

# Joining Erikson and Identity Specialists in the Quest to Characterize Adult Spiritual Identity

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Identity theorists have often assessed spiritual identity as one of many components of a person's ego identity under the assumption that spirituality structures the self and promotes outcomes consonant with other domains of identity. In this article, we analyze presuppositions implicit in this assumption. Drawing from a qualitative study of spiritually devout women and men, we probe whether existing operationalizations of Erikson's theory accurately conceptualize the narratives of spiritually devout women and men. In places where existing operationalizations seem inadequate, we offer several directives for future theoretical construction.

Following Erikson, identity theorists have long recognized spirituality as an important domain of identity formation and as a contributor to adult development (Markstrom, 1999; Ray & McFadden, 2001). Most often, identity researchers have assessed spiritual identity as one of many components of a person's ego identity under the assumption that spirituality structures the self and promotes outcomes consonant with other domains of identity (Josselson, 1996; Marcia, 1966, 1993). In this article, we analyze several presuppositions implicit in this assumption. Drawing from a qualitative study of spiritually devout women and men, we offer

observations and questions in hope of advancing current conceptualizations of adult spiritual identity development.

### ERIKSON ON SPIRITUALITY/RELIGION

Raised by a Jewish-leaning mother who looked favorably on Christianity and later married to a Christian wife, Erikson often pondered how expressions of religion and spirituality contributed to or curtailed the healthy formation of ego identity. He recognized that there were those for whom religiousness and spirituality provided such a profound and comprehensive resolution to individual identity crises that it could become definitive of one's identity across the life span. Hence, Erikson traced the psychohistories of charismatic religious leaders such as Luther and Gandhi realizing that they universalized their own individual identity crises in such a way that they ignited the insight, power, and energy of generations (Erikson, 1958, 1969). Though he never identified himself within Christianity, his conceptualizations largely provide a reversal of Freud's antagonism to religion (Roazen, 1976). Several examples taken from an address Erikson (1996) gave at Yale are sufficiently illustrative to establish this claim. Erikson resonated with the way Jesus activated those who approached him seeking cures, just as Erikson himself sought to free those inactivated by ethical stagnation or ill psyches through psychotherapy. Interestingly, he chose the New Testament term *metanoi*, or repentance, to signify how one might recover from inactivation due to a bad conscience or a sense of being banned by divine judgment, and thus regain the capacity of central position in one's life space. "Inner light" or the "luminosity of awareness" (Erikson, 1996) signified by Jesus's saying that "the eye is the lamp of the body" (Matthew 5:22) was regarded by Erikson as the most direct Biblical reference to the sense of "I." He argued that for a people to have an adequate sense of *I* that coheres from a collective *We*, there must be among the *We*'s majority or its leading aristocracy such dimensions as numinosity, a choice of action, a central position, and continuity in time—all marked by strong boundaries. Erikson was impressed by the actualization of these dimensions developing out of Israel's monotheism and Jesus's claim to be certified by Jehovah to announce such actuality as potential in present reality (e.g., "the Kingdom of God has come upon you.").

Carol Hoare (2002) pointed out that Erikson often turned to the etymological origins of words that convey unity and wholeness of personhood to combat the tendency of his day to think in paradigms that posited people as fragmented individuals, separated from one another, or that reduced them to modernistic categories. Thus, Erikson's image of the spiritual adult involved holistic concepts such as (1) actuality and mutuality: the release of defensiveness naturally acquired in attaining autonomy that frees one to participate and share effectively; (2) leeway: the freedom to be oneself and to grant such freedom to others; (3) adaptation: the move

from passive acceptance of unacceptable life conditions to ego strength whereby one gains the power to fit the environment to one's needs and the needs of others (Gandhi overcoming prejudice is his exemplar); (4) insight: truth gained via contemplation of seeing into oneself and into a situation that it obliges toward ethical action (Erikson regarded confessional prayer as the precursor to psychoanalysis); and (5) virtue and centrality: the spiritual and ethical center that with optimum resolution of life stages allows the self to be bound together around transcendent values of hope, purpose, fidelity, love, wisdom, and so on. Without question, religion and spirituality was highly regarded, carefully conceptualized, and fully integrated in Erikson's thinking about life-span psychosocial ego development. However, this has not always been the case with subsequent research. Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, and Benson (2006) contended that the spiritual domain of development has historically been marginalized by social scientists and rarely regarded with as much significance as the cognitive, emotional, or social domain. Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer (2001) and Tisdell (2002) indicated that research linking an individual sense of ego identity to religion and/or spirituality during adulthood has been rare. In the following sections we review ego identity studies that have contained religion or spirituality as components of identity. We evaluate the methodological assumption that spiritual identity can be characterized by the same processes, structures, and outcomes as other identity domains, and we allow the narratives of spiritually devout adults to clarify and broaden existing conceptualizations regarding how spiritual identity is formed, revised, and sustained.

