CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE
DEVELOPMENT OF A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL IDENTITY**

A THESIS

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BY

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ABSTRACT

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The importance of a spiritual identity is critical to a person's well-being, yet surprisingly very few theories of self-identity that include spirituality as part of a self-concept consider how specific types of religious affiliation, or exposure to a particular faith tradition, can influence spiritual identity. This thesis fills this gap by examining how a Christ-follower/Christian identity is formed, by expanding on a theistic model of spiritual identity development and generalizing from a contemporary psychological model that describes the importance of language acquisition on an emerging sense of self. I make an argument that a spiritual identity develops through exposure to sacred texts and faith practices, and more importantly the language and vocabulary that comprise them. Scholarship on New Testament texts argues that these texts were written to new Christ-followers to shape their emerging group identity. As such, these texts contain language that forms a particular narrative about who a Christ-follower is, and what it means to be a Christ-follower. These same texts impact current and new Christ-followers/Christians in a similar manner, with the language of these texts creating the narrative structures around which a person can form their own Christ-follower/Christian spiritual identity. Evidence for this developing spiritual identity is revealed through the verbal narratives people produce to describe their relationship with God. A few examples of personal narratives are provided to illustrate.

To my family, who has always given me the time and space to pursue my dreams, no matter how crazy they may seem at the time.

And to Salem United Methodist Church-Ladue, in St. Louis, MO, and the pastoral leadership there for your mentoring and support of my pursuit of this degree.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

SCT   Self-Categorization Theory

SIT   Social Identity Theory

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In 2023, the Public Religion Research Institute published the results of a survey examining religious behaviors of Americans.[1] This survey included responses from 5800+ adults living across the United States, and was focused on addressing the importance of religion to Americans amidst rising disaffiliation with organized religion, an increasing cultural and political divide across the United States, and a transition in local churches back to in-person worship and related services following the COVID-19 restrictions on such gatherings. While they report that 27% of respondents indicate having no religious affiliation, 52% of respondents report that religion is either the most important or one of many important things in their life. In addition, 35% of respondents reported praying with others throughout the year, 30% reported attending a religious service a few times a year, and 29% reported talking to religious leaders at least a few times a year. These findings point to a complex relationship between religiosity, the extent to which people participate in communal religious practices (e.g., group prayer, church service attendance), and religion, i.e., the values and principles of an institutionalized system of religious tradition.

A similar complex relationship exists between religiosity and spirituality. Findings by the Pew Research Center published in 2023 show that 70% of their sample of 11,000+ Americans report being spiritual in some way, with 48% of their sample report being both

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[1] "Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval." PRRI, May 16, 2023. https://www.prri.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/.

religious and spiritual.[2] In asking their respondents what they meant by "spiritual" the modal response (47%) defined it in terms that aligned "spiritual" with religious faith or belief, and particularly aligned it with Christianity.[3] While many definitions of spirituality exist across the scholarly literature, there is consensus amongst scholars that it is best conceptualized as a personal relationship with God/the Divine,[4] a definition that mirrors the Pew Center respondents' perspective that being connected to God is essential to spirituality.[5]

The findings that religiosity may be declining across the U.S., but spirituality is not points to the need to study how spirituality impacts individuals, and their sense of who they are. Indeed, the question "who am I?" is one of life's most challenging questions. To answer this question, we must reflect on various aspects of our self, for example consideration of who we are as a physical being, or even who we are as a thinking being. This knowing of who we are provides us with a sense of meaning and personhood,[6] and a sense of self-identity that distinguishes us from, yet connected to, others.[7] Spiritual identity has long been recognized as an important element of a person's total self-identity, with some scholars arguing that spirituality structures the self.[8] This

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[2] Becka A. Alper et al., *Spirituality Among Americans,* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, December 7, 2023): 69.

[3] Alper et al., *Spirituality*, 10.

[4] Brian J. Zinnbauer, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Allie B. Scott, "The Emerging Meanings of Religiousness and Spirituality: Problems and Prospects," *Journal of Personality* 67, no. 6, (December 1999): 901.

[5] Alper et al., *Spirituality*, 31.

[6] Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person. A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 188.

[7] John Barresi, "On becoming a person," *Philosophical Psychology* 12, no. 1 (1999): 90.

[8] Chris Kiesling and Gwen Sorrell, "Joining Erikson and identity specialists in the quest to characterize adult spiritual identity" *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 9 (2009): 252.

aspect of the self is essential for consideration of human thriving and well-being,[9] and as such has been a focus of psychological study.

The concepts of personhood and identity, however, are important to theological investigation as well. Consider, for example, theologian Peter Sedgwick's comments about the concept of self-identity in Calvinist thought where the self becomes the elect being, or in Wesleyan thought where the self participates in the drama of salvation, or more generally that it is only through religion—its rituals and other activities of worship—that our self-identity is truly rediscovered and sustained.[10] Such comments emphasize the theological importance of studying self-identity. Indeed, there has been considerable attention in biblical studies since the late 1990s on the formation of a distinct Christian social identity amongst the first Christ-followers as a central component of New Testament texts. The same amount of attention has not been applied, though, to studying how these same texts act to shape personal Christian self-identity in contemporary Christ-followers. This thesis attempts to address this gap, by bridging recent scholarship in biblical studies that applies social identity theory to the development of a Christian group identity in the early church through the language of the New Testament texts (epistles and gospels) with recent psychological theorizing about the development of autobiographical memory and autobiographical consciousness through social-cultural interactions and emergent language abilities. I will address some of the shortcomings of conventional theories of the self that do not adequately account for spiritual development and make an argument that a person's individual spiritual and

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[9] Chris Kiesling et al., "Identity and spirituality: A psychosocial exploration of the sense of spiritual self," *Developmental Psychology,* 42, no. 6 (2006): 1274.

[10] Peter Sedgewick, "Who Am I Now? Theology and Self-Identity," *Theology,* 104, no. 819 (May 2001): 200.

religious identity is formed through interactions with religious texts—the narratives that organize a religious group consciousness and identity—to shape the individual autobiographical spiritual consciousness that underlies one's spiritual self-identity.

Thesis Overview

Several important psychological theories exist that emphasize the importance of spirituality and the development of a spiritual self as a critical component of a person's self-identity. Rather than provide a comprehensive review of all these theories, a brief description of two of the most influential of these theories is provided in Chapter 2 to offer a foundational understanding of the constructs of identity and the self. It is important to note that neither of these theories, as influential as they are in psychology for providing an understanding of the self, and as much as they attempt to incorporate an understanding of the role of spirituality on the self, takes a *theistic* approach, i.e., a belief in the existence of God, to the study of spirituality and identity development. Such an approach has been offered by Justin Poll and Timothy Smith,[11] who take a distinctive Christian identity approach, and so an overview of their work is presented at the end of Chapter 2. This theory is an important theological advance in understanding how spiritual self-identity develops, in that it firmly assumes that we are spiritual beings, capable of communicating with and being in relationship with God. However, it fails to fully account for how that spiritual self develops, i.e., it fails to describe the psychological processes that engage to allow for the formation of a spiritual self-identity. It is important to be familiar with Poll and Smith's work as it sets a framework for my theorizing around how the spiritual self develops and influences thoughts and behaviors.

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[11] Justin B. Poll, and Timothy B. Smith, "The Spiritual Self: Toward a Conceptualization of Spiritual Identity Development," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 2 (2003): 133.

Chapter 3 of this thesis provides a brief discussion of social identity, to outline how this aspect of one's self-concept connects them to groups. Understanding how individuals acquire social identities is critical to understanding how such identities are distinct from self-identity. This same chapter will then explore how social identity theory has emerged as a perspective for studying New Testament texts to make an argument that these texts were written to shape the identity of early Christ-followers. This approach is foundational to my argument that these texts serve the same purpose today to shape Christian identity, because they provide the narrative language and conceptual structure for contemporary Christ-followers to create their own spiritual self-identity through the formation of an autobiographical spiritual consciousness that depends on acquisition of a specific religious language and vocabulary.

Chapter 4 represents the expansion of the previous two chapters to my specific thesis argument, beginning with an overview of recent work by psychologist Robin Fivush and colleagues[12] on the development of autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory is a unique aspect of human memory that allows individuals to define themselves as distinct from others, with a sense of personal history shaped by social and cultural interactions that help us answer the question of what it means to be human. Fivush argues that language, especially its role in the formation of autobiographical memory and personal narratives, is key for the development of autobiographical consciousness, an extended subjective awareness that underlies a sense of self.[13] In this chapter I will present my argument that the development of a spiritual

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[12] Katherine Nelson and Robyn Fivush. "The Development of Autobiographical Memory, Autobiographical Narratives, and Autobiographical Consciousness," *Psychological Reports* 123, no. 1 (2020): 71.

[13] Nelson and Fivush, *Autobiographical Consciousness*, 73.

autobiographical consciousness is necessary for the development of spiritual self-identity, and argue that it is formed in much the same way that general autobiographical consciousness is formed, through language and the creation of organizing narrative structure. Key to my argument, though, is that it is the language of religious texts and lived religious experiences that shape a personal narrative wherein individuals come to define who they are as persons of faith, not just as members of a religious group. These texts, then, serve the same purpose they did when first written, i.e., to shape the reader's identity. That statement in and of itself is not unique. What is unique is the link I make to theoretical explanations that demonstrate how language supports the development of a spiritual autobiographical consciousness that anchors this identity with and through a deepening relationship with God. This chapter will provide sample spiritual autobiographies that reflect the underlying narrative structure of spiritual autobiographical consciousness, and how this consciousness reveals the progression of spiritual identity development as a growing connection to God.

