4-23-2018

Millennial Culture and Epistemology: Exploring the Meaning-making Discourse of an Emerging Generation

Sophia Driscoll Gamber
Ursinus College, sogamber@ursinus.edu

Adviser: Jasmine Harris

Recommended Citation

MILLENNIAL CULTURE AND EPISTEMOLOGY:
Exploring the meaning-making discourse of an emerging generation.

Sophia Driscoll Gamber
Ursinus College
Anthropology & Sociology
Senior Honors Thesis
2017-2018

Faculty Advisors:
Dr. Jasmine Harris
Dr. Danielle Widmann Abraham
Dr. Lauren Wynne

MILLENNIAL CUTLURE AND EPISTEMOLOGY:
Exploring the meaning-making discourse of an emerging generation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

ABSTRACT:

Millennial Culture and Epistemology takes a mixed methods approach to understanding the culture and epistemological processes of the current cohort of millennial undergraduate students at a small residential liberal arts college. The study first identifies specific trends in epistemological frameworks, ethics, and claimed spiritual/religious identities among a sample of undergraduate students and finds that students are commonly utilizing subjectivist epistemological frameworks that are built around cultural relativism and skepticism. The study then unpacks markers of undergraduate millennial culture as they relate to epistemology and finds that students' stances on issues of community, social ethics and responsibility, religion, and spirituality are often heavily influenced by students' experiences with trauma, mental health concerns, widespread generalized cultural anxiety, broadly shared disdain for traditional organized religion, and a social ethos of individualism. They maintain a preference for personal spirituality over communal religious practices, though many do not find religion or spirituality to be important and some regard it as harmful to persons and society. This does not mean the students aren't interested in social care and community building—quite the contrary. The study finds that students are very active in caring for others around them, and they often enact this social care through personalized moral communities. These findings suggest that scholars of sociology and religion must develop new academic language and study tools that accurately detach millennial community practices and epistemology from religion and spirituality so as to more fully and inclusively address the relationship between cultures, epistemology, and ethics.

INTRODUCTION:

In the fall of 2017, my final year of college, I got my second tattoo. A woman with long gray hair did it in a little parlor in Philadelphia one night in late October. It's a small piece only four words long, not much bigger than two postage stamps side by side: *Be still & know.* For anyone unfamiliar with the Old Testament, these words are taken from Psalm 46, a prayer for comfort and deliverance, and one which I frequently turned to in moments of confusion as I struggled to ascertain my place in the world unfolding around me or in moments of joy, when the glory of the world revealed itself in the most unexpectedly beautiful of ways. *Be still, and know that I am God.* In the Vulgate translation, the Latin words are *vacate et videte: "*empty [yourself] and see." These words sit half-hidden on the inside of my left forearm, practically in the crook of my elbow, and often when I am nervous or trying to center myself in prayer I trace the letters with my right hand and reflect on these two different translations. What does it mean to *see*? What does it mean to *know*? And who *is* "God"? What does who God is say about who I am, or who human beings are? Does it really matter? I looked around at my peers and friends on my college campus and wondered what it meant that for most of us, "God" really doesn't seem to matter much.

This study asks these questions on a sociological platform by interrogating how millennial culture relates to the generations' epistemologies and ethical codes. It is particularly concerned with how millennial students embedded within their cultural context engage with the world around them. It is a study of over one hundred young millennial undergraduate students at a small liberal arts school in the American northeast, conducted in the fall of 2017 when the young millennial age cohort was in the midst of its college and coming of age years. At the time of conducting the interviews and surveys that would later become this project I was halfway

through my last year at the college where I collected my data. I began this project largely because I wanted to learn more about how other people my age and on my campus related to the concept of "God," to each other, and to their sense of their place in the world. It's difficult to spend much time at all with young millennials and not see quickly how areligious folks of my generation often are, how much we've wrestled with coming into a full ownership of how we know the world around us. I wanted to better understand the religious and spiritual identities of the students on my college campus and how these identities influenced how students see the world unfolding around them and how this in turn influences their professed and practiced ethical commitments.

