrate personality characteristics such as openness to
experience, introversion, and conscientiousness. Previous researchers have also suggested that spirituality represents a separate dimension of personality that does not fit neatly within the Big Five framework (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006). Given that participants described de-identifying with the ego and aligning with their higher spiritual selves, another hypothesis is that spirituality is a superordinate factor that influences personality as a whole. The participants indicated that they had been changed by their spirituality; however, these personality traits may also have been a factor that influenced the participant’s pursuit of spirituality. Similarly, Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) stated:

We do not yet know whether personality influences the development of religiousness (e.g., the tendency to strive for the sacred, to ask existential questions about one’s place in the cosmos), whether religiousness influences personality (as research on personal goals suggests), or whether personality and religiousness share a common genetic or environmental causes. (p. 392)

Other researchers have also called for additional research into personality and spirituality, such as longitudinal studies that would demonstrate any changes in participants over time (McFadden, 1999). Investigations into associations between spirituality and personality could utilize comparative groups such as SnR, Spiritual and Religious, Religious but not spiritual, and neither religious nor spiritual. Researchers could include a measure of how active participants have been in pursuing spirituality and whether they identify as spiritual beings having a human experience or not.

**Implications for Clinical Practice**

Some experiences described by the participants should be considered in the context of clinical practice. As noted by Shafranske (2011), it is important for clinicians to understand the roles religion and spirituality play, both as sources of psychological
conflict and as well as significant sources of strength. Although it might be unlikely for the participants in this study to choose psychological therapy over spiritual counseling if any outside help were needed, in earlier periods of spiritual development when they were not yet able to draw on spirituality as a coping resource participants often went through a difficult period involving loss of faith, which demonstrates one application of the present Religious or Spiritual Problem V-code in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Helping clients who are experiencing a religious or spiritual problem to clarify their beliefs may help them process their experiences and provide a foundation for action. The goal is not necessarily to change a client’s belief system to a SnR one, but to help him or her come to a more integrated view of the world grounded in his or her lived experience. Goals of therapy may be to identify core beliefs and achieve a stable worldview consistent with these beliefs. As demonstrated by the participants in the present study, having a well-integrated worldview wherein actions are consistent with beliefs can achieve long-lasting beneficial effects. Although a referral to a spiritual counselor may help these clients in the long run, they may not be open to this as their first course of action if they are initially uncertain what they believe about religion and spirituality as a whole.

Some participants also described going through more acute spiritual emergencies that could easily be mistaken for psychotic symptoms, as described by Lukoff (1998). These participants described going through a dark night of the soul, wherein they experienced a loss of self-identity and received visions or heard voices. Although some participants went through a difficult period wherein their ability to function in society [Type text]
was severely impacted, they viewed these experiences as transformative events necessary for spiritual growth to occur. Participants stated that going through these hardships and redefining themselves as spiritual beings allowed them to come to a more expanded understanding of life. As Lukoff discussed, these participants also cautioned that care must be taken to avoid labeling experiences of spiritual emergencies as symptoms of mental illness. If clients have had a profound experience, normalizing these types of experiences and discussing the power that these experiences hold to shatter one’s model of reality and demand a restructuring of core beliefs may be an important first step in the broader goal of integrating their significant experiences with their past and current experiences to reassemble a new working model of the world. Clinicians might encourage these individuals to seek out others who have had similar experiences and refer them to a licensed therapist from the Spiritual Emergence Network who specializes in these types of issues.

Conclusion

I was drawn to this topic because identification with a SnR belief system seems to be a growing trend in a society with a more traditional religious foundation at a time when many are losing faith in political and religious leadership. What I took from completing this dissertation was an appreciation of the importance of spirituality on the psychological functioning of the participants; in a world filled with existential uncertainty and vast suffering, these participants have found a worldview that provides a powerful internal source of guidance and resilience. I also grew in my own meditative practice and understanding of spirituality. My aim in creating the grounded theory was to present the participant’s experience in a way that facilitates and expands the reader’s understanding
of the SnR orientation, as well as the interplay of identity, belief systems, and worldview; my goal was not to prove or define something in absolute terms. Rather, I hope that this dissertation may serve as a platform to further the discussion of the vastly important and underappreciated topic of spirituality in the field and practice of psychology.
REFERENCES


[Type text]


[Type text]


Appendix A

Example of recruitment email

To: (email address of spiritual meet-up group organizer)

Subject: Dissertation study on spirituality

Message: Hello. I am a graduate student at Pacific University’s School of Professional Psychology and am looking for participants for my dissertation study on spirituality. The purpose of the study is to investigate the subjective experience and belief systems of individuals who identify as being spiritual but not religious. This study will contribute to the limited psychological literature on spirituality by providing a greater understanding of the role spirituality plays in people’s lives. In addition, this study is an opportunity for individuals to reflect upon their spiritual journey and share any key events or insights they have experienced. To qualify, individuals must be 18 years of age or older, speak fluent English, identify as being spiritual but not religious, and be willing to talk about their beliefs at length (1-2 hours) in an audio-taped interview.