Finally, Chapter 5 will offer some concluding thoughts discussing the importance of understanding how spiritual identity develops given findings that report that a majority of Americans describe being spiritual and that connecting with their spirituality is an essential part of their being.

CHAPTER 2.

IDENTITY, PERSONHOOD, AND THE SPIRITUAL SELF

The importance of spirituality and the development of a spiritual self is a central part of many psychological theories of self-identity. Most of these theories have been influenced by William James from the late 19th century and later by Erik Erikson in the mid-20th century, so they will be discussed here in some detail to provide a foundational understanding of the concepts of the self and how self-identity develops. These two theories include the concepts of spiritual identity in their discussion of self-identity, but neither takes into consideration a firm conviction that God exists, nor how that belief influences a person's spiritual identity. As a contrast to these approaches, this chapter will close with the discussion of a model of identity development from Justin Poll and Timothy Smith that holds the assumption that God exists as central to its explanation of how the spiritual self develops.

Psychological Theories of Identity and the Spiritual Self

William James and Identity Development

The earliest psychological theory to address identity development and the self comes from philosopher and psychologist William James. In his *Principles of Psychology* James outlines a theory of personal identity that includes a multi-dimensional self that is necessary for making sense of experiences and memories, and for guiding attention to things of interest.[1] This multi-dimensional self is comprised of two elements, the "ME" and the "I." He writes, "…personality implies the incessant presence of two elements,

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[1] William James, *The Principles of Psychology, Volume 1* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1890,) 292.

and objective person, known by a subjective Thought and recognized as continuing in time. Hereafter, let us see the words ME and I for the empirical person and the judging Thought."[2] This ME/I distinction is important for considering how an individual experiences selfhood. The ME is the object of experiences, and reflects the phenomenology of selfhood, i.e., "all that he [a person] is tempted to call by the name of me."[3] This aspect of self is contrasted with the subjective experience of I, that part of the self that is known to the conscious thinking mind.

In describing the ME, James denotes three distinct MEs/selves, each of which has its own phenomenology and corresponding consciousness:[4] the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self.[5] The material self refers to one's physical body and those physical objects that can be called "mine." The social self refers to the recognition a person gets from others: friends, family, co-workers, etc. Finally, and most relevant to this discussion, the spiritual self is described by James as the aspect of self that is tied most closely to our inner reflections, feelings, and dispositions. He considers this ME as the core of our identity, writing that this ME is "the most enduring and intimate part of the self, that which we most verily seem to be. …our moral sensibility and conscience...so supremely precious that, rather than [lose] it, a man ought to be willing to give up friends and good fame, and property, and life itself."[6] For James, the spiritual self often acts as active personal consciousness, serving to guide our momentary thoughts and reflections, and therefore, influence our actions. It is "…more incessantly there than any

[2] James, *Principles*, 371.
[3] James, *Principles*, 291.
[4] Mateusz Wozniak, "'I' and 'Me': The Self in the Context of Consciousness," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (September 2018): 1656-2.
[5] While James argues for the existence of distinct selves, all work together to create a unified sense of identity.
[6] James, *Principles*, 315.

other single element of the mental life…."[7] It is the aspect of the self that guides

cognitive activities like attention, and is the "part of the innermost Self which is most

vividly felt."[8] This aspect of the self arouses critical emotions and impulses, including

spiritual self-seeking, which James defines as an impulse toward "…psychic progress,

whether intellectual, moral, or spiritual…".[9]

For James, self-seeking allows for the distinction between actual selves—those

immediate aspects of the self that exist in the present moment, and potential selves—the

aspects of the self that *can come to exist*. The tension between the two selves (the actual

and the potential) guides behaviors. The material self, for example, might need to forego

an immediate bodily pleasure in the interest of improving health to achieve a more ideal

material self. Of all the potential selves, James notes that it is the potential social self, in

its quest to seek social approval, and not the potential spiritual self, that most impacts our

current moral conduct and is most connected to our moral and religious lives. James

writes:

> Yet still the emotion that beckons me on is indubitably the pursuit of an ideal
> social self, of a self that is at least *worthy* of approving recognition by the highest
> *possible* judging companion…This self is the true, the intimate, the ultimate, the
> permanent Me which I seek. This judge is God, the Absolute Mind, the 'Great
> Companion.'…Those who have the most of it are probably the most *religious*
> men."[10]

Even though James identifies a spiritual self, his theory emphasizes the self as a

by-product of bodily activity. He does not negate the existence of a soul as a force that

may compel individuals to have faith in the divine,[11] but for James the self, in any of its

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[7] James, *Principles*, 298.
[8] James, *Principles*, 305.
[9] James, *Principles*, 309.
[10] James, *Principles*, 315-316
[11] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 53.

distinctions, is an observable, empirical construct subject to observation and investigation, while the soul represents a metaphysical concept that is not worthy of exploration. In arguing against an attempt to study the soul William James writes,

> So, in the present instance, we ought certainly to admit that there is more than the bare fact of coexistence of a passing thought with a passing brain-state. But we do not answer the question What is that more? when we say that it is a Soul which the brain-state affects. This kind of more explains nothing; and when we are once trying metaphysical explanations we are foolish not to go as far as we can. For my own part I confess that the moment I become metaphysical and try to define the more, I find the notion of some sort of an anima mundi thinking in all of us to be a more promising hypothesis, in spite of all its difficulties, than that of a lot of absolutely individual souls. Meanwhile, as psychologists, we need not be metaphysical at all. The phenomena are enough, the passing Thought itself is the only verifiable thinker, and its empirical connection with the brain-process is the ultimate known law.[12]

James does not negate the existence of what he calls religious experiences, but he is careful to refrain from arguing that these experiences guide development of the spiritual self. This is an important framing, because it captures much of the psychological theorizing about the self throughout much of the late 19th to early 20th century. Indeed, a cultural shift toward secularization during this period shifted an understanding of self from a primarily theological perspective to a scientific/naturalistic perspective, with the self, as an aspect of the body, viewed as being subject to natural law just as much as, for example, tidal movements are subject to natural law.[13] What this shift produced was an exclusion of spirituality as important to identity development, with spirituality remaining a largely undiscussed aspect of identity theory until Erik Erikson proposed a theory of psychosocial development where spiritual development takes a central role.

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[12] James, *Principles*, 346.

[13] Deborah J. Coon, "Salvaging the Self in a World Without Soul: William James's *The Principles of Psychology," History of Psychology* 3, no. 2. (2000): 84.

Erik Erikson and Identity Development

To understand Erikson's theory of identity development, it is important to situate it in his larger life context. Erikson was raised Jewish in Germany in the early 20th century, where he most certainly felt like an outsider, a factor that influenced his theory of identity development.[14] For Erikson, identity development, and the question "Who am I?", especially as related to one's religious (i.e., social) and spiritual (i.e., self) identity, was fraught with conflict and potential exclusion and prejudice if the answer did not align with contemporary German political thought and the majority culture. Erikson's thinking regarding psychosocial development was strongly influenced by his training in the Freudian Psychoanalytic tradition, and its emphasis on ego development as occurring over a series of stages across the lifespan. This is most clearly seen in the articulation of the central core principle of his work: the epigenetic principle. This principle proposes that our identity develops through a series of unfolding life cycles, each with its own specific challenges and conflicts that must be resolved to achieve identity integration.[15] These stages are trust versus mistrust; autonomy versus shame/doubt; initiative versus guilt; industry versus inferiority; identity versus role diffusion; intimacy versus isolation; generativity versus stagnation; and integrity versus despair. As each stage carries its own unique challenges, Erikson argues that a strong sense of self results when there is successful resolution of the challenges faced at each stage. Additionally, each stage builds on the success or failure of conflict resolution from the previous stage as a person progresses towards integration.

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[14] Kiesling and Sorrell, *Joining Erikson*, 253.
[15] Donald Capps, "Erikson's Life-Cycle Theory: Religious Dimensions," *Religious Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (April 1984): 121.

In considering what drives this developmental process, Erikson advanced the argument that development results from forces outside of ourselves, or "the dynamic activity of God."[16] This is a remarkable deviation away from the predominant Freudian-influenced psychoanalytic perspective of development that dominated psychology at the time, an approach that could best be described as antagonistic to concepts of religion and spirituality. Erikson's writings across his 50 years of work from 1935 to his death in 1985 reflected his troubling concerns about humanity's mounting ability to develop weapons of mass destruction that could kill with greater efficiency and precision than had ever been the case in human history.[17] Hence, over his lifetime of writing and developing his theory, we see arguments about human psychosocial development as tied to the development of virtues, ethical thinking, and faith in something beyond ourselves as being critical to achieving a mature healthy adult identity. In his later years, and in particular his exploration of Jesus' teachings and parables as a tool for understanding how a sense of "I" develops, Erikson wrote that self-identity ("I") results from a subjective awareness of an inner light that "dwells on the very border of our conscious existence."[18]

As Erikson conceptualized identity development across the life cycle, and as tied to his theorizing that a healthy identity resulted from true, ethical behavior, he was careful to note that the eight stages of development correspond to a schedule of virtues that result when there is a positive resolution of the conflict inherent to each stage of development. Self-identity becomes coherent or stable when the individual comes to

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[16] Capps, *Erikson's Life-Cycle Theory*, 121.

[17] Carol Hoare, "Identity and Spiritual Development in the Papers of Erik Erikson," *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 9, no. 3 (2009): 186.