The project was designed with mixed-methods data collection regime that would hinge on a demographics survey of our campus and interviews with survey respondents. Though I do now call myself a Christian and feel called to pastoral ministry and counseling, I had wrestled significantly with that aspect of my identity and had my own tumultuous relationship with religion, spirituality, people, and God. From having lived among my peers it was clear that religion and spirituality might be touchy subjects for other folks, too. The more I wrestled with designing my study, the more interested I became in the cultural contexts of the age group I was studying. Folks around my age and a little older are typically known as "millennials" in major demographic studies. According to most demographers, millennials are all those individuals born between 1990 and 2000, and the generation is broken up into two further subdemographic categories by the Pew Research Center. "Late millennials" were born between 1990 and 1995. Young millennials were born in the second half of that decade from 1995 to 2000. Young millennials, one of whom I am and many of whom are now in their college years, are the specific focus of this study. I hadn't yet started studying the metaphysics of my generation or the ways

they might differ from previous generations, but this interest into the major cultural trends of the 2000s and 2010s, particularly with regards to religious affiliation, planted the seeds of questions that would later blossom into full-on investigation of our generation-specific epistemology—our ways of knowing and seeing the world we lived in.

Millennials are staggeringly religiously unaffiliated compared to older generations. About 36% of all young millennials alone born between 1995 and 2000 surveyed in the Pew Religious Landscape Study of 2016 reported that they were religiously unaffiliated (sometimes referred to as "none") (Pew:2016). Many millennials were not raised in particularly religious households, and many who were raised within religious traditions rejected their religious organizations or did not continue to seek them out for a number of reasons, ranging from institutional critiques of religious organizations to distrust of religious leaders to anxiety over being judged for certain behaviors or required to conform to community standards that didn't work for them. Many were apathetic to traditional religion and spirituality because traditional religion *itself* seemed quite apathetic to their lived struggles.

This trend only appears to be deepening. Another Pew study found, for example, a 9 percent increase from 2012 to 2017 in people aged 18 to 29 who identified as spiritual but not religious(Pew: 2017). This is not inconsiderable. When asked if they believed in God, 50% of young millennials said "absolutely yes," the lowest of all of generational cohorts to respond this way. On the other hand, 17% of young millennials said "absolutely no," the highest frequency of such a response among all of the generational cohorts. When asked what they turned to for moral guidance, 23% of young millennials said they turned to religion for guidance (again the lowest frequency of such a response among all other cohorts), but 46% said they relied on "common sense" for moral guidance (the highest frequency of such a response among all other

cohorts)(Pew:2016). Regardless of any personal proclivity I might have for organized religion and what might be considered more conventional spiritual beliefs, the radical shifting away from religious epistemology cannot be undervalued. I might be a religious young millennial, but this seems to be a subculture, and not the main stream.

Many millennials do still identify personal spiritual needs within themselves and/or resonate with aspects of spiritual life untied to traditional religious institutions (Oppenheimer: 2014). This is perhaps best indicated by the growing trend of young people who identify as "spiritual but not religious," which has become so prominent that it is now a widely used demographic category in contemporary religious landscape research. So while millennials may be casting away the traditional religious practices and beliefs of previous generations, many are nonetheless still interested in engaging with questions of morality and spirituality (some, like me, are even still interested in figuring out how to reimagine our existing religious institutions so we can engage these questions meaningfully within our tradition), and we're are doing so in increasingly pluralistic and unorthodox ways. The need for community and social care is still present among the population.

When I began designing and implementing this project in the fall of 2017, I had titled the project "Spirituality and Service: Exploring an undergraduate spiritual landscape and exposing connections between student spirituality and community engagement." It was too wordy to last long, but beyond that, it was also riddled with assumptions. For one thing, while I knew from personal experienced corroborated by several national-wide religious landscape studies that most undergrads my age wouldn't describes themselves as "religious," I thought that "spiritual" would be a word that most undergraduates would connect with or feel a claim to. I knew from living among my peers and from broader data available through nation-wide demographic studies that

"religious" was certainly not a word most people my age were going to identify with, but I had assumed that because many of us would likely reject "religious," we would ascribe instead to "spiritual" as an automatic default. Furthermore, I took for granted that people for whom religion and spirituality meant very little in their lives would be comfortable calling their atheism, agnosticism, or total indifference a kind of "spiritual identity." To conduct a religious and spiritual landscape study was by no means innovative, so the study attempted to push the discourse further by teasing out the potential relationship between students' religious and spiritual identities, moral convictions, and community service engagement. This of course added another level of assumption to my study design by too narrowly limiting the language I was using to talk about how students were translating their moral convictions into ethical actions.