Contemporary research often attempts to differentiate religion from spirituality. In this endeavor, *religion* generally becomes associated with the institutional and the sociological (prescribed systems, rituals, and traditions or beliefs), and *spirituality* becomes associated more with personal, psychological, and individual phenomena (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1993). Although the distinction has intuitive rationale, we have avoided this differentiation in this article for several reasons. First, this dichotomy dismisses the reality that for millions of people formal religious participation, the content of collective ideals, and religious practices are deeply intertwined with the experiential and formative components of their self-definition (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Indeed, all dimensions of spirituality can be addressed by religion as well as by other ideologies and practices (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Second, our protocol in conducting qualitative interviews has been to allow the respondents freedom to name what they refer to as the spiritual part of their lives. Hence, some respondents refer to themselves using a descriptor common to organized religion ("Muslim," "Christian," "Jew"), whereas others label this component of their life using terms more often associated with contemporary spirituality ("unity," "self-realization," "awakening"). Third, our conceptualization resonates with approaches to understanding religiousness and spirituality that seek to integrate rather than polarize these concepts (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Spiritual identity, the preferred term in our research, is

inclusive of religious belief and practice but may also involve processes and pathways to the sacred not found in traditional religion.

## EXTENDING THE IDENTITY STATUS PARADIGM

Marcia (1966) stimulated early research on identity and spirituality by explicitly conceptualizing the ideological domain of identity to include political and religious orientations. He also delineated the key identity concepts of exploration and commitment as interacting processes in all domains of identity formation, including religious identity. Following Marcia's innovative conceptualization, a number of studies assessed exploration of and commitment to religious ideology as components of overall adolescent identity status (Marcia, 1993; Markstrom, 1999). However, these studies did not focus specifically on the content or structure of spiritual identity.

In an article published in *Developmental Psychology* (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell, 2006) we presented the findings of a study that analyzed lengthy qualitative interviews with 14 men and 14 women. Our convenience sample involved respondents who were known to be devoutly spiritual, and who had the capacity to articulate this significance and influence in their life. Predominantly Euro-American, this sample included four Black respondents (1 African, 2 African Americans, 1 India-born), and one Hispanic respondent. More than half of the respondents identified themselves as Protestant; however, the sample also included three Muslims, a Jew, a Greek Orthodox, a Roman Catholic, and six who identified their religious preference as "other." Respondents ranged in age from 22 to 72 years ( $M = 43.8$  years,  $SD = 14.0$  years), with the majority being young and middle-aged adults. Almost all respondents had at least an undergraduate degree, and many were intending to become or already were employed in a vocation associated with their spiritual convictions.

Specifically, we examined individuals' narratives about their spiritual identity for *role salience* (the importance of spirituality to their sense of identity) and *role flexibility* (the extent to which they have considered changes in their spiritual identity). These dimensions distinguished the ways individuals gave structure and content to their sense of spiritual identity. Salience and flexibility were conceptualized as adult-appropriate extensions of Marcia's (1966, 1993) adolescent identity formation constructs of exploration and commitment (Whitbourne, 1986). Adults revealed the salience that a role had for them through the type and intensity of motivation and affect they had toward it, the time they invested in it, and the impact the role had on their self-evaluation. Adults revealed their flexibility in a role as they reflected on how their past, present, and future involvement in the role had changed or will change (Sorell et al., 2006; Whitbourne, 1986). Each narrative was transcribed and read by at least two trained raters. An open coding procedure provided

content analysis of each interview. Identity components of spirituality were rated according to a coding manual. Reliability of ratings was established by consensus among the raters. Utilizing this multimethod system provided a much more substantial view of the processes and related areas of a person's sense of spiritual identity. The advantage this methodology offers beyond Marcia's identity status designations is explained in subsequent sections of this article. Our methodology and rating scheme is elaborated in a previously published article (Kiesling et al., 2006).

Surfacing themes from these lengthy interviews brought us to the realization that many of the patterns of identity formation we observed bore resemblance to Marcia's dimensions of exploration and commitment. Marcia's (1966) original two dimensional design posits four quadrants. Achieved individuals are high on exploration and commitments; moratoriums are high on exploration, but low on commitment; foreclosed are high on commitment but have bypassed exploration; and diffused have not experienced exploration nor made an identity commitment in this particular area of their life. We utilized the identity statuses as a generative framework that first classified our participants and then enabled us to identify similarities and differences within and between groups. These class designations were determined from objective ratings and from psychohistories developed by the raters for each participant. Thus, a foreclosed designation was given to a participant with low scores on past role flexibility/reflectiveness and high scores on role salience, especially when the narrative of their interview indicated little ideological questioning or deliberation on the way to faith commitment. Similarly, a moratorium designation was assigned to a participant with high scores on past and present role flexibility/reflectiveness if their narrative also indicated active searching without consistent commitment. An achieved designation signified high scores on role flexibility and role salience, coupled with movement from an ascribed sense of spiritual self to one the respondent has exercised choice in constructing. Finally, as our convenience sample contained devout adults, we found little evidence of a diffused pattern among our respondents.

Once located according to a particular identity status, related research and existing descriptions of the characteristics of those within a particular status could direct us toward deeper understandings of a particular pathway of spiritual identity formation. For example, as foreclosure is typically associated as a pattern of ascribed identity generated by identifying with others, we probed the interviews and discovered that indeed many of those classified in the current study as foreclosed named those within their family or faith tradition as their model(s) for faith development. Similarly, as moratorium is often cited in the literature as being accompanied by disapprobation from family; we looked for and compared evidence of similar dynamics in our sample.