[18] Erik Erikson, "The Galilean Sayings and the Sense of 'I'," *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 19, no. 2 (1996): 299.

understand the relationship between their moral values and their moral behavior.[19] The

virtues of childhood (hope, will, purpose, and competence) grow to fidelity in

adolescence and finally love, care, and wisdom in adulthood as the self matures and

evolves to achieve an increased sense of spiritual and ethical being.[20] To fully achieve the

highest level of ethical development, individuals must hold a belief in an ultimate force

that exists outside of themselves.[21] This aspect of Erikson's theory represents a "vertical"

line of development dependent on a relationship with a transcendent being as distinct

from his "horizontal" line of development that focuses on psychosocial development and

relationships with others who are part of an individual's sociocultural context.[22]

Theistic Models of Identity Development

While Erikson's theory of identity development marks a significant step forward

from James' theory of self in considering the importance of spirituality and the influence

of a force beyond self in shaping our development, it does not take into consideration a

specific perspective that faith in God is important to identity formation. Given the role of

faith in people's lives, one of the challenges facing psychology, then, is the lack of a

theistic model of identity development, one that takes into close consideration a

definition of spiritual identity as being something more than a form of social identity.

One of the first approaches to developing a theistic conceptual framework for

understanding psychological development comes from P. Scott Richards and Allen

Bergin. Richards and Bergin outline their foundational assumptions as follows: God

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[19] Lynn C. Reimer and Kevin S. Reimer, "Maturity is Coherent: Structural and Content-Specific Coherence in Adolescent oral Identity," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 10, no. 6 (2015): 545.

[20] Donald Capps notes in *Erikson's Life-Cycle Theory* (122) that this aspect of Erikson's theory transforms it from a strictly psychological theory of ego development to one that also captures a person's moral development.

[21] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968): 220

[22] Hoare, *Identity and Spiritual Development*, 190.

exists; human beings are the creation of God; and there are unseen spiritual processes by which the link between God and humanity is maintained.[23]

Richards and Bergin's assumptions have been highly influential in the adoption of a theistic approach to psychotherapy and counseling, and they validate the importance of spiritual identity, but the model does not outline how spiritual identity develops. To address this gap, Poll and Smith propose a model of spiritual identity development that fully embraces the assumption that humans are spiritual in nature, and that a spiritual self can only be formed through a sense of self in relation to God and a recognition of the divine in ourselves and others.[24] Expanding on Richards and Bergin, Poll and Smith's model links spiritual experiences, and the internalization of these experiences, as essential to creating a sense of spiritual awareness. These experiences result from both personal interactions with God (e.g., personal prayer) and group interactions with God (e.g., church attendance). Over time these interactions result in a sense of God's identity as being relevant to one's life, and as something desired to be in relationship with. These realizations bring about the formation of a spiritual identity and a sense of spiritual self that becomes internalized and functions to shape and guide attitudes and behavior. They link the part of us that experiences spiritual development to James' notion of the spiritual ME, and the part of us that reflects on and organizes these experiences into a spiritual identity as James' I.[25] A spiritual self is developed through the interaction between spiritual experiences and the construction of meaning from those experiences.

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[23] P. Scott Richards and Allen E. Bergin, *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy, 2nd Edition* (Washington, D.C., American Psychological Association, 2005), 13.
[24] Poll and Smith, *The Spiritual Self,* 133.
[25] Poll and Smith, 133.

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Like Erikson, Poll and Smith maintain that spiritual identity development occurs over a series of phases or stages.[26] The first stage, *Pre-awareness*, is a stage characterized by a person's lack of conscious awareness that they have a spiritual nature. A person may have had spiritual experiences, but these are not salient parts of their consciousness. The second phase of spiritual development, *Awakening*, is characterized by a growing sense of God's existence, but this awareness is fragmented, vague, or inconsistent (e.g., thoughts of God occur only when attending church, or in response to a specific life changing event). The third stage, *Recognition*, is an extension of the previous, where individuals become capable of generalizing their spiritual experiences across settings. Here individuals become capable of recollecting past experiences and current experiences as revealing the presence of a spiritual theme (e.g., the acceptance of a religious doctrine as a guide to personal actions, choices, and thoughts, and its use as a life principle). There is also a sense of the real presence of God in their lives. The final stage, *Integration*, is the penultimate phase of spiritual identity development where spiritual experiences become integrated with self-concept and a person internalizes an understanding that they have a spiritual nature who has a personal relationship with God. Spirituality becomes woven into every aspect of life because it is recognized as an essential part of their being. (See Table 2.1 for clarification of these stages and their characteristics.)

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[26] Poll and Smith, *The Spiritual Self,* 133.

Table 2.1 Stages of Spiritual Identity Development (adapted from Poll and Smith, 2003) with a description of spiritual autobiographical narrative contents.

Stage	Description	Characteristics	Spiritual Autobiographical Narrative Contents
Pre-Awareness	No awareness of self as in relation to God	No conscious regard of self in spiritual terms.	Personal narratives contain no language to reflect a sense of spirituality.
Awakening	Awareness of self in relation to God	Life events are seen as connecting to God, but awareness is inconsistent or fragmented across personal environment.	Personal narratives contain references to one's own spirituality but are limited to specific contexts in one's present (e.g., formal religious services).
Recognition	Formation of a consistent spiritual identity	Individuals regularly see connections between their life experiences and God, and act upon their spiritual experiences (e.g., through adoption of religious doctrines), but spiritual experiences are seen as external to the self.	Personal narratives reflect an understanding or sense of God's presence in one's life, both in the past and the present, and a willingness to align one's behavior with religious principles.
Integration	Spiritual identity is fully connected to one's self concept	Spiritual experiences are internalized, and there is a sense that one has a personal relationship with God. Persons recognize they are spiritual beings at the core, and they seek spiritual experiences as a "way of life."	Personal narratives reveal an intimate relationship with God. There is an expression of deep connection to God, and descriptions of encounters with God as part of one's daily experiences.

Importantly, Poll and Smith argue that this journey of spiritual identity development will vary greatly across individuals, and as a function of what/who they believe God to be.[27] This developmental sequence, then, is not tied to specific life cycles or ages, but rather progress is tied to a person's beliefs about God and refinement of those beliefs that result from direct interaction with God. For example, individuals who live in an abusive parent situation may view God as an angry, unforgiving, and abusive God (Father/Parent), and so have not fully integrated God into their lives. Only through direct experiences that reveal God's nature to be something different (loving and forgiving) can they come to see themselves as being a child of God and in close relationship with God. Spiritual identity development progresses, then, as a person's image of God aligns with their experiences of God and a relationship with God is seen as relevant and meaningful. Spiritual identity development can be initiated at any point in one's life, as it is tied to when an individual begins to experience spiritual awareness. This can happen in childhood or adulthood, and may progress linearly to the final stage, or may be more idiosyncratic where there is a return to earlier stages from later stages as a person works through questions about spiritual realities and how they as individuals relate to God and others.

The Poll and Smith model is a clear example of how a spiritual self functions as an important component of one's self-identity. Indeed, it goes beyond other models of identity development by taking an explicit theistic account of identity formation and how spiritual identity evolves from and with direct experience with God. What it misses, though, is an adequate description of the psychological processes that allow for this

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[27] Poll and Smith, *The Spiritual Self*, 134.

spiritual development to occur, arguing that individuals' direct experiences with God are the critical piece, but providing no explanation for how these experiences become incorporated or integrated into one's consciousness. This thesis will attempt to fill this gap by examining one way in which spiritual self-identity is formed: through the development of a spiritual autobiographical consciousness, an aspect of autobiographical memory that relies on narrative self-stories that draw upon individual's experiences and interactions with others, including exposure to important religious texts that help support spiritual awakening and recognition that one belongs to a larger communal group defined by its connection to God. Before advancing this new approach, though, I will use the next chapter of this thesis to outline how the early church formed a unique "Christ-follower" identity through letters from the apostles to the emerging Christian church. It will be my argument that these same epistles continue to shape the development of Christian spiritual self-identity in the contemporary world as these texts are the foundation for the formation of a spiritual autobiographical consciousness that must be formed to support the *Awakening* and *Integration* phases of spiritual development that Poll and Smith describe.

CHAPTER 3.

SOCIAL IDENTITY, SELF-CATEGORIZATION, AND

NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

The previous chapter presented a discussion of spiritual identity as an important

part of a person's self-concept. Importantly, it provided the details of a theistic model of

spiritual identity development proposed by Poll and Smith that steps forward from classic

psychological models of identity development to describe a progression of growth that

comes about through a series of cycles that promote increasingly deeper connections to

God. While this model represents a significant step forward in describing development of

a spiritual self, it does not provide deep insight into the psychological processes that

support such development. Poll and Smith admittedly recognize that their model is a

"tentative conceptualization of spirituality identity... [that can] provide an impetus for

additional work and refinement."[1] One area they implicitly point to is the need to

differentiate how a person's spiritual identity develops separate from one's social identity,

especially as their model centers relationships with God and others as critical to the

development of an integrated spiritual identity. It is important to understand, then, what is

meant by social identity, the focus of this chapter, especially as it provides a grounding

for one's religious identity and belongingness to a larger religious group, factors that

impact personal spiritual identity development.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) focuses on how a person understands their identity as

tied to membership in a group and highlights the role of group processes and intergroup

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[1] Poll and Smith, *The Spiritual Self*, 140.

relationships in describing how individuals come to distinguish themselves from others.[2]

Its origination is often tied to British social psychologist Henri Tajfel,[3] who defined social

identity as knowledge that one belongs to a social group.[4] Individuals can hold multiple

social identities to categorize themselves because of membership in multiple social

groups (e.g., as a member of a professional organization, and simultaneously as part of a

sports team's fan base). Each of these identities may vary in their salience over time, but

at any given time only one is likely to dominate.[5] SIT emphasizes that one's social

identity has three components: (1) a cognitive component, i.e., knowing that one is part of

a group; (2) an evaluative component, i.e., a sense that group membership has value

(positive or negative); and (3) an emotional component, i.e., that group membership is

accompanied by emotions directed towards both the group and other groups. These three

components work together to drive intergroup behavior, conflict, and social change, and

make the case that to understand individuals it is critical to understand them as members

of a group. [6]

     While SIT emphasizes that understanding who a person is requires knowledge of

their group identification, SIT highlights how a person's social identity is distinct from

their personal identity. Personal identity is more closely related to a person's individuality

[2] Michael A. Hogg, "Subjective Uncertainty Reduction Through Self-Categorization: A Motivational Theory of Social Identity Processes," *European Review of Social Psychology* 11, no. 1 (April 2000): 243.