After grappling with the survey data and digging in deeper on this issue in my interviews with students, I realized I had to fundamentally rethink the ways in which I was navigating this project and the foundational assumptions I'd built into the questions I was asking. I set about trying to design more effective and inclusive language, and in doing so arrived at an understanding of what I now call the "millennial epistemology," an underlying cultural epistemological framework built into a cultural metaphysical framework that most of the students that I studied, regardless of religious or spiritual identity, seem to be working with. It was a ground-breaking moment. The data I'd been collecting through my survey and interview regime was unable to find much of a correlation between religious identity and engagement in community service activities, but it was clear that students, seemingly independently of their religious affiliation, were relying on a similar mechanism for understanding social reality, and the understandings they were coming to led them in turn to behave according to a millennial ethics that relies on limited moral universals and a do-no-harm approach to decision making.

This epistemology serves as the guiding framework in place for processing the world around us, determining what we know to be true or real, and then from there, with that data in hand, making decisions on how to live within the world that we see and know.

Whether we realize it or not, we are all actively operating off our own personal metaphysical frameworks, and these personal metaphysical frameworks are influenced by our identities and experiences, which are irremovably situated within our cultural context. To define culture broadly, we can say that culture is an evolving construction that is built of the social norms and behaviors found within a group or society. Culture therefore includes the full range of phenomena that are diffused over time and across human networks through processes of social conditioning. All of this lead us to experience and navigate the world in particular ways and to develop an understanding of what truth is and how we can know what truth is that is unique to us. This is where epistemology comes in as one of those diffused phenomena that are transmitted through the social network. Culture aids us in our attempts at making meaning out of the world around us. Epistemology, a specific phenomenon of culture, refers to the conscious and unconscious processes of truth-making and knowledge-making. More succinctly, it is concerned with what we know and what we believe about the world around us, and how we come to these conclusions. A scientific epistemology, for example, might hold that one can only know things empirically through a process of data collection and analysis. Culture and epistemology is about as far as we'll go in this study, but a more comprehensive conversation would also include the two other subdivisions of metaphysics: cosmology and ontology. Where epistemology refers to the study of knowledge and how we "know" about things, ontology is the study of the things themselves. It is the study of the nature of being, of existence, and of reality itself. Cosmology refers to our understandings of how the universe "works"—what the origin of the universe is,

why the universe exists and if it has a purpose, and if the existence of consciousness has a purpose. Cosmology is often build around religious, mythical, or scientific evidence-collection frames, though it does not necessarily have to take any of these approaches nor does it have to limit itself to just one kind of evidence. A deeper exploration of the broader metaphysical systems at play is necessary to fully understanding how young peoples' thinking influences their behavior in community—there's an accompanying cosmology and ontology that I could only just barely begin to make conclusions about with the data I had—but we can begin to dive into a tiny glimpse, located on a small liberal arts college campus in the fall of 2017, of what the millennial epistemology might look like.

This paper attempts to dissect the millennial epistemology and then to explore how this epistemological approach impacts social interaction and behavior. In Chapter 1, we walk through an in depth explanation of the study's methodological schema. This includes more detail on the evolution of the project, which is necessary for understanding how this present body of work relates to existing discourse on American religious and spiritual identity and how it responds to the need to update our discourse to meet the changing trends in our cultural epistemologies and the evolving role of religion and spirituality in society.

Chapters 2 and 3 break down the millennial epistemology to reveal its major working parts as they exist the based on themes isolated within the survey and interview data. Chapter 2 addresses the major structural pillars of this epistemological framework and the assumptions written into its foundations. I argue that the millennial epistemology is characterized by subjectivism, cultural relativism, antirealism, and skepticism. The millennial epistemology makes very few foundational or concrete claims about moral rights and wrongs. Instead, constituents utilize a do-no-harm ethic, in which any behavior is morally acceptable provided it

"does no harm" to others. Chapter 3 interrogates the different factors within the lives of

millennials that influenced the development of the epistemology. These factors emerged as

significant themes within the interview and survey data collection process, and include

widespread cultural anxiety, childhood instability related to family changes or socioeconomic

pressures, challenges to traditional religious and scientific epistemological approaches,

widespread instances of trauma and mental illness, and a strong sense of personal responsibility.