Despite many commonalities, however, we also discovered in our comparative reflections places in which the existing nomenclature and the characterization of individuals within particular identity statuses seemed to inadequately represent the

narratives, aims, and ways that spirituality structured and provided meaning for these respondents. Evaluating theory on the basis of ongoing research, we began questioning whether existing operationalizations adequately map the social geography of the spiritual/religious domain. We present our thinking on these questions below and solicit the help of identity researchers in forging more adequate conceptual constructs for understanding adult, psychosocial, spiritual identity.

## EMERGING QUESTIONS TOWARD THEORETICAL RECONCEPTUALIZATION

### Is Spiritual Identity Development Related in the Same Way as Other Identity Components to a Biological Ground Plan?

Psychologists, like Erikson, view the life cycle as divided into several distinct developmental stages regarded as structurally normative and qualitatively distinct. Côté and Levine (2002) commented that the logic undergirding stages of development is epigenetic and the causal source is ontogenetic, that is, everyone passes through them in normative development. Theorists working in the area of spiritual development, however, have questioned (1) whether spirituality is more of a discontinuous process than is implied by stage theory, (2) whether spirituality admits to greater variability, and (3) whether developmental theories imply inevitable progress (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). In the assumption that religious ideology is a component of identity that can be evaluated according to current operationalizations of Erikson, it is implied that there are insignificant differences between the epigenetic patterning of self-construction in this domain and others.

There are no doubt relationships between developmental competencies and spiritual identity formation. Erikson (1968) connected the origins of faith to the first developmental task of life: trust versus mistrust. Further he predicted that ideological exploration and spiritual identity development could become especially salient with adolescent cognitive ripening (Erikson, 1968). Religion could serve as a vehicle for resolving crises bolstering faith via the achievement of ego strengths (Kwilecki, 1999). Côté and Levine (2002) noted that Erikson saw adults striving for competence through the various crises of the life cycle; always questing to find coherence and purpose in their human experience. No doubt there are many locations in the life cycle where spirituality interacts with maturation. Our interviews (Kiesling et al., 2006) verified that spirituality was deeply associated with the seasons and transitional periods in the life cycle (e.g., practices of religion/spirituality related to a process of differentiation in young adulthood; the review and entrustment of one's life at the end of the life cycle). However, it is less certain (and problematic to assume without longitudinal data) that spirituality follows a linear, normative, epigenetic unfolding. It was common among our morato-

rium and achieved respondents to report change in the spiritual dimension of their lives that raters categorized as non-normative or off-time change such as a dark night of the soul experience, an illuminating dream, owning an addiction, or experiencing bankruptcy. Consider further that proponents of faith development theory, influenced by Erikson's life cycle theory, define faith in terms that enable the claim that spirituality is a universal phenomenon, that is, everyone has faith if faith can be defined as "where one rests the heart" or as "the practice of one's ultimate concern" (Fowler, 1981). Yet proponents of faith development theory, including Fowler, acknowledge that most people never ascend to the highest levels of faith development. This suggests that the engine moving a person through faith development is less biologically driven (at least in adults) than is the inevitable passage through Erikson's eight stages of life. Unlike other, more "fixed" dimensions of identity construction (e.g., ethnicity or gender), and different in kind from a "role" thrust upon a person by virtue of their location in the family (e.g., mother, daughter, grandson), involvement in spirituality is more discretionary (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006) and hence more idiosyncratic (Kwilecki, 1999). Perhaps there is some recognition of this in the fact that Marcia (1966) coupled religion with politics as functioning within the ideological domain of identity; and yet this domain is subsequently conceptualized as functioning similarly to other identity components. Further, religious experience, especially aspects perceived as Divine encounter (1) are quite common, but not universally reported; (2) vary widely in salience to individuals and cultures; and (3) may occur independent of a person's developmental stage (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Indeed, it appears that individual differences in the salience of spirituality to one's sense of self are greater than individual differences in something like the relevance of gender to the self concept.

John Gibbs (2003), who posed a similar argument pertaining to the domain of morality, pointed out that gender is perceived from the start as being relevant to the self. Toddlers perceive their identification as "boy" or "girl" (and we might add as "son" or "daughter") and so begin to consolidate gender and family roles in their self-schemas. Thus, biology and environment insists that a girl or boy derives some sense of themselves as a gendered body, making it rather difficult to imagine a person arriving in adulthood without significant thoughts and feelings emanating from various roles associated with their embodiment as a male or female. The process of spiritual identity awareness is a more gradual process, less determined by societal labeling of the self. Indeed, it is hardly beyond the imagination to contemplate how a sense of spiritual identity could remain underexplored and/or without commitment, not because of disability, but simply because this potentiation was undeveloped, regarded as little significant import, or not associated with expectations accompanying the various roles a person inhabits. Marcia's (1966, 1993) statuses assume for other domains that a person who has not authored identity construction defaults to either a foreclosed or diffused status. Foreclosed status is typically associated with bypassing exploration and carrying forward an ascriptive



plan designed by someone else. Diffused status is commonly associated with a sense of lostness, pathological woundedness, or the tendency to be defined by one's circumstances and following the impulse of the moment (Josselson, 1996, Marcia, 1966). Neither of these statuses seems accurate or inevitable associations to make for persons who simply have not developed their spiritual identity.