[3] Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity Theory." In *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories*, ed. Peter J. Burke (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 111.

[4] Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner. "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior." in *Political Psychology: Key readings*, eds. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), 283.

[5] Sabine Trepte and Laura S. Loy. "Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory," In *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects,* eds. P. Rossler, C.A. Hoffner, and L. Zoonen (Wiley, 2017), 6, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0088.

[6] Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner. "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict." In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks Cole, 1979), 40.

and those personal attributes that make them different from other individuals, even those within their own social group. While people often see themselves as, and act as, individuals, the cognitive, emotional, and evaluative components of their social identity drive how they see themselves in a social environment, and how they interact with others in this environment and with individuals of another social group. SIT is then, principally a theory of intergroup relations, and has been instrumental in advancing our understanding of intergroup conflict, stereotyping, and prejudice.

Self-Categorization Theory

Tajfel's student, John Turner, advanced an extension of SIT, Self-Categorization Theory (SCT),[7] to further clarify the distinction between personal and social identity. SCT focuses on how group processes mediate self-concept. Turner argues that personal identity and social identity operate at two different levels of self-categorization. Personal identity is comprised of the self-categories that define a person as unique (i.e., as "I" and "me"), while social identity comprises the social categorizations of self in terms of shared similarities with members of a social group that allow us to perceive ourselves as a "we" and "us."[8] In this way, the self can be experienced as both inherently personal, but also as part of a social collectivity. How a person defines themselves at any given moment (i.e., the level of self-categorization, i.e., "me" instead of "we") is dependent upon the level of comparison (i.e., individual versus group) and the resulting subjective sense of self. When a shared social identity is salient, then personal identity diminishes, self-perception becomes depersonalized, and the individual person sees themself more as a representative

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[7] John C. Turner et al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1987).

[8] John C. Turner et al., "Self and collective: Cognition and Social Context," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20, no. 5 (1994): 454.

of the group then as an individual. By this description, then, self-categories are not fixed, but rather are fluid and varying relative to the social context, although social identity is more salient in intergroup contexts (the classical "us" versus "them" or in-group versus out-group, situation) than it is in intragroup contexts.[9] Collectively, these principles point to the self, and one's self-concept, as the product of dynamic social processes that emerge to regulate interactions in changing social contexts.[10]

Because SCT maintains that self-categorization results from social interactions, individuals come to represent themselves in terms of how well they "fit" with a particular group through a variety of cognitive processes that operate to represent the individual. A process of comparative fit serves to maximize between-group differences along with within-group similarities, while a process of normative fit serves to analyze the extent to which between-group differences are consistent with expectations and stereotypes about the groups involved.[11] Each of these processes requires access of cognitively represented group categories that must be activated in any given social situation to guide self-categorization. What becomes accessible and activated in any given context is a product of "perceiver readiness," a process whereby factors from a person's unique life history and their specific social relations constrain categorization to make self-identity a function of a person's past in response to their present context.[12] The self-concept that emerges is functional, not a set of self-defining attributes, and is indeed what allows people to

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[9] Michael A. Hogg and John C. Turner. "Intergroup behaviour, self-stereotyping and the salience of social categories." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 26, no. 4 (1987): 337.

[10] Turner et al., *Self and Collective*, 462.

[11] S. Alexander Haslam et al. "Social Identity Salience and The Emergence Of Stereotype Consensus." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25, no. 7 (July 1999): 810.

[12] Samuel Pehrson and Stephen Reicher, "On the meaning, validity and importance of the distinction between personal and social identity: a social identity perspective on Identity Process Theory," In *Identity Process Theory. Identity, Social Action and Social Change,* eds. Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 110.

perceive of themselves more in terms of their group membership and less in terms of their own individuality. This is the depersonalization that emerges in self-stereotyping, a process by which members of the ingroup are seen as more similar to each other, and simultaneously as more different from members of other outgroups.

One of the important outcomes of defining self-categorization as functional rather than structural is that identity becomes fluid, affected by different social contexts and the presence of others (actual, implied, or imagined) that allow for different thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to emerge as they are shaped by the social context. This is what is meant by social influence, and where the concept of conformity, i.e., adherence to group norms, becomes important. Group norms are "regularities in attitudes and behavior that characterize a social group and differentiate it from other social groups."[13] Group norms define how members of a group should act, and create the boundaries around the group prototype, the abstract characterizations of a group that capture its central characteristics that make a group as distinct as possible from other groups. This prototype is formed, then, in response to social interactions, not a fixed set of abstract traits of the group,[14] and functions to ground the norms of a group and facilitate self-categorization of group members.[15] The fluidity of these processes illustrates how new group identities can become formed, especially as social influence comes into play to define new boundaries around group identity. The next section of this chapter will apply these ideas to a discussion of how a specific new group identity, that of "Christ-follower" came into existence in antiquity.

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[13] Michael A. Hogg and Scott A. Reid. "Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms," *Communication Theory* 16 (2006): 7.
[14] Pehrson and Reicher, *Personal and Social Identity,* 103.
[15] Hogg and Reid, *Social Identity*, 14.

The New Testament and the Formation of a "Christ-follower" Identity in Antiquity

Since its inception, SIT, and its extension SCT, has become one of the most widely used theoretical perspectives within social psychology for explaining social phenomena.[16] More importantly, its reach has extended beyond social psychology and is being used across a broad range of academic disciplines, including its emergence as an alternative perspective to those methods typically used for studying biblical text (e.g., source criticism, or form criticism), particularly the New Testament, with an emphasis on how such texts were used in the early church to create a new identity for individuals claiming to follow Christ as distinct from their existing ethnic and other social identities. The first appearance of this approach was in 1994, in a paper given by Philip Esler, where he applied SIT to the Matthean Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12).[17] It represents an approach whereby the social context of early Christ-follower communities is carefully considered through the lens of SIT and SCT applied to the text to make an argument that the text played an important role in establishing a new group identity for these communities.

In his paper Esler argues that the Beatitudes are best understood as a message to members of the Matthean community about their distinct identity as Christ-followers, and the social norms relevant to this new group identity.[18] The Beatitudes present a series of qualities that Esler argues are a description of the ideal Matthean qualities that stand in

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[16] Rupert Brown. "The social identity approach: Appraising the Tajfellian legacy," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59 (2020): 5.

[17] Philip E. Esler, "Group Norms and Prototypes in Matthew 5.3-12: A Social Identity Interpretation of the Matthaean Beatitudes," In *T and T Clark Handbook to the Social Identity in the New Testament*, eds. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 147-171.

[18] Scholars agree that the gospel of Matthew has a strong Jewish character, with its author likely being Jewish. It does not, though, present a gospel message sympathetic to a form of Judaism that rejects the Jesus movement. F. P. Viljoen, "The Matthean Community According to the Beginning of his Gospel," *Acta Theologica* 2, (2006): 244-245. Viljoen argues that this gospel seems to represent the author's (Matthew) attempt to define a specific theology and Christology for an emerging Jewish community of Christ-followers that makes them distinct from traditional Judaism.

contrast to qualities that characterize the Judean leaders as seen elsewhere in Matthew. As such, they provide a context for understanding the Matthean ingroup social norms as compared to the Judean outgroup. The gospel, then, can be seen as a text that not only brought the Jesus message, but also served to encourage the development and maintenance of a unique social identity in a group of Christ-followers. Each of the Beatitudes presents a desirable characteristic for the Matthean community to hold (e.g., meekness, thirst for righteousness, being merciful) that Esler argues are meant to encourage specific behaviors and establish distinctive social norms in this ingroup. This is contrasted with those characteristics of the Judean outgroup, who are called hypocrites by Jesus for their public displays of righteousness and other behaviors that are condemned by Jesus (e.g., Matthew 6:1-18). Applying SCT principles, Esler highlights how the language of this gospel text reinforces a sense of ingroup versus outgroup thinking to establish a framework for behavior and attitudes that define a specific group identity. Esler also notes that the Beatitudes communicate normative prototypes, unnamed individuals who are "poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers, and those who are persecuted and reviled."[19] These prototypes and the larger narrative in which they are embedded define a distinctive Matthean group of Christ-followers, and this text serves to strengthen and legitimatize its social identity where such identity was being threatened and challenged.