If interested or have questions, please send an email to (researcher’s email address), and indicate which of the following statements you most closely align with:

a) I am both religious and spiritual.
b) I am spiritual but not religious.
c) I am religious but not spiritual.
d) I am neither religious nor spiritual.

Sincerely,

Michael Crockett, M.A.
Appendix B

Informed Consent Document

1. Study Title
Factors Contributing to a Spiritual but not Religious Belief System: A Grounded Theory Study

2. Study Personnel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Student Investigator</td>
<td>Michael Crockett, MA</td>
<td>Pacific University</td>
<td><a href="mailto:croc3869@pacificu.edu">croc3869@pacificu.edu</a></td>
<td>(503)352-2900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertation Committee Chair</td>
<td>Genevieve Arnaut, Psy.D, PhD</td>
<td>Pacific University</td>
<td><a href="mailto:arnaut@pacificu.edu">arnaut@pacificu.edu</a></td>
<td>(503)352-2900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Study Invitation, Purpose, Location, and Dates

You are invited to participate in a research study on the subjective experience of individuals who identify as having a spiritual, but not religious belief system. This project has been approved by the Pacific University IRB and will be completed by August 2012, and it will take place in a private location near Portland, Oregon, that you and the researcher agree will allow for confidentiality and a quiet space to conduct the interview. The results of this study will be used to expand the limited empirical literature on spirituality and will help psychologists better understand the worldview of individuals with a spiritual, but not religious belief system. In addition, this study is an opportunity for you to reflect upon your spirituality and share any key events or insights you may have experienced.

4. Participant Characteristics and Exclusionary Criteria

[Type text]
Participants are required to be 18 years of age or older in order to participate, and must be fluent in English. Participants must self-identify as being spiritual, but not religious (as opposed to being spiritual and religious, religious only, or neither) and indicate that they are comfortable talking about their belief system at length in an audiorecorded interview. Participants who do not meet these criteria will not be included in the study.

5. Study Materials and Procedures

Approximately 15-25 participants will be interviewed in agreed upon private and quiet areas, such as a reserved reading room in a public library, or a study room at Pacific University. Participants will fill out a brief demographics form to be used for descriptive purposes only. Interviews are expected to be 1-2 hours long and cover any relevant areas of the individual’s spirituality, such as how they came to hold their beliefs, and how these beliefs influence their lives. Interviews will be recorded using a digital-audio device, and transcribed by the investigator using a computer program to create a text file. Transcribed interviews will be de-identified and kept on a password-protected hard-drive and files will be encrypted. Recorded material will be deleted immediately following transcription. No specific information with identifying information derived from the interviews will be included in the results. No identifying information will be placed in the transcripts; an identification (ID) number will be assigned to all participants for identification purposes and only the number will be used in transcripts. Only the investigator will have access to both the name and ID numbers assigned to participants.

6. Risks, Risk Reduction Steps and Clinical Alternatives

a. Unknown Risks:
   It is possible that participation in this study may expose you (or an embryo or fetus, if you are or become pregnant) to currently unforeseeable risks.

b. Anticipated Risks and Strategies to Minimize/Avoid:
   The interview is noninvasive and appears to pose no physical or mental health risks to you. The only foreseeable risk is that you may experience uncomfortable thoughts or emotions when completing the interview due to the personal nature of the topic you are asked to discuss. You may refuse to answer any of the questions that you do not wish to answer. You have the right to end participation at any time without negative consequences.

c. Advantageous Clinical Alternatives:
   This study does not involve any experimental clinical trials.

7. Adverse Event Handling and Reporting Plan

The IRB office will be notified by the next normal business day if minor adverse events occur (e.g., You become upset and must discontinue the interview) and will be handled as follows: the investigator will immediately provide information regarding the School of Professional Psychology’s clinics, and will contact you within 48 hours to check if you are ok and ask if you would or would not want to continue in the study.
The IRB office will be notified within 24 hours if major adverse events occur (e.g., You threaten the investigator or state you will harm yourself or others) and will be handled as follows: consulting with research advisor immediately and contacting the appropriate authorities (e.g. police, child protection services) if necessary. Any unforeseen breach of confidentiality will be considered a major adverse event, the breach reported to the IRB within 24 hours, and the affected participants will be notified.