We discovered (Kiesling et al., 2006) that though the Role Related Identity Interview for gender or age or any identified family role could begin with the assumption of experience in a role (e.g., "how do you feel about being a daughter/woman/wife?"), our questions for spiritual identity necessitated beginning with the question of whether this subjective sense of identity existed (e.g., "how much do you consider yourself a spiritual person?"). It makes intuitive sense that persons may not consider themselves "spiritual" as neither their social context nor predisposition or physiology provoked significant consideration of themselves as a spiritual self. Conceivably this may account for the number of identity studies from other cultures in which spirituality/religion is not assessed because it is regarded as at best a peripheral part of culture in that context. We would hasten to add however that there is the likelihood that spirituality may appear irrelevant in a particular study, not because it is methodologically established as being undeveloped or unimportant to the participants being studied, but because the researcher failed to ask relevant questions.

### What Characterizes Achieved Spiritual Identity?

In our interviews with devout, spiritual women and men (Kiesling et al., 2006), we found a number of respondents who, like the achieved in Marcia's studies with adolescents, passed through a time of exploration or crisis that stimulated experimentation or reflectiveness. Through this process a greater sense of internal awareness and interiority developed. The participants we classified as "achieved" could name experiences and beliefs that were different from or more intentional than those of their parents, indicating that the ascriptive or inherited self of childhood had been relinquished, modified or built upon, and that alternate identity possibilities had been considered. Furthermore, it was evident that rather than being embedded in these social contexts, these respondents were now able to reflect on these experiences from an objective posture, that is, the space of their spiritual identity now exhibited an identity they had exercised some choice and effort to gain. The capacity to verbalize their own process of identity change, the efficacy of language that named and distinguished the past sense of self from the present sense of self, and the ascendancy to formalize the questions asked and the means by which to resolve role-related doubt, seemed uniquely elaborate in those who fit within the achieved pattern. For example, Eve, a 36-year-old woman who derived her own rituals and practices of paganism, offered this disclosure about the search that led her to divinize the feminine:



Oh yes there was my mom who made me go to Sunday school, and I thought it was a waste of time, and I did it to make her happy. I did the Quaker thing and the Jewish thing. I went into a Mosque and talked to the people there. Like I said, where is the place for me in this or where is the place for the female? Nobody can answer that question.

Eve grew up under the malediction of a father who wanted her to be a boy and who subsequently gave preferential treatment to her brothers. As a young adult she lived through her depressed mother's suicide. Through the searching described above, Eve finally came to identify with women in mythological literature whom she noted often seemed "cursed," but who also were given a place of regard as divine, unlike the patriarchal godhead in the other faiths she had explored. Her "paganism" thus involved developing her sense of spiritual self through self-selected caricatures drawn from epic tales, creating celebrations in her community of friends for life passages (e.g., menstruation), and observing rituals marking seasonal changes (e.g., winter solstice).

Eve fits nicely into existing descriptors for the achieved identity status, clearly exemplifying an intentional process of exploration and self-authoring of her commitment in paganism. There were other participants in our study, however, that we classified as "achieved" because they bore more resemblance and common ground with the achieved status than with any other status. Their ratings for role salience and role flexibility matched those classified in this status. However, further characterizations of achieved identity seemed to misrepresent the sense of self we heard them articulating, causing us to wonder if the outcome of some spiritual identity processes function to structure the self in ways not yet fully ascertained in the identity literature. For these respondents, the spiritual sense of self was bent not so much toward charting their own path in self-satisfactory ways, but toward realizing the self as perceived in the presence of deity itself. Marcia (2002) offered some awareness of this trajectory toward achieved spiritual identity. In narrating the psychohistory of Francesco Bernadone (Saint Francis), he concluded that Francesco "gave over the psychosocial development to powers greater than himself" (p. 206).

Conventional characterizations of achieved identity based on the dimensions of exploration and commitment have typically described a self-authored structure exemplifying a high locus of control. Achieved persons are claimed to have expanded identity choices in the interest of greater independence and autonomy, the ego moving beyond constraint or "identification with" as the primary influence over one's sense of self (Josselson, 1996; Kroger, 2000; Marcia, 1993). Thus, the ego becomes free to be in greater service to the self. By contrast, some of the achieved participants in the current study, like Francesco Bernadone, described their formation as emerging from religious traditions and cultures where spiritual identity development depends on the surrender, subordination, mortification, or

denial of ego needs rather than expression and assertion of the ego-centered self. Utilizing an idiographic methodology, Kwilecki (1999), for example, narrates “the submissive,” prototyped in her depiction by Mother Theresa, as one of four religious types.

Although our respondents cited the characteristic move away from ascriptive roles presented in one’s past, the transforming movements they described were about being apprehended more than that of choosing; relinquishing shame, guilt, or self-doubt rather than having to endure it in the process of differentiation; and entrusting the self to another that moves one either back toward dependency and security or toward interdependence, rather than toward individuation or autonomy. In these stories of the spiritually achieved, the vision for selfhood was not articulated so much as an expansion of identity choices, but as a narrowing devotion whereby the ego becomes single minded in its faithfulness to a deity. This is congruent with Waterman’s (1993) notion that the aim of achievement is not flexibility but centeredness—a central organizing principle that orchestrates and coalesces identity contents.