   The questions I once couched around community service take their new form in Chapter

4. Chapter 4 addresses the different ways in which the millennial epistemology influences how

we interact with one another in social settings and in our efforts to care for our communities and

ourselves. We pick up with the conversation on the heavy emphasis on personal responsibility

that many millennials identify with, and move into an exploration of how this personal

responsibility ethic also interacts with the do-no-harm moral philosophy that's symptomatic of

the epistemological structure. We then move into the widespread prevalence of childhood trauma

and mental illness and the rejection of traditional religious and spiritual communities and

practices among young millennials and how these two factors relate to one another and to the

broad preference for personal spirituality over communal religion.

.

Chapter 1:

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS
Study methodology and the evolution of the research question.

I knew immediately when I was designing the original project that what I was most interested in was the kind of data I could only get from face to face conversations with students. A study of religious and spiritual identity on a college campus was an opportunity to engage in the kinds of conversations that moved me, to gain insight into an aspect of identity which is tied to incredibly intimate information about individuals. Religion and spirituality, though closely tied to race, gender, sexuality, and other kinds of identities, is an often overlooked aspect of diversity. In the American context this kind of identity is often required to be lived out only privately. This kind of identity is also "chosen" or claimed—it's unlike a demographic feature like race, which we are all socialized to quickly identify just by looking at someone. Instead, in contemporary society personally claimed religious and spiritual identities are often an evolution based on choices and exposure, though pressures from family and community are also certainly still at play in how we define our faith. To ask someone about their religious affiliation might yield, as I learned in my interviews, a two hour conversation that touches on socioeconomics, gender, race, family, heritage, sex, education, and so much more. These identities are often the best general demographic indicator we have of the frameworks that population is using to understand the universe and their place within it. Students were wrestling with profound questions and challenges of faith, community, and understanding of purpose and meaning. How were they navigating those challenges and what sort of language were they using to articulate those questions? Because the project was still wholly focused on surveying the religious and spiritual identities present on campus and getting a sense of students' community service

involvement, the study's first move was to implement an all-campus survey with some basic questions pertaining to identity and behavior.

The original study was thus built around a mixed-method sampling methodology which utilized survey sampling and interview data collection techniques and an inductive grounded theory approach to data coding and analysis. The survey phase was initiated in October of 2016 and was open to all currently enrolled students aged eighteen to twenty-two. I sent it out electronically to all college-affiliated student email accounts, and additional survey participation was solicited in person through two tabling events in common student areas during peak traffic times. These tabling sessions proved to be quite useful. They allowed participants time to interact with me as the researcher and to have their questions answered in person. I am certain that the personalized interactions I was able to have during these tabling sessions helped to secure a broader return yield on the survey than might have been possible using only email solicitation. During tabling sessions, I had a laptop available for students to confidentially and independently fill out the questionnaire. At various points there were more students interested in filling out the survey than I had available laptops. I instructed these students how to access the survey on their phones, and some gathered around at my table to discuss some of their preliminary questions before beginning the survey. Some students comfortably talked with each other about a few of the open-ended qualitative survey items they were surprised to see included or struggling to answer. Conversations developed. They continued even as people finished up the survey, passed me back the laptop, and walked away together towards class or the dining hall. I was startled to witness the level of engagement students were initiating with one another.

All participants were presented with a digital informed consent waiver before proceeding to the rest of the survey, which consisted of three main sections. All three sections contained

both qualitative and quantitative items, though the majority of the items within the questionnaire were quantitative. While the survey does gather some essential basic demographic data, its primary objectives were firstly in implementing an population-specific study that askes similar questions about the population as the Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study of 2015 asked of the general American population and secondly in focusing in on issues of student engagement with community-building/community organizing activities. The design of the survey heavily reflected this emphasis.

The first section contained questions pertaining to demographic background, including items related to racial, ethnic, gender, and political identities and family financial background. The second section moved into questions regarding the participant's current religious and spiritual identity and practice, in addition to the identities and practices they may have been raised with while growing up. This section finished off with items related to belief in a higher power, scripture, afterlife, and questions of personal morality. The third section shifted the focus to items pertaining to students' involvement in a broad array of community service activities. "Community service" in this study was used very broadly to encompass a wide array of activities including but not necessarily limited to traditional direct or indirect volunteer service, political or social activism, civic engagement such as voting and campaign canvasing, or military service. The survey concluded with a final section requesting interest and availability for participating in the secondary interview-based portion of the study. Only students who had taken the survey would be eligible to participate as interviewees in order to ensure the purity of the sample.