Esler has used this same sort of approach to the study of Paul's letter to the Romans. In his volume *Conflict and Identity in Romans* Esler presents a case that one

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[19] Esler, *Group Norms in Matthew 5*, 170.

central purpose of Paul's letter, written to a specific group of individuals in Rome and not

the larger Jesus movement, was to strengthen their social identity as Christ-followers.[20]

The Roman social context at the time was one of great ethnic and socioeconomic

diversity, where ethnic identity and socioeconomic stratification produced division and

conflict between groups.[21] Applying SCT to Paul's letter, Esler argues that it represents

an important move on Paul's part to unify the Roman Jesus movement, comprised of a

diverse group of individuals who mirrored the larger Roman society in terms of their

existing social identities and accompanying long-standing group conflict, under a single

common identity in which they are unified to God through Christ. Central to Esler's

argument is an understanding that Paul's mission to Rome was embedded in a

socioreligious context where both Judean Christ-followers and non-Judean Christ-

followers were members of a single congregation. Into this society a growing Jesus

movement was emerging, one that cut across ethnic lines, but not without producing

conflict between individuals of different ethnic descent who found themselves part of the

Jesus movement. Esler writes,

> "There are clear signs in the text…both that Paul is writing to a movement with
> strongly articulated beliefs and practices and that animosity (manifested in
> behavior) is being expressed between its Judean and non-Judean members. A
> group and a group identity have clearly developed distinctive from that of the
> Judean communities…"[22]

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[20] Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans. The Soial Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003),12.

[21] The concept of ethnic identity in the ancient Mediterranean world is complex, and a full discussion of it is well beyond the scope of this thesis. The number of immigrants to Rome during the time Paul wrote his letter was significant and included immigrants from across the entire Mediterranean region. Judean immigrants, though, were particularly noticeable, maintaining their own distinctive social and religious practices and beliefs. The early Jesus movement attracted followers of both Judean and non-Judean ethnicity, and of different socioeconomic stratifications, leading to tension and hostilities amongst Christ-followers as a function of longstanding sociocultural, ethnocentric and socioeconomic biases. Judeans are best described as Jews, with non-Judeans serving as a better descriptor of what is sometimes translated as "Gentiles," but includes all individuals not of Judean descent who engaged in worship of gods other than the God of the Judean people (see Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 113).

[22] Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 101.

In his greeting to the congregation in Rome, Paul establishes that his communication is to both the Judean and non-Judean Christ-followers. He writes, "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world." (Romans 1:7-8, NRSV) In this greeting to "all" of the Christ-followers in Rome, Paul sets a foundation for a later reminder that these two ethnically different groups share a new distinctive group identity through Christ that is characterized by its own faith and its own distinct theology,[23] writing, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "the one who is righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17; NRSV)

In these opening sections of his letter, Paul attempts to reduce the intergroup conflict that no doubt exists in the early Jesus movement, given its ethnically diverse composition. Paul is engaging in recategorization, a process by which subgroups of a larger superordinate group begin to view each other as members of the larger ingroup rather than as members of the smaller outgroups. Esler argues that Paul's intent was to bring together harmony amongst the Christ-followers, not by asking them to abandon their existing identities, but rather by building a new common identity,[24] an important application of SCT to inform our understanding of an ancient text, and as a means to guide contemporary application. To emphasize the utility of this approach, Esler writes,

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[23] Esler, *Conflict and Identity,* 139-140.
[24] Esler, *Conflict and Identity,* 143.

…the cultural distance of a biblical text from each new generation of readers and listeners does not mean that they are thereby precluded from understanding what was originally conveyed in the text…The contemporary issue driving the current study of Romans is the nature of Christian identity—that is, the question of what it means to be a Christian…[25]

Other scholars make similar arguments about other New Testament texts, suggesting that they function as group narratives to support a new group identity formation in the early Christ-follower communities.[26] These texts, through the narratives they provided, became essential to helping these communities form and retain a distinctive set of social values and norms that were fundamental to maintaining their distinctive social identity. These narratives provided a way to create a temporal order to their understanding of the Jesus movement where their past selves became connected to their present and future selves through the distinctive gospel story that supported identification as Christ-followers [27] This work, collectively, points to the importance of these texts in shaping how their intended audience constructed or reconstructed their identities, by incorporating text narratives—with their specific set of themes and characters that was distinct from existing other religious narratives—into their own experience and personal autobiographical narratives. The importance of these processes to the formation of a new group identity in the New Testament Christ-followers is central to the application of SIT and SCT to those texts. The next chapter of this thesis will address how these processes operate at the level of an individual's self-identity, and

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[25] Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 2, 10.

[26] Matthew J. Marohl, "Letter Writing and Social Identity," in *T and T Clark Handbook to the Social Identity in the New Testament*, eds. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 93-104.

[27] Marco Cinirella, "Exploring Temporal Aspects Of Social Identity: The Concept Of Possible Social Identities," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 28 (1998): 235. Social identities maintain a temporal nature, and these narratives play an important role in shaping a coherent group representation.

importantly the contemporary reader of these New Testament texts, to shape spiritual

identity development through the stages described by Poll and Smith.

CHAPTER 4.

THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE ON

SPIRITUAL IDENTITY FORMATION

The previous chapters laid out a description of psychological and sociological

theories of identity development in general, as well as more specific approaches to the

development of spiritual identity, both at an individual level and at a group level through

the application of Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory to

understanding how New Testament texts served to build the unique emerging identity of

Christ-followers in antiquity. This chapter will examine more explicitly how those same

religious texts and other religious language (e.g., language that is part of religious

practice, rites, or rituals) shape and transform an individual's spiritual identity. This

language is essential to framing the narratives created as spiritual identity develops and

progresses through the phases of spiritual development described by Poll and Smith. The

idea that scripture can shape spiritual development is not itself novel, as Melugin, notes

that "Scripture is a vehicle for the formation of the self…[and that] a given religious

community which has a text may employ it to promote a particular kind of identity which

is appropriate to the religious community in which it is to be used."[1] What is novel to my

approach is the application of a psychological theory of how autobiographical

consciousness develops through language and reveals itself in personal narratives to

examine more carefully the processes by which spiritual identity develops.

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[1] Roy F. Melugin, "Scripture and the Formation of Christian Identity," in *A Biblical Itinerary. In Search of Method, Form, and Content. Essays in Honor of George W. Coats,* ed. Eugene E. Carpenter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 169.

Autobiographical Memory

The processes involved in the development of spiritual identity are rooted in a uniquely human form of memory, autobiographical memory. Human memory is comprised of multiple memory systems,[2] with autobiographical memory being the system that serves to provide memory of one's own distinctive personal history: the events, places, and people that comprise our personal experiences. This system contrasts with other memory systems that support different types of stored representations. Memory for events that can be located within a specific time or place comprise episodic memory, while abstract knowledge acquired from experience that cannot be connected to a specific time or place comprises semantic memory. Although autobiographical memory contains memory for personal experiences, it is more than a simple database or storehouse of these experiences, as it integrates personal perspective, evaluation, and personal interpretation with the memory for the experience. It is a system specialized "…to make memory consistent with an individual's current goals, self-images, and self-beliefs."[3] Recollected experiences come to "…define who one is in the world, how one became that way, and what it means for defining self in the present and into the future."[4] It is impossible to have a sense of self without autobiographical memory, because it is the memory system responsible for personal meaning-making.

Autobiographical memory is characterized by the fact that the memories it contains are organized along multiple dimensions, but in general the organizational

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[2] Donna J. LaVoie and Derin J. Cobia, "Recollecting, recognizing, and other acts of remembering: An overview of human memory," *Journal of Neurologic Physical Therapy* 31, no. 3 (Sept 2007): 135-144.
[3] Martin A. Conway, "Memory and the self," *Journal of Memory and Language* 53 (2005): 595.
[4] Robyn Fivush, "Sociocultural developmental approaches to autobiographical memory," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 33 (2018): 493.

system is believed to be hierarchical, with specific event details supporting the base of the hierarchy, moving up to greater levels of abstraction that comprise life periods.[5] Combined, these memories serve to create a coherent sense of a personal past that moves into the present and extends to the future. This temporal structure allows us to retrieve information from our past that is personally relevant to our present or can be used to shape our thinking about our future self. As such, retrieval is less a process of accessing specific information, and more a process of recombining that information to serve a specific intention. Consider this example: if I am asked to recall a significant life experience, it is unlikely that my consciousness will be filled with all the significant moments of my past, but rather what will come to mind will be an event that contains themes, intentions, or motivations that align with my current self-beliefs. The details of that event are likely to be modified to fit my goals at that time, and gaps in my recollection may be filled with details from similar experiences to give coherency to the memory, even if those details are from a different exact experience. These processes reveal that autobiographical memory retrieval is fluid and dynamic.

Importantly, how we modify our retrieval, and how we tell our recollected story is subject to influence from those we are telling it to. There is a dynamic interplay between the teller and the listener that serves to reconstruct the memory. This is most apparent during reminiscing, where individuals jointly recollect a shared experience and tell its story, with each person filling in the details that provide shared meaning. These characteristics are what help define autobiographical memory's functions, including its purpose in guiding the formation of life goals by interleaving various past experiences

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[5] Martin A. Conway and Christopher W. Pleydell-Pierce, "The Construction of Autobiographical Memories in the Self-Memory System," *Psychological Review* 107, no. 2 (2000): 262.

that help define a particular sense of self, and importantly a sense of self that defines a

way to be in the world.[6] This sense of self becomes part of one's life story and takes the

form of a narrative to provide a structure where certain characters are introduced in

particular places and times, there is a chronological order to the story, and a resolution

that points to a sense of personal growth. These narratives often also contain cultural

expectations and shared cultural knowledge, because they are "constructed within layers

of social and cultural expectations about what a self is and what a life looks like."[7] A

sense of self, then, as formed in autobiographical memory, has an inherently social nature

even if it is also uniquely personal.