With new eyes to see and new ways to apprehend a kind of contextual belongingness, the space in which they perceived their sense of self was transposed to exist in the very being of divinity. Like Daniel Stern’s (Fowler, 1996) explanation of the child whose cumulative experience of the presence of a benevolent caregiver develops a capacity to evoke an image of the face of this person when physically absent, so did these respondents describe a metaphysical intuition of knowing and being known by God in such a way that the experiences oriented the whole of life around this sense of spiritual identity, a formation associated with what Erikson named *homo religiosus*.

The essence of the phenomenon we are describing can be readily found in the recovery community where spirituality accompanies the significant restructuring of the self. Note the themes of surrender and receptivity fashioned by the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: Step 1: we admitted we were powerless over X – that our lives had become unmanageable; Step 2: we came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity; Step 3: we made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him; Steps 6 and 7 – we were entirely ready to have God remove our defects of character and remove our shortcomings; and Step 11: We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1939).

To further illustrate the divergence of this patterning with the characterization of achieved identity in the literature, consider a comparison and contrast between the description of the “achieved” women in Josselson’s (1996) study, where religion was one component of identity, and our findings, in which spiritual identity served a central and integrative function for many of our respondents. Josselson renamed her achieved women “pathfinders,” signifying the investigation of different

ways of situating oneself in life and the self-authoring of choices consistent with what one wants. These achieved women were portrayed as those who had gained confidence in their ability to attain personal success by selecting self-satisfying investments of themselves. Having sacrificed notions of being the ideal daughter, these women purportedly had come to rely on themselves and on their own sense of approval standards by which to live; the internal quest for autonomy having overshadowed residing negative emotions of disapproval or self-doubt. Josselson's (1996) study is reminiscent of humanistic theories of maturity and health, such as Rogers and Maslow, who regard the telos of human development as self-actualization, freedom of choice, and decreased need for approval from others.

The spiritually achieved in our sample similarly spoke of "being on a journey," of finding or following a path, and/or of feeling responsible for choosing the path they had taken. They were aware of alternate ways of being and believing; conscious of, but not inseparable from, the authority of the past; convinced of having made choices toward what ultimately satisfied. The compass for their lives had become internalized and they listened more to an emergent sense of self. However, this "inner voice" was often associated with or indistinguishable from the voice of the divine. Guidance emerged not so much from themselves but from a transcendent source transposed internally. For many of the monotheists in our sample, Deity thus became the bestower of identity. Social scientific research has been ambivalent about embracing this as a possible identity "achievement." Because achieved identity typically assumes personal belief in one's own efficacy (Greve, Anderson, & Krampen, 2001), religious orientations that call for submission to external authority are often excluded or are relegated to a status of immaturity. There are no doubt frequent contexts where such calls for submission contribute to a foreclosing of religious identity. Further, submission and single-minded devotion may result in negative outcomes that bear resemblance to a pattern William Perry (1968) identified in cognitive development as "retreat." In this schema, a person avoids complexity and ambiguity through a regression to dualism that overidentifies with an authoritarian structure and evokes righteous hatred toward anyone who is Other (cf. Hoare, this issue). However, we contend that there are those who bear an undeniable family resemblance to the processes Erikson conceptualized as positive identity resolution eventuating in acquired virtues, but that existing characterizations of achieved identity have not fully captured their essence. Several anecdotes may serve well to further elucidate the point.

*Hope* is a 42-year-old, White female and mother of two:

I guess I spent the first 30 years of my life trying to feel good about myself by what I achieved and what I did. If I was a good wife and a good mom, and if I performed and did well in whatever this year I was involved in, I was doing OK, and I was well respected in whatever, well liked. If I had things together, then I could feel OK about myself. I did feel OK about myself because I was able to hang things together. Then

there was this period in which, in my mid-30s, things kind of became unglued. Horrible things were happening ... At the time it was a very real fear that I would lose it and never get back. Basically it was the fear of being annihilated, and who or what was trying to annihilate me, and maybe it was God. Through this whole struggle I began to see that it wasn't God. In a way it was the way I viewed myself. I was setting myself up. So I began to have a more realistic view of myself which included my brokenness, and some pain and wounds from my past. My areas of what I would call sinfulness – injury to myself, and to people I loved, and other people. And I began to see that I was not as together as I thought I was. That was a really difficult realization, but then through that I also realized that God loved me, and that this was no real surprise to Him. It may have been a huge surprise to me, but it was not any surprise to him and that he in fact already dwelt among all this stuff in me. If he was happy to be there, then I could be happy to be in myself. This didn't happen in a few weeks, this was a very long process. But that is essentially where I have come to. I am in God and He is in me; if He is happy to be in me, then I can be happy to live with Him in me as well, like I can be at home with myself. I have a more realistic understanding of my weaknesses and my temptations, and my areas of sinfulness as well as my strengths and what I do have together. I guess I have an appreciation that God holds it all together and that I don't have to hold anything together. It doesn't matter if I'm well or I'm mentally alert, psychologically adjusted, or whatever ... my togetherness is because that I am in God. Because of my self-image, I'm happier in myself because of who I perceive myself to be in God.