Upon completion, all survey responses were securely retained within password protected files. All survey participation and responses, regardless of whether they were obtained via tabling or email solicitation, were confidential, although any information that students self-

disclosed while talking with other participants and passersby during the tabling sessions does not fall under this purview of confidentiality. Financial compensation was not offered, but I was able to partner with several professors to create extra credit compensation opportunities for students currently enrolled in specific courses. The survey garnered 108 responses from a student body of approximately 1500 students, 46 of which included interest in further participation through interview sampling.

The interview phase began in mid-November as I was wrapping up the last push for survey response collection. Interview participants were solicited through the electronic survey portion of this study only. I contacted all of the survey participants who expressed interested in interview participation via email to set up a time to interview. This was finally the phase of data collection I'd always been most excited for. For hours I'd pour over the raw survey data, arched over print-offs of pie charts and frequency tables trying, excitedly pointing out unexpected trends to whoever was available to listen. I crafted my interview questions from the gaps and holes emerging in the story that the data was telling. It was in these early moments that I got my first very real indicators that I was asking the wrong questions with the wrong language, but I still hadn't quite put it together that using traditional but outdated language like "religious and spiritual identity" that didn't resonate with my study population would impose severe restrictions on how much I was actually able to learn.

I conducted interviews in person with eleven survey respondents. I took over a vacant classroom for several evenings over the course of a few weeks in late November and December, and despite my best effort to stick to my interview script, often I'd find myself chatting casually with the . Originally I'd written the interview schedule to run about thirty minutes. I asked participants to budget roughly a half hour to forty five minutes for their interview, with promises

that I'd respect their time and not keep them too long at the expense of their end-of-semester

work ethic. One-on-one interviews between the participant and the student researcher generally

lasted about thirty minutes, though some lasted over an hour. All interviews are confidential,

conducted privately, and audio-recorded on a password protected device. The interview

schedule, having been developed through a grounded-theory approach to analyzing the survey

data, attempted to address trends identified in the survey data that needed greater nuance and

elaboration.[1] Because the sample size and the college community itself were already relatively

small and somewhat intimate, it was of particular importance that efforts be taken to limit the

possibility that stories or identities could be traced back to specific students on campus. There

are, for example, very few students of certain religious traditions present on campus and only a

few specific students serving in certain high profile extracurricular roles, so throughout this

paper, identifying information about the interview participants will be presented in a scrambled

form, such that all identifying information has been extracted from the data and reinserted in a

"scrambled" format to minimize any possibility of connection and exposure. All interview

participants will be referred to by pseudonyms throughout the paper. The importance of

confidentiality became even more obvious to me as the interview process developed.

Certain interview items often yielded incredibly intimate accounts of students' mental

health concerns, complex family issues, sexual trauma and relationship abuse, existential

anxiety, and other highly sensitive topics. Given the design of the questions and the topic, this

was not at all altogether unexpected, but the extent to which students felt comfortable sharing

their stories was somewhat surprising and often made it difficult to navigate the boundaries

---

[1] All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the interview participant. All interview recordings, transcriptions, and data will be kept confidential and securely stored on a password protected computer throughout the entirety of the research process and confidentiality will be maintained in all subsequent publications and presentations.

between researcher and peer. I struggled to maintain safe professional distance, distance which felt entirely artificial given that so many of the interviewees were people I saw strolling around campus, doing laundry in the residence halls, or chatting over coffee in the student center. Some students recounted stories and opinions that they explicitly stated would jeopardize the financial support they were receiving from their families, while others recounted stories of traumas they had sustained that were in some way distinctly linked to religion or spirituality and the exposure of which they feared might damage their relationship with their family, friends, or congregation. Because of this, confidentiality became even more of an absolute imperative, and I became even more aware of the vulnerability people invited me into when they offered me this information. We cried together. I ended almost half of my interviews in hugs. I began to think of my interviews as sacred spaces that must be convened and conducted with the utmost care and concern for the individual on the other side of the table.

The difficulties associated with navigating the boundaries between student-researcher and student-peer in the interview setting. It was easier to dissociate specific student identities with survey responses than with interview subjects and therefore prior association with survey respondents proved to be less difficult. However, I was already well acquainted with interview subjects and we had shared varying levels of interaction and familiarity outside of the research setting. In combination with the sensitivity of some interview disclosures, this created some tension in navigating the boundaries between a researcher's distanced compassion towards their subjects and a peer's proximate concern for their friends. For some interview participants, it does not seem as though this tension was heavily on their mind as they were sharing their responses, but it is somewhat impossible to ascertain the full extent to which my identity played a role in any given subject's disclosure. It is not unreasonable to suggest that for some interviewees, my

identity made they feel more comfortable to share because of the prior trust established, while for others, it made them far less inclined to divulge.