Autobiographical Consciousness

Psychologist Robyn Fivush and her colleagues have conducted considerable

research on how autobiographical memory and its underlying narrative structure develops

and is revealed. They argue that the development of autobiographical memory requires

the formation of an autobiographical consciousness. Fivush writes,

> The integration of an extended subjective perspective within an extended
> narrative framework, both of which are mediated through language and shared
> cultural narratives, forms what we are calling *autobiographical consciousness*. As
> individuals adopt and adapt the narrative structures and frameworks in which they
> are socially and culturally embedded, these narrative frameworks begin to define
> individual understanding, such that externally provided culturally mediated
> narrative forms become the internalized form of human autobiographical
> consciousness….[that] develops in deeply embedded social and cultural
> interactions that define the forms and functions of recalling the personal past.[8]

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[6] Robyn Fivush, *Family Narratives and the Development of an Autobiographical Self* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 17.

[7] Fivush, *Family Narratives*, 20.

[8] Nelson and Fivush, *Autobiographical Consciousness,* 75.

Fivush's work links the critical period of development for autobiographical consciousness as being tied to language acquisition. This does not mean that consciousness does not exist prior to language, as preverbal children clearly experience consciousness. What Fivush argues is that language plays a transformative role in how we remember and experience the world because it is what allows us to form the necessary narrative structures that underlie our own autobiographical consciousness; it transforms our experiences into what Fivush calls the "story of me"[9] in autobiographical consciousness. Her colleague Katherine Nelson describes the transformative power of language on autobiographical consciousness as follows.:

> The most dramatic evidence of the close relationship of self and language comes from Hellen Keller's famous autobiography (Keller, 1905/1954) in which she relates how at the age of 6 years she awakened to the power of words as her teacher (Annie) finger-spelled the word "water" into her hand while pumping water into it. She relates that following this incident she asked for and learned the "words" for everything in her immediate world, and at once came into a new sense of herself in the world around her, a sense of being a self in relation to others. That she has some inchoate memories from the years prior to this event suggests that personal memory *per se* does not depend on language, but that language has the power to make these memories explicit and to provide a wholly new sense of the self in its context.[10]

While Fivush and Nelson highlight the importance of language, especially the development of the ability to use language, as being fundamental to the formation of one's autobiographical consciousness, they are both careful to note that autobiographical memories and autobiographical consciousness are not linguistically based. Rather, language functions to shape how we experience and relate to the world, how we might internalize our experiences, and how we communicate our experiences. Language serves

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[9] Fivush, *Family Narratives*, 17
[10] Katherine Nelson, "Self and Social Functions: Individual Autobiographical Memory And Collective Narrative," *Memory* 11, no. 2 (2003): 130.

a relational function, then, anchoring "the I in relation to the Other and to the continuity of the I in the past, present, and ongoing into the future [to bring] out the self in its reflective and reflexive form."[11] Language, they argue, forms the framework for the narrative structure of thought, shaping what we remember from our experiences. And while human thought can take many forms,

> "…at base, we understand ourselves and our worlds through narrative modes of thinking…Arguably, narratives provide templates for how to be a person, and how to live in the world…templates for understanding human motivation, intentions, and actions, and these templates [are] used to both understand others, and also turned inward, to understand our selves."[12]

Language and Narrative in Spiritual Autobiographical Consciousness

The importance of language to the development of a general autobiographical consciousness cannot be understated. It is also essential to the formation of spiritual autobiographical consciousness and an emergent spiritual identity. A central principle of Poll and Smith's model points to the likely existence of this consciousness, emphasizing that the reflection of past spiritual experiences guides the construction of a spiritual self. They note that,

> …by reflecting upon spiritual experiences from the past and by projecting such experiences into the future through faith, individuals are able to feel continuity and constancy of their spiritual selves as eternal beings. Internalization of spiritual experiences allows individuals to construct a sense of a spiritual self in relation to the world in which they live and to the world beyond.[13]

If we bridge this argument to principles laid out by Fivush and Nelson, both in their individual and collaborative work on autobiographical memory, we see that the ability to reflect on personal spiritual experiences requires the formation of a spiritual

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[11] Nelson, *Self and Social Functions*, 130.
[12] Fivush and Nelson, *Autobiographical Consciousness*, 75-76.
[13] Poll and Smith, *The Spiritual Self*, 133.

autobiographical consciousness, a form of consciousness that requires the presence of a personal spiritual narrative, a narrative that must be formed through acquisition of a particular religious language, not just language in general. Religious language is found in the principal texts and canons of a religion, as well as in the language fellow believers use to engage with each other about their religious and spiritual experiences (informally and formally through the ritual practices of their faith tradition). Nelson and Fivush note that the narratives supporting general autobiographical consciousness provide frameworks for understanding personal experiences and are formed through social interactions, e.g., shared reminiscing, or shared story-telling, or similar linguistically mediated exchanges, whether verbal or written.[14] These narratives, and the form of consciousness that is revealed through them, are not just a journey through time, though. Rather, they are personal accounts of what an experience means to the individual. They reflect the past in some way but will be active reinterpretations of how that past experience shaped a person's present and leads to potential futures to provide an extended sense of self through time, rather than the chronological retelling of experiences. These communicated narratives ultimately reveal a sense of who a person thinks they are and who they are in relation to others.[15]

What type of language is necessary for the formation of spiritual autobiographical consciousness, and how does it reveal itself? SCT as applied to the study of New Testament texts points to their role in antiquity as helping to shape the identity of the early Christ-followers. That is, these texts provided a new language about a new way of

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[14] Nelson and Fivush, *Autobiographical Consciousness*, 83.
[15] Nelson and Fivush, *Autobiographical Consciousness*, 91.

thinking about religion, faith, and spirituality.   Consider Paul's words to the church in Corinth and how his text serves to structure a new communal identity:

> To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours….I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind. (1 Corinthians 1:2,4-6, NRSV)

In this greeting Paul uses language to remind the new Christ-followers in Corinth that they have a new identity in Christ with a new calling, new knowledge, and are part of an emerging global community. Paul's language helped shape a broad spiritual social identity and group consciousness, but these same texts function at the individual level to provide the language necessary to form a spiritual autobiographical consciousness. The language of these texts allows for the internalization of spiritual experiences that Poll and Smith argue as underlying spiritual identity development and help frame a narrative about one's personal spiritual identity. They provide a way of telling one's own story.

My claim here is similar to one made by Melugin,[16] who notes that to have a Christian identity, it is essential to be familiar enough with scripture so as to place one's own life within the framework of the Christ story, arguably a process that characterizes the phase of spiritual *Awakening* that Poll and Smith describe as the first stage of spiritual identity development.[17] This is a specific way of reading scripture that focuses on its use and application, not on explanation or interpretation. Melugin notes that in reading scripture this way, it is being read figuratively, and put to performative use; it is not being used to explain big theological concepts,[18] and functions as constitutive text, i.e., text that

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[16] Melugin, *The Formation of Christian Identity*, 170.
[17] Poll and Smith, *The Spiritual Self*, 134.
[18] Melugin, *The Formation of Christian Identity*, 169.

shapes a community identity.[19] This type of text is essential to the formation of the

narrative structures that underly spiritual autobiographical consciousness because it

provides the lens through which spiritual experiences can be interpreted, organized, and

communicated. Simply, it provides the boundaries around what a spiritual self is, and

what a spiritual life looks like as a means of providing a language that can be applied to

experiences.

A close examination of how New Testament texts have explicitly shaped one's

spiritual identity will serve to illustrate these points. As I have noted earlier, many of

these texts will be the same texts that supported the development of a new Christ-

follower's community identity in antiquity. These texts provide the language not only

necessary for social identity, but also the language that an individual can use to define

themselves as being in relation to God and to recognize the divine within themselves and

others. These defining attributes of spiritual identity are central to one's progression from

Pre-awareness to full *Integration* in spiritual identity development.[20] This progression,

and the form of consciousness that supports it, will be revealed through personal spiritual

narratives or spiritual autobiographies, much as is the case that general personal

narratives reveal the formation of one's general autobiographical consciousness. One of

the best examples of the influence of scripture on the formation of spiritual

autobiographical consciousness comes from St. Augustine's *Confessions*.[21]

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[19] Melugin, *The Formation of Christian Identity*, 176.
[20] Poll and Smith, *The Spiritual Self*, 133.
[21] Augustine of Hippo, Saint, 354-430. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York. Random House,1960), Kindle.

Autobiographical Consciousness as Revealed in Augustine's *Confessions*

Augustine's *Confessions* are a powerful example of personal narrative, telling his own pilgrimage from a life of self-indulgence ("I wish to bring back to mind my past foulness and the carnal corruptions of my soul…")[22] to full development of his spiritual identity. In Book 8 of the *Confessions*, Augustine writes,

> With thanksgiving let me remember, O my God, all your mercies to me and let me confess them to you…. You have broken my bonds…I will narrate how you broke them asunder…. Your words had stuck fast in the depths of my heart, and on every side I was encompassed by you. I was now certain that you are eternal life, although I saw it only "in a glass, in a dark manner." Yet all my doubts…had been removed from me.[23]

In this portion of Augustine's narrative, we see him telling the story of his conversion from a life of sin to one of acceptance of God's grace. This passage mimics text from Paul's letter to the Corinthians and reveals its influence on Augustine. Paul's letter reads, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."[24] Comparing Augustine's narrative, with his realization that he was only dimly aware of God's work in his life, to the 1 Corinthians text reveals that the text provided a language and structure from which Augustine could frame his understanding of his own spiritual experience, and what it meant for his spiritual identity (even though he did not use that phrase he is describing who he is).