Palmer is a 72-year-old man who left his family of birth at a relatively early age, estranged from his father. In college, he met a Hindu guru who not only became a father figure to him but who talked about psychology as the development of the soul. Palmer decided to follow his teacher's influence, later becoming a Muslim. He retired from psychology when his wife's debilitating illness required him to be perpetually at home. Rather than growing bitter, Palmer learned from his Islamic faith simply "to submit" to this as the will of God, a sort of test and an opportunity to become something he failed at earlier—a caregiver to his family.

Vaughn is a 48-year-old man who believed that his primary identity was found in relationship to God through Christ and that virtually every identity must flow from that. "If it doesn't, then I will collapse to selfishness ... to aggressiveness ... or to aggrandizement – trying to make a name for myself ... or to accumulation." The strength of this conviction evolved from bankrupting a small fortune he had amassed playing the stock market to support his family while serving as pastor. He defined a transforming moment in his sense of spiritual self that occurred at this low point in his life.

I don't believe I had ever had such a sense of assurance before, and I honestly don't know that I expect ever again to have such a sense of assurance. I had just finished a wedding.... It was a blessed event. There was a sacramental presence there. These were good people and they loved the Lord. It was a very, very special, intensely spiri-

tual time for me. After that wedding I went back to my office, which is a beautiful office. It's still there, turn-of-the-century church. On two sides it had stained glass windows. It's a gorgeous office. It was ten o'clock at night. I suddenly started hearing a seagull. As a kid growing up, occasionally seagulls would come up in that area, and they would follow behind your tractor, dive bombing down to get grasshoppers and rodents and whatever they could find. It was not unusual for me to hear seagulls, but you don't hear a seagull at ten o'clock at night. I had not heard or seen any seagulls recently. Sitting there in the chair, I sensed wave after wave after wave, like I was at an ocean with seagulls overhead, and every wave was like the love of God just flooding over me, just filling me. It was a phenomenal event in every sense of the word. I'm not quite sure how long it lasted, maybe a few minutes, maybe 30 minutes. I don't know. It was from that point then that I knew everything would be all right. There were no words, there was nothing spoken, it was just the immense sense of being in the ocean of God's love. From that point I really did hear the "one great word" that I swear was an audible word to me, at least internally it was audible, was to go back to school. I was sitting in that same office and the sun was streaming through the stained glass windows. God said, "Go back to school and get the foundations right." It was out of that crisis then that all of this, I think the fullness of life that I have now, really emerged.

Other participants echoed this posturing of the self in receptivity. Another Muslim in our study commented that "as soon as I stand to make my prayer I'm making my intention to submit myself to Allah." A woman in our study who designated her religion as "pagan" described "trance dancing" in which she could "hear people talking and see people who are spirits and elders dancing with you." Thus, throughout these interviews many of the participants that we characterized as "achieved" identity used the language of surrender or receptivity to describe their way of comporting the self toward Deity. The social self constructed from the expectations of others had been relinquished, but not so much in the direction of ego strength, as in an embrace of divine self-donation on their behalf (Volf, 1996) that offered them an experience of totality by which they felt whole and integrated (Dean, 2004). Non-Western cultures also have conceptualized "fusion" not as a loss of self by absorption into a more powerful other (a potentially pathological distortion of surrender/submission that weakens identity rather than validates and forms it), but as entering a sense of oneness with creation itself (Dean, 2004). Is it accurate to interpret these phenomenological expressions as the outcome of exploration and commitment eventuating in an "achieved" spiritual sense of self, or might other constructs and characterizations more adequately represent these stories?

Feminist scholars have alerted us to the reality that we construct a self "in relation" to reliable others in our lives. The stories of our monotheistic "achieved" subjects suggests that something like this may occur on a transcendent plane in the construction of spiritual identity, opening the door to operationalizing spiritual

identity focused more on relatedness. This reconceptualization should not seem too foreign to social scientists because it follows much of the reformulation of our understanding of the adolescent's relationship to parents. Although earlier models assumed that for adolescents to individuate as their own person in adulthood, separation from parents was encouraged, sometimes resulting in a consequent mutual antagonism during the transition. More recent models suggest that parents who remain a vital part of adolescent development while giving their son or daughter space to become their own person are not interfering with the development of agency and an internal locus of control in the adolescent, but actually supporting and enhancing it. Likewise, developmental theory that plays too strongly on "achievement" that moves one away from "identification with" chosen or self-authored selfhood, often assumes in assessing spiritual/religious orientation that reliance on an external authority represents a less mature level of development. Rather, the narratives we heard of those who in every other way resembled "achievement" in identity articulated that the influence of Deity as an authority figure aided and enriched, rather than curtailed agency and development of mature selfhood. Underhill's (1957) classic study of the mystic way depicts movements in the spiritual path that reflect a paradoxical relationship of passive and active ego postures. The self, once awakened to transcendent reality, may necessarily move through a period of purification involving detachment from all that has served to dissipate the energies of the self. Once surrendered and purified, the self can then become illumined by a sense of Divine Presence and by a compelling lucid version of the world. Concepts Erikson associated with the spiritual adult—actuality, centrality, mutuality, leeway, insight, and virtue (Hoare, 2002)—may be quite apt at capturing this entrustment of the self to Deity in a way that current conceptualizations of "achieving" a spiritual identity lack.