8. Direct Benefits and/or Payment to Participants

a. Benefit(s):

You may or may not personally benefit from being in this study. You may enjoy sharing the story of your spirituality and gain insights from reflecting upon your experiences.

b. Payment(s) or Reward(s):

Participants will not be paid for their participation.

9. Promise of Privacy

This study and the investigator will not use your name or identity for publication or publicity purposes. Your confidentiality will be protected, however the investigator will follow mandatory reporting regulations and exceptions to confidentiality as described in the following cases: where a clear intent to harm oneself or another individual is described, and where the abuse of children, the elderly, or individuals with mental impairments is preventable. Interviews will be digitally audio recorded and responses will be transcribed by the investigator alone. Transcribed interviews will be de-identified and kept on a password-protected hard-drive and files will be encrypted and kept in a locked file cabinet. Recorded material will be deleted immediately following transcription. In order to protect your confidentiality and anonymity, all information regarding your identity will be kept confidential. No identifying information will be placed in the transcripts; an ID number will be assigned to all participants for identification purposes and only the number will be used in transcripts. While dissertation readers will have access to de-identified quotations from the transcripts, only the investigator will have access to the full transcripts and to both the name and ID numbers assigned to participants. In addition, no identifiable quotations will be included in the final paper.

10. Medical Care and Compensation In the Event of Accidental Injury

During your participation in this project it is important to understand that you are not a Pacific University clinic patient or client, nor will you be receiving complete medical or mental health care as a result of your participation in this study. If you are injured during your participation in this study and it is not due to negligence by Pacific University, the researchers, or any organization associated with the research, you should not expect to
receive compensation or medical care from Pacific University, the researchers, or any organization associated with the study.

### 11. Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Pacific University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without prejudice or negative consequences. If you choose to withdraw after beginning the study the investigator will ask if any data obtained can be used in the results.

### 12. Contacts and Questions

The researcher(s) will be happy to answer any questions you may have at any time during the course of the study. If you are not satisfied with the answers you receive, please call Pacific University’s Institutional Review Board, at (503) 352-1478 to discuss your questions or concerns further. If you become injured in some way and feel it is related to your participation in this study, please contact the investigators and/or the IRB office. All concerns and questions will be kept in confidence.

### 13. Statement of Consent

Yes No

- I am 18 years of age or over.
- All my questions have been answered.
- I have read and understand the description of my participation duties
- I have been offered a copy of this form to keep for my records.
- I agree to participate in this study and understand that I may withdraw at any time without consequence
- I give permission for the researcher(s) to gather audio data for analysis, understanding that any tapes will be immediately deleted upon transcription.

Participant’s Signature

Date

Investigator’s Signature

Date

### 14. Participant Contact Information

This contact information is required in case any issues arise with the study and participants need to be notified and/or to provide participants with the results of the study if they wish.
Would you like to have a summary of the results after the study is completed?  ____Yes  ____No

Participant’s Name (Please Print) ________________________________

Street Address  ______________________________________

Telephone  ______________________________________

Email  ______________________________________
Appendix C

Demographics Form
(Please print neatly. To be used for descriptive purposes only.)

Pseudonym: ________________________________
(Please choose a name that you would like to appear in place of your true name in written reports. Make sure that your choice can not be linked to you by others to help maintain your confidentiality)

Gender: ________________________________

Age: ________________________________

Marital Status: ________________________________

Race/Ethnicity: ________________________________

Highest degree earned: ________________________________

Approximate yearly income: ________________________________

[Type text]
Appendix D

Second Reader’s Themes

If you are looking for an overarching theme: **Spirituality as a journey that becomes a core essence of life/ a way of life.** I could see grouping meditation, deeper spiritual experiences, unifying people, and a focus on thinking positively as all parts of spirituality. And then grouping struggles in personal life, ties to religion, and educating self as being more of the journey to becoming the spiritual person:

**Spirituality**

1. **Meditation**
   - can mean different things for different people and the experiences with meditation differ
   - seems to be a core part of spirituality

2. **Deeper Spiritual Experiences**
   - includes out of body experiences, vision quests, clairvoyance
   - experiencing something that most people don’t experience or even believe to exist
   - these are the experiences that people have kept to each other (which could be a separate theme—this idea that certain experiences need to be kept a secret as a way to protect oneself as others view it as weird or pathologize it)