Augustine also speaks of the influence of the text from the gospel of John on his spiritual development, and a growing sense of how he fits into the larger Christian

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[22] Augustine, *Confessions*, 23.
[23] Augustine, *Confessions,* 143.
[24] I Corinthians 13:11-12, NRSV.

narrative. John's gospel reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."[25] Augustine writes,

> It was first your will to show me how you resist the proud and give grace to the humble, and how great is your mercy in showing men the way of humility, that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among" men….[that] "In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God."…I read that the soul of man, although it gives testimony of the light, is not itself the light, but the Word, God himself, is "the true light, which enlightens every man that comes into the world."[26]

Later, Augustine describes wrestling with the notion of sin, and what it meant for God, in Jesus, to become human as he comes to understand who he is. Augustine writes,

> How have you loved us, O good Father, who did not spare your only Son, but delivered him up for us sinners…. Rightly is my hope strong in him, because you will heal all my diseases, through him "who sits at your right hand and makes intercession for us," elsewise I would despair. Many and great are those infirmities of mine, many they are and great, but more potent is your medicine…. Behold, Lord, I cast my cares upon you, so that I may live…[27]

Augustine in effect places himself into the larger narrative of the gospel message and its meaning with his own understanding, an understanding that eventually becomes an essential tenet of the Christian faith. It reflects how Augustine has integrated the awareness that Christ's death and resurrection make us righteous before God into a narrative about that event and what it means for the individual (including himself). Augustine writes,

> "That before all times and above all times your Only-begotten Son remains unchangeably coeternal with you; and that souls receive 'of his fulness,' so that they may be blessed; and that they are renewed…But that 'according to the time, he died for the ungodly,' and that 'you spared not your only Son, but delivered him up for us all.'"[28]

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[25] John 1:1-2, NRSV.
[26] Augustine, *Confessions*, 129-130.
[27] Augustine, *Confessions*, 240.
[28] Augustine, *Confessions*, 131.

This text references Romans 5:8, a passage of a larger section in Romans (Romans 5:1-11) that Esler describes as an important text for understanding the formation of a communal identity anchored in Christ.[29] The structure of the Romans text is especially important for seeing how scripture influences the formation of a spiritual autobiographical consciousness as well, because its form places the reader into a narrative that has a past, present, and future. In this text Paul writes about our past ("For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly....God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us"),[30] and our present and future states ("Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.")[31] The temporal arc of this text is typical of the types of personal narratives that support autobiographical consciousness and facilitates the making of meaning from our experiences.[32] Augustine's *Confessions* reveal the influence of this text on his own narrative, as he describes a personal spiritual experience that reveals full *Integration* of his experience with an internalized sense of self in relation to God. He elaborates on the role of scripture in his own spiritual development:

> So it was with the most intense desire that I seized upon the sacred writings of your Spirit, and especially the Apostle Paul. Those difficult passages, where at one time he seemed to me to contradict himself, and where the text of his discourse appeared to be at variance with the testimonies of the law and the prophets, melted away. I saw those pure writings as having one single aspect, and I learned to exult with joy.[33]

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[29] Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 197.
[30] Romans 5:6,8, NRSV.
[31] Romans 5:9, NRSV.
[32] Fivush, 2018, 493.
[33] Augustine, *Confessions,* 141.

Augustine's *Confessions* are deeply personal and disclose a vulnerability inherent to his sense of personhood, and ultimately, they describe a journey that maps onto Poll and Smith's description of how a spiritual identity develops as a result of spiritual experience and a growing sense that we are in relationship with God. Augustine describes multiple types of spiritual experiences, but his *Confessions* include many references to and the influence of New Testament texts, and to the importance of scripture in general in changing who he thought he was and how he should be living his life, key aspects of spiritual autobiographical consciousness.

Spiritual Autobiographical Consciousness as Revealed in Conversion Narratives

Poll and Smith's model of spiritual identity development, with its reliance on this development as occurring through a series of stages or phases makes it a type of religious conversion model, where individuals move from a stage of lack of awareness about the relationship between themselves and God, to phases of deeper appreciation for and growing intimacy with God. The examination of religious conversion stories and personal conversion narratives will then reveal the presence of a spiritual autobiographical consciousness being shaped by a deepening connection to God and an increasing familiarity with scripture, much as was the case with Augustine's *Confessions*. In his text *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, D. Bruce Hindmarsh describes the conversion narratives that proliferated during the Evangelical Revival or the First Great Awakening in England from 1730-1755.[34] The conversion narrative was a popular genre at the time, so there are many examples from these texts that illustrate how scripture gave language to spiritual experiences and impacted people's spiritual identity development by providing a

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[34] D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative. Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: University Press, 2005).

vocabulary for telling that story. Indeed, Hindmarsh notes that the primary source of people's understanding of the "good news" of the Christian faith was not just the Church and its theology, but also the New Testament. As Hindmarsh notes, "The gospel and conversion are closely linked in the pages of the New Testament in terms of divine call and human response."[35] Conversion narratives provide an excellent literary device for gaining insight into how a spiritual autobiographical consciousness shapes spiritual identity.

In his text, Hindmarsh describes a particularly salient example of a conversion narrative where scripture came to shape spiritual autobiographical consciousness in Joseph Humphreys, a relatively unknown assistant to John and Charles Wesley during the early Methodist revival of the 1740s. Hindmarsh points to Humphreys' conversion narrative as a good example of how the conversion experience compelled individuals to tell their life story.[36] The telling of a life story will necessarily reveal one's autobiographical consciousness,[37] so a closer look at Humphreys' narrative seems warranted here. Hindmarsh describes Humphreys' narrative as typical for the time for any conversion narrative, describing his struggle with religion, faith, and his own behavior. Humphreys describes his conflicted state of mind, writing that he was ashamed "to think what different personages I wore," and troubled "because I was not all of a piece."[38] He then describes an intensive experience when meeting together with other members of his religious social group, to share their stories and study scripture. He was so moved one

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[35] Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 13.
[36] Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative,* 80.
[37] Nelson and Fivush, *Autobiographical Consciousness*, 73.
[38] Joseph Humphreys, *Experience of the Work of Grace Upon his Heart* (Bristol, 1742), 18, quoted in Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 83

night that he writes, "I went home, and those words were applied to me with great power, *There is now therefore no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus*."[39] This story describes the direct application of a scriptural text (Romans 8:1) to a powerful spiritual experience, a recurring theme of the conversion narratives of the time.[40] It reveals the type of realization that Poll and Smith note as part of the *Awakening* phase of spiritual identity development, and perhaps even movement into the *Recognition* stage of spiritual identity development where spiritual experiences coalesce into consistent themes across one's life.

John Wesley's well-known Aldersgate experience and his narrative of it, affords another example of how New Testament texts provided the language through which a spiritual experience shaped spiritual autobiographical consciousness. In his *Journal*, Wesley writes about a spiritual experience occurring on May 24, 1738,

> In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.[41]

Wesley specifically notes here how Paul's letter to the Romans put language to his powerful experience of feeling his heart be "strangely warmed." His words exemplify what can be described as *Recognition* that he has a spiritual identity through a relationship of trust in God. His narrative reveals a sense of spiritual self and spiritual autobiographical consciousness with his use of first-person pronouns. Hindmarsh notes that this narrative reflects a central moment in Wesley's spiritual development, a shift

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[39] Humphreys, *Work of Grace*, 20.
[40] Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 83.
[41] John Wesley, *Journal* (J.H. Revell, 1903; reis., Monee, IL: Independent, 2016), 56.

from "impression to expression, from formation to proclamation"[42] reflecting the type of transition Poll and Smith indicate is characteristic of a developing spiritual identity. The impact of this experience was framed by and communicated externally through the language of Paul's letter.

The conversion narratives that proliferated in the late 18th century during this period of Evangelical Revival demonstrated a growing sense of spiritual identity in the converts. They reflected an integration of scripture with this development, with the language of scripture shaping their narratives. Prominent preachers of the day were skilled in a rhetorical style that applied scripture to the events of the time "to create a vivid tableau out of the Scriptural narratives and to place [their] hearers in the story as living actors."[43] Such preaching served to further build a spiritual autobiographical consciousness by providing the framework for a specific narrative a listener could use in telling their own conversion story.

To illustrate, consider the details Hindmarsh provides from the conversion narrative of a woman, Margaret Austin, describing the impact of hearing the sermons of evangelist George Whitefield.[44] She describes seeing herself in the scripture stories she heard in these sermons from Matthew's gospel about a rich man walking away sad from Jesus because he would not give up his possessions (Matthew 19:22) or in the stories of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Matthew 23). Of these experiences she writes "the Lord Saw fit to Lett me See my Self."[45] This testimony reflects an awakened spiritual

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[42] Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 124
[43] Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 143.
[44] Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative,* 143-144.
[45] Margaret Austin (May 19, 1740), "Letters to Charles Wesley, c. 1738-88," *Early Methodist Volume,* John Rylands Library, Manchester, England, quoted in Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 144.

autobiographical consciousness, brought about by many spiritual experiences no doubt, but certainly was facilitated by exposure to at least one critical New Testament text (Matthew), skillfully placed into a sermon, that helped draw her into a larger story from the past and from which she could pull personal meaning into her present. Such temporal arcing is characteristic of autobiographical consciousness.

Spiritual Autobiographical Consciousness and the Language of Lived Religion

This chapter has focused on how a spiritual autobiographical consciousness forms through exposure to formal New Testament texts, as those texts provide a vocabulary for what it means to have a Christian identity. These texts, though, are not the only influence on the development of the spiritual autobiographical consciousness that underlies the formation of a spiritual identity. New research points to the importance of "lived religion" on how individuals encounter and experience religion in their everyday environment and interactions.[46] Sociologist Nancy Ammerman's work is particularly insightful in demonstrating the influence of lived religion on spiritual identity.[47] She invited 95 individuals to provide spiritual narratives of their everyday life, a question that can only be answered if one has a spiritual autobiographical consciousness. Ammerman notes that these narratives reveal lives where the individuals are in relation with "divine actors."[48] While Ammerman applies a primarily socio-anthropological lens to interpreting the narratives her participants provide, they also clearly provide information about an underlying set of psychological processes and structures in their participants that are

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[46] Kim Knibbe and Helen Kupair, "Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 2 (2020): 157-176.