Further help in conceptualizing this development may be found by borrowing from Côté and Levine's (2002) articulation of the development of the superego. Freud regarded the superego as fully developed with the resolution of the Oedipal complex (Schwartz, 2001). Erikson, however, believed not only that it developed earlier, but also that it never finished developing. Further, he posited that as the superego undergoes transformation beyond childhood, the proscriptions formed in the context of childhood transform into the prescriptions of the ego ideal—now regarded as a province of the personality. We find in this an explanation of the transpositioning of Deity whereby a person does not reject external authority toward groundless relativity but rather internalizes and appropriates it as a province of the personality (Côté & Levine, 2002). Hoare (2002) noted Erikson's concern that this movement can simply lead people to harbor "too many internal restrictive covenants" (p. 71), based in self-judgment that project one's own feared flaws onto others. However, she also noted Erikson's belief that this moralistic self could, and should, develop into the ethical, principled, spiritual adult who "affirms judiciously instead of negating arbitrarily" (p. 72). Again, achieved spirituality, gained

primarily through insight and care and eventuating in wisdom (Hoare, 2002), may not idealize autonomy but rather point to the ego surrendered and aligned to the will of another (i.e., "one greater than oneself"; Marcia, 2002, p. 206).

One final piece of reconceptualization is important. In identity status theory, an achieved sense of self follows from a period of exploration, whereby a person may suffer guilt and self-doubt at the cost of differentiation. The result of having chosen particular identity commitments is almost always cited as a greater sense of individuation and autonomy. Thus, theorists often cite as the mechanisms for identity development toward the achieved status such things as one's readiness to change, accommodation, or disequilibrium. Speakers at a recent Society for Research on Identity Formation conference heralded as illustrations of exploration toward achieved identity the story of a woman who recently divorced, and the story of a priest who was stepping out of the role of ordained episcopacy. Although there may be liberation(s) worthy of celebration in these stories, the conceptual itinerary that is implicitly sanctioned by utilizing these narratives as illustrative of movement toward achieved identity seems to pose an inversion of the "virtues" that Erikson articulated as fidelity, love, and care. Characterizing readiness to change as the primary mechanism of growth promotes a shifting pattern and perhaps even an undermining of the relationships, roles, and points of exchange that it would appear Erikson saw as crucial in naming faithfulness and care as virtues of the adult stages of life.

The tension experienced in our query is determining how on the one hand to reconcile the societal demand for keeping even the most fundamental values fluid to match the changes in society and the alterations generated by movement from one social setting to another, with Erikson's insight on the other hand that identity crisis may be resolved by ideological commitment. As Côté and Levine (2002) suggested, the most general notion of accumulating ego strength throughout the life cycle is Erikson's conceptualization of virtues. We find it helpful to norm the process of spiritual/religious maturity based not solely on whether experimentation and change is occurring, but whether ego strength is accumulating toward the virtues that Erikson cited as favored resolutions of identity transitions. Utilizing role salience and role flexibility with their various components enables a broadened conceptual grid by which to make these distinctions. For example, one respondent in the current study defined his spirituality as a perpetual quest to reinvent himself. Utilizing identity statuses, it is difficult to categorize a respondent whose spiritual commitment is to continual exploration. Similarly, we discovered a respondent whose ideological commitment as a Jew was not the resolution of his exploration, but rather the cause of it, as he wrestled with the theodicy of the Holocaust and sought to aid in the Palestinian struggle. In this case, we could designate role flexibility/reflectiveness as very high while distinguishing this from exploration as anticipatory socialization; and we could



distinguish it as representative of accumulated virtue as opposed to other “explorations” that were not.

### What Mechanisms Promote Spiritual Development and Change?

Those researching identity development have provided various responses to the question: “Why explore?” In our comparative analyses we once again found ourselves asking how similar these processes are to the mechanisms that drive spiritual identity development. Grotevant (1987) conceptualized exploration as a process variable and identified five antecedents to the exploration process: (1) information seeking tendency; (2) the presence or absence of competing forces in one’s life; (3) satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one’s current identity; (4) expectations for the exploration process; and (5) willingness to explore. Schwartz (2001) credited Kerpelman, Pittman, and Lamke (1997) for adding a revision to Grotevant’s process model, suggesting that exploration is promoted when there is an attempt to balance congruent and incongruent self perceptions and the feedback one gets from significant others. Waterman (1992) outlined four principles involved in the inward search for innate potentials that seems to accompany aspects of exploration: (1) overly constrictive environment that delimits the prospective choices one is able to explore; (2) competing social factors that encourage socially acceptable choices versus seeking one’s inner potential; (3) the distraction of pleasures incompatible with their pursuit of unique excellence; or (4) difficulties in identifying or actualizing one’s inner potentials.