3. **Unifying People**
   - love, compassion, understanding
   - eliminates differences between people, everyone is the same (acceptance of the differences in other people, including religiously/ spiritually)
   - idea that all life is sacred
   - one path to god/ one god but many ways

4. **Focus on Thinking Positively**
   - having a positive outlook, positive experiences, using positive psychology.
   - might even include acting in a positive manner, doing for others

**Journey to Becoming a Spiritual Person**

**Educating Oneself**
- reading books, studying
- search for answers, questioning – often started in youth
- using science, “science of the soul”
- experimentation

[Type text]
-finding teachers (either in person or through readings)

**Ties to Religion**
- belief in god
- past or current attendance at church or involvement with a specific religion
  - believes there are negative aspects to religion (this includes its limitations, that it divides people, fear, hypocrisy)

**Struggles in Personal Life**
- these varied greatly but included having a violent family, a spouse dying, divorce
- going through the struggle seems to have an impact on the person’s spirituality, either it enhances their practice or they used it as a support, etc.
Appendix E

Narrative Example

Summary for Participant 6 (P6):

I met P6 in her home for the interview. P6 reported that she grew up in a very small, traditional Lutheran community where her parents expected her to go to church every Sunday and she had no choice about things such as joining the youth group. Her experience of this church was “all hell and damnation” where no one was allowed to question the preacher’s interpretation or the Bible. P6 reported that her younger brother was killed in a horrific motorcycle accident when she was 13, and that she lashed out at the preacher after he talked about being punished for sins in the eulogy. She reported that this event pushed her away from her parent’s religion:

And um, what I realized is that - what I made up when I was 14 was that they have the wrong God. No God would just mow somebody down at that young age just to punish somebody. You know, and that my god didn’t do that. And so I started reading when I was 14 about the different principles of Judaism, of Buddha, of Daoism, and all these different philosophies and trying to figure out who was the right God, or how I could find a belief that I could live with. Because I couldn’t live with the one my parents had.

She reported that after this she went largely unchurched until she was about 40. During this time, she went through a period where she struggled with feeling lost and doubting if there was any meaning to anything. However, she reported that it was this struggle that “pushed me to read all those books and [explore] all those truths that everybody else was feeling to see if any of that really sticks.” During this time she also looked into a lot of new age spirituality, Sufi dancing, using crystals, and spiritual healing, and learned to connect to the divine by meditating, going out and enjoying nature, and helping others in need. For P6 this spiritual connection is a physical and not an intellectual experience, and she is drawn to meditations that focus on being tuned into the heart center and the body, rather than the mind.

When P6 was in college she had an out of body experience during a meditation led by a group counselor that had a profound influence on her spiritual beliefs. She stated that this experience confirmed to her what she had sensed as a child; that there is more than just a physical, bodily existence, and that she was connected to the divine and a part of everything in existence. She also reported having other mystical experiences such as having intuitions, premonitions, or messages in dreams “fed back” to her in the form of significant coincidences that remind her that she is connected to something larger than just herself. She reported that an important part of her spirituality is:

[Type text]
Just that constant questioning and never assuming that anybody has the right answer. Never assuming that any group has the right God. Just kind of making it personal - like I thought that if I could create a personal God that was really supportive to me, that would be the God for me, rather than whatever anyone else says.

P6 views the divine as more of an essence or energy that everything is a part of and that everyone has a direct and personal connection to. As the divine lives in her and all living things, people have responsibility for their actions and contribute to existence, rather than having a separate entity in charge of taking care of or punishing people. To her, this means that people are empowered to find their own meaning and worth, and “you get that by going through these trials and tribulations and getting to the other side and building and learning, and questioning, rather than closing down and believing that we have no control or no capacity for our own decision making.” Similarly, she does not separate spirituality from everyday life, seeing it as part of who she is, how she sees the world, and how she interacts with people. For her, spirituality is often an active process, where she chooses how to view things and interpret events, checks in with her intuition, and uses this for guidance to make decisions.

P6 stated that spirituality has given her a deeper sense of who she is and more confidence in herself, and has kept her from despair in dealing with things such as deaths in the family by giving her a higher purpose to believe in and live for. She stated that her spiritual practice helps her stay centered, look for the positive side of things, and see negative experiences as lessons to grow from. Goals of her spirituality include finding people in the community to learn, develop, and grow spiritually with, and to connect back to her art, where she feels a strong sense of the divine. She believes it is important to share spirituality with others in order to learn from each other’s experiences, and to become more tolerant, accepting, non-judgmental, and loving. An ultimate goal of her spirituality is to live a full life, constantly learning from the experience, and get to the point where she is and be able to die and leave without any drama.