[47] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes. Finding Religion in Everyday Life.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Kindle.

[48] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, Chapter 2, Kindle.

impacting their spiritual identity development, and spiritual autobiographical

consciousness. She notes the power of these narratives in revealing spirituality:

> We don't tell stories about God intervening in the world if we do not believe that God exists, but what we know about divine character and divine interaction with humanity is carried by the stories that play out across the domains of our lives…. People develop individual life stories that are guiding internal scripts but are intertwined with public shared stories. They contain memories of "how I always behave" but also provide shared situational narratives of "how people like us behave." Our implicit narrative sense structures the everyday meaning-making.[49]

Many of the example narratives Ammerman provides in her work are illustrative

of the different stages of spiritual identity development that Poll and Smith describe and

the underlying spiritual autobiographical consciousness that has formed. Consider, for

example, this narrative as provided by Ammerman from one of her participants, Andrew

Hsu. He writes, "As a Christian man I'm aware of my spirituality, i.e., my relationship

with God and that I have a friendship with him and I try to walk with him."[50] This

language reflects a spiritual *Integration* that emphasizes a personal relationship with God,

and also explicitly indicates awareness of a spiritual identity with a statement of who he

is ("…a Christian man…"). There are other examples from her text where people

describe an experience and how they interacted with God in that moment, also revealing

Integration of a spiritual identity into their sense of self, and importantly the weaving of

their spirituality into their everyday activities. Ammerman provides this narrative from a

participant, "We looked up at all the stars and we thought about God and, um, how he

created the world and the universe, and said a prayer of thanksgiving for everything."[51]

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[49] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, Chapter 1, Kindle.
[50] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, Chapter 2, Kindle.
[51] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, Chapter 2, Kindle.

Not all of Ammerman's narratives, though, point to a fully integrated spiritual identity. Some of the narratives reveal a still developing spiritual identity. The following provides an example of this:

> Rather than asking people to give us a general assessment of how important religion is in their households or a calculation of how much time they spend on spiritual activities, we simply asked them to tell us stories about the people, places, and events that are both memorable and ordinary. When people generalized about their families, they sometimes made grand claims: "Everything to do with my daughters and my wife and the house and work revolves around my religion and the love we have for each other," said Francis Parker, a devout Boston Catholic. While he talked about the family's involvement in church, a majority of the stories he told about his household—about sporting activities, working around the house, and the like—were told with no specific reference to any spiritual dimension. [52]

Here we see a narrative that points to the attainment of the *Awakening* stage of spiritual identity development, a fragmented sense of spirituality, but not much development beyond that stage.

Similar to what I have been emphasizing here, Ammerman writes that the narratives she collected reveal how religious institutions have shaped people's habits, routines, and practices to give them a sense of the spiritual in the world. Clearly, and to my point, engagement with external religion shapes an internal spirituality. As Ammerman notes in describing two narratives where individuals report experiences with a spiritual entity, "In both cases, the religious culture in which these women live provided ways to tell the story."[53] In other words, the religious culture provided the language necessary for forming a spiritual autobiographical consciousness from which a narrative could be used to tell the story. She elaborates, "They speak in ways they share with the religious communities of which they are a part, using symbols developed in the long

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[52] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories,* Chapter 5, Kindle.
[53] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, Chapter 2, Kindle.

history of religious efforts to organize, categorize, and encourage human experiences of transcendence."[54] This provides "Theistic spiritual discourse [that] is, then, produced and sustained through participation in religious communities."[55] This discourse—this language—is the necessary building block of a spiritual autobiographical consciousness, and without it, spiritual identity could not develop. The religious texts, practices, and social interactions of religious communities all provide the vocabulary around which individuals can develop their spiritual autobiographical consciousness and awareness of their spiritual identity. Without this language, there are no ways of deriving, organizing, and communicating the meaning of these experiences as is necessary for spiritual identity to develop, and no way of knowing where one is in that developmental process. Why this matters is discussed in the next and final chapter of this thesis.

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[54] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, Chapter 2, Kindle.
[55] Ammerman, Chapter 2, Kindle.

CHAPTER 5.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This thesis began by noting the importance of spirituality in American's lives, with the Pew Research Center reporting in 2023 that 70% of American adults describe themselves as spiritual. To gain a greater understanding of what this means, the Pew Center also asked respondents to explain what "spiritual" meant to them. For those respondents who described themselves as spiritual, the top two explanations focused on being connected—to something bigger than oneself (74%), or to God (70%). These responses point to the central role of a relationship with God or the Divine in people's lives as being key to one's spirituality and spiritual identity. This is further illustrated in participants' explanations of "spiritual." One respondent noted that "spiritual" means "…having a relationship with God…"[1] with another respondent noting that it means "Connecting with the creator who is the source of my existence."[2] These comments reflect how a person's understanding of spirituality is tied to a relationship with God, an important component of a spiritual identity.

Psychology, philosophy, theology, and other disciplines have long wrestled with explaining how a spiritual identity forms, and what role it has in one's life. While a spiritual identity sometimes has been described as a form of social identity, it is more than that. While social identities can influence people in many ways similar to how a spiritual identity influences people, a person's spiritual identity can be argued to be central to a person's existence as it is the only kind of self-identity that emphasizes

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[1] Alper et al., *Spirituality*, 34.
[2] Alper et al., 34.

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transcendence and a focus on the good, as well as the nature of reality.[3] As the Pew

findings indicate, a spiritual identity provides individuals with a sense that they are

connected to something bigger than themselves, and that spirituality can provide meaning

to their lives in ways that go beyond social connections. A spiritual self-identity

motivates individuals to act on their religious conviction, i.e., to live out their religious

values, and not just use their religious or spiritual identification for other purposes.[4]

Knowing this, it is important to understand how a spiritual identity forms and shapes a

person's life, especially in considering the psychological well-being of persons of faith,

and the perspective that personal wholeness necessarily includes a sense of identity that is

in relationship with God.[5]

This thesis adds to this conversation a perspective that looks specifically at how a

Christian spiritual identity takes shape. While there are likely many factors by which this

spiritual identity forms, I have focused here on a model that emphasizes the development

of a spiritual autobiographical consciousness as being necessary to this spiritual identity

formation. This type of consciousness is argued to develop in much the same manner as a

person's general autobiographical consciousness, i.e., through the acquisition of a

language and vocabulary that serves to frame the narrative structure of the underlying

cognitive system (autobiographical memory) that supports identity expression. I have

argued that it is through an individual's exposure to Christian religious practice, New

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[3] Andrew G. Christy, Grace N. Rivera, and Rebecca J. Schlegel, "Authenticity and the true self in religion and spirituality," in *The Science Of Religion, Spirituality, And Existentialism,* eds. Kenneth E. Vail III and Clay Routledge (London: Elsevier Academic Press), 133.

[4] Darhl M. Pedersen, Richard N. Williams, and Kristoffer B. Kritensen, "The Relation of Spiritual Self-Identity to Religious Orientations and Attitudes," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28, no. 2 (2000), 147.

[5] Leon Turner, "The Paradox of the Self and its Implications for Concepts of Personhood: Contrasting Contemporary Theological and Psychological Approaches to an Old Problem," *The Journal of Faith and Science Exchange* 5 (2001), 204.

Testament texts, and the language and vocabulary inherent to these that a specific

spiritual autobiographical consciousness forms. This language and vocabulary serve to

frame personal spiritual experiences and act to shape the narratives needed to articulate

who individuals think they are not only as human beings, but as spiritual beings. As this

language develops individuals become able to express their spiritual identity, as well as

achieve positive and significant attachment to God. [6] Such outcomes occur when a

positive spiritual self-identity is fully integrated and is associated with a positive self-

concept.[7] Understanding the processes that support this development are critical, then, for

both psychological and pastoral counseling, to help individuals achieve wholeness and

well-being.

The ideas proposed in this thesis have limitations, as they focus exclusively on

Christian identity. It is likely, though, that to the extent a spiritual autobiographical

consciousness is a universal aspect of human cognition, then spiritual identities of other

sorts are likely to form in a similar manner, i.e., through the acquisition and integration of

a particular language and vocabulary that supports the narrative structure of

autobiographical memory. An overwhelming amount of psychological research points to

this aspect of cognition as being essential for self-identity, but it remains to be

empirically demonstrated that the ideas proposed in this thesis will be borne out.

Nonetheless, a look at personal narratives and conversion stories suggests that spiritual

experiences are shared in and through narratives that have their own specific vocabulary,

with that vocabulary mapping neatly onto the language of sacred texts and practices of

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[6] Bruce Evan Blaine, Pamala Trivedi, and Amy Eshleman. "Religious belief and the self-concept: evaluating the implications for psychological adjustment." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24, no. 10 (1998): 1040.

[7] Blaine, Trivedi, and Eshleman, *Religious Belief*, 1050.

the religious environment in which an individual has experience. Much like children acquire language through imitation and exposure to language from their parents and other elders, individuals that are part of specific religious communities will acquire a language from their religious elders that helps shape their understanding of their experiences. Further work on this topic can clarify in greater detail how individuals progress through stages of spiritual identity development that reveal increasing levels of integration of spirituality with a sense of self.

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