These rather comprehensive lists of mechanisms for identity growth are certainly applicable to the domain of spiritual identity development. In numerous places in our interviews we can cite illustrations where information seeking (Grotevant, 2001), the expectations of significant others (Grotevant, 2007), incongruency between ideal and actual selves (Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997), and constrictive social contexts (Waterman, 1992) were instrumental in contributing to or restricting change and growth in one’s sense of spiritual self. However, these lists typically assume movement toward inner-directed agency, internal locus of control, differentiation, and individuality. Such processes name the trajectory of spiritual identity development for some of our participants, but may not adequately account for the profundity of what Buber termed the “I-Thou” relatedness evident in the narratives of our participants. Our experience in listening to the narratives of spiritually devout adults parallels in many ways the experience of feminist scholars attempting to describe the lives of women. Although there is movement toward autonomy and individuation, our research underscores that the story of spiritual identity is incomplete unless the essential counterpoint of related-

ness, especially the pattern of how one images and relates to the sacred (Kwilecki, 1999; Zinnbauer et al., 1999), is given greater consideration.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have taken a grounded approach toward theoretical reconceptualization in the domain of spiritual identity construction. Specifically, our research has moved us to pose three questions: (1) Is spiritual identity development related in the same way as other identity components to a biological ground plan? (2) What characterizes achieved spiritual identity? and (3) What mechanisms promote spiritual development and change?

In response to the first question, our findings suggest that significant relationship exists between the developmental tasks of a person's life and one's capacity for spiritual identity formation. However, the narratives we heard also suggest that spirituality is more discretionary than other domains of identity and less ontogenetic than is implied by a linear, normative, biological ground plan. Erikson's theory permits an infinite variety of outcomes constrained only by one's social context, and therefore we do not regard our findings as dismissive of his theory. Rather we find existing operationalizations of Erikson to be limited in their capacity to understand adult spiritual identity, especially insofar as they treat this domain as acting consonant with other dimensions of identity. Other aspects of Erikson's theory remain underconceptualized. These, we believe, may be highly generative for future research in adult spiritual identity. This point may best be elaborated by considering our second question.

In relation to our second question regarding achieved spiritual identity, we provided examples of devout adults who resemble existing descriptions of an achieved identity status, but whose narratives insist on reconceptualizing dimensions and outcomes that have characterized this status. In addition to the language of "achievement" gained by individuation and separation in the service of freeing the ego, we have posited that some patterns of maturity in spiritual identity development are fashioned more by centeredness and relatedness and would be better characterized as surrender of the ego, receptivity to the transcendent, or a "giving over" of the processes of identity formation to a higher power.

We cited Carol Hoare's (2002) work earlier in this article as it addresses Erikson's rendering of the spiritual/ethical adult. The holistic images that she gleaned from Erikson's notes on adulthood (e.g. actuality and mutuality, leeway, insight, centrality, virtue, and principled moral behavior) provide foundational concepts essential to deepening our understanding of spiritual identity construction. Currently, methodological approaches have largely applied the identity status dimensions of exploration and commitment to distinguish different patterns of forming a spiritual self. Although this proved to be a useful scheme, we also dis-

covered that it tends to bias the conceptual itinerary for spiritual identity development toward individuation/separation and away from relatedness. Utilizing a methodology that expands the identity status dimensions of exploration and commitment into multiple components of role salience and role flexibility, we were able to hear additional aspects in the narratives of spiritually devout adults. Underhill's (1957) chronicling of the mystic path that recognizes and delineates purification and detachment as part of the journey toward a strengthened, illumined and unitive self offers a conceptualization that better balances surrender and agency as potentially tandem ego postures.

Likewise, in some of her earlier work, Josselson (1994) delineated eight dimensions to relational space in studying the connected lives of women, arguing that when "viewed in the context of relatedness, identity emerges not from increasing separation and distinction from others, but from the continually redefined capacity to make use of and to respond to others." (p. 101). She concluded that "the crucial events that people recount in their odysseys of identity are usually fundamentally relational." (p. 101). Our research suggests that the theoretical revisions called for by feminists scholars offers hope alongside Hoare's (2002) and Kwilecki's (1999) work for advancing our conceptualizations about spirituality. Additional work is needed to consider how the following concepts might be operationalized alongside of Hoare's images to better conceptualize Erikson's original understanding of the spiritual/ethical adult: a sense of being held (holding) where there is enough protection and safety to begin discovering aspects of self; attachment that does not diminish individuation but enriches it; intense connecting (passionate experience) often resulting from the psychodynamic patterning of hurt, anxiety, hate or pleasure; validation (eye-to-eye validation) from the mirroring of the self; idealization and identification in patterning ourselves after admired others; mutuality and resonance that mitigates aloneness via putting oneself forward into experiences that are sensed as being shared by others; embeddedness that makes the self part of a social world and the social world part of the self; and generativity determined by what one chooses to "tend to" (tending or care) (Josselson, 1994).

Finally, our third brief inquiry into exploring the mechanisms of spiritual identity development and revision cause us to once again wonder at the complexity and multidimensionality of our focus. Our investigation suggests that the motivations toward developing a spiritual sense of self are legion—inclusive of and yet potentially more comprehensive and integrating than exploration and commitment in other domains. Spirituality may indeed be pursued in the service of anticipatory socialization and resolving the adolescent identity crisis. However, any treatment of Erikson makes it plain that spirituality originates in the first psychosocial task (trust vs. mistrust) and is potentially operative in the resolution of every subsequent lifecycle challenge. Further, the current, global political state of affairs makes untenable the assumption that every motivation for engagement in constructing a spiritual sense of self is equally valid and directive to similar outcomes.

Rather, critical in the investigation of spiritual identity is distinguishing the mechanisms and contexts that promote, and that prohibit, various patterns of spiritual identity formation.

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