Preliminary review of the survey data suggests that certain demographic groups within the sample population are underrepresented within the data. As a student myself and the recipient of the campus-wide emails soliciting survey responders for other students' research project, I knew it would be difficult to get a perfectly representative sample. There's limited incentive to participate, and students at the college tend to be incredibly busy people. While all currently enrolled students had access to the survey, only some students were eligible for extra credit compensation, which likely limited the appeal of survey participation. Additionally, the study as a whole was oriented around a particular topic and focus that not all students would find interesting or important, and thus participation was somewhat self-selecting. Preliminary data analysis shows that survey data is slightly skewed towards senior students, who make up 32% of all students sampled (compared to 21.7% first years, 23.6% sophomores, and 20.8% juniors). At 76.4% of all respondents, white respondents also vastly outnumber non-white and bi-or-multiracial respondents. This is actually fairly representative of the general student body. The college reported that the total enrollment population was 74% white in 2017 and only about 21.6% students of color and/or students of two or more races. A gender skew was also very present which is not representative of gender differences within the population. Students identifying as women comprised 67.9% of survey respondents, followed by students identifying as men (29.2%) and students identifying as non-binary or gender non-conforming (2.8%). The college reported a 52.8% female to 47.2% male ratio overall in 2017. Of my ten interview

participants, all of whom were pulled from the list of self-selected survey respondents, five

identified as women and five identified as men.[2]

What could it have been that led to such a low overall response yield, and why were the

respondents all predominately white, predominately women, and predominately seniors? I

worried for a long time after running these initial numbers that my sampling methodology hadn't

been designed well enough or perhaps my survey had just been too long. What I came to see

eventually was one facet of the role my own identity had played in the research—I am a white

woman in the senior class. I'd encouraged many of my college friends (many of whom were also

white and/or women and/or seniors) to take the survey. I stared out over the student lounge from

a white woman's body, soliciting survey responses during my tabling sessions. I'd written survey

questions from a white woman's perspective through a highly protestant Christian lens that

limited my ability to see what was actually important. In analyzing the demographic skew

present in the survey data, I began to think deeper about the role my own identity was playing

within the research. What other features of who I am were weaving their way into this project

and changing the data I was able to collect and the conclusions I was able to draw?

It wasn't until I presented my initial findings four months into the research process when

I was confronted with a bigger truth. Not only had my whiteness and my gender presentation

been part of my data collection regime, but perhaps even more significantly my own religious

identity and epistemological proclivities had completely influenced the ways I was thinking

about how to approach questions of faith, worldviews, identity, and community building within

our college population. My Christian tradition was written into the language that I used and

embedded within the questions I created, all the way down into the core of the project itself, with

---

[2] Student body demographic data was pulled from a 2017 demographics data report available through the college's online webpage, which was accessed digitally in March of 2018.

its key emphasis on volunteer community service as the important expression of community care that the academic discourse needed to be focusing on.

Most of the students I surveyed and seven of the ten that I interviewed identified as some version of atheist, agnostic, unaffiliated, or spiritual but not religious when I asked them about their spiritual or religious identity. In the survey, participants were given a broad list of common spiritual identities and asked to check all that they felt applied to them. In keeping with what I already knew about the evolving relationships students have with faith, I did not ask students to just select one tradition and there were options to write in their own identifiers. Of all students surveyed, 24.1% selected "atheist/agnostic" as one of their identifiers. 16.7% selected "spiritual but not religious." 20% reported that they were "unsure of my religious identity." 12% claimed no religious or spiritual affiliation. Of the interview participants, two said that they didn't even think of atheism as being their religious identity, and they certainly didn't feel very spiritual. "I'm not spiritual about atheism so I don't think it's a spiritual thing," Matt, an upperclassman humanities major said. "I honestly don't even really think about it much. It's not that important to me. It just is what it is."

Many of these students didn't connect with the traditional language of the discourse, namely as it pertained writ large to "religious or spiritual" identity. That was not language that they used to talk about their experiences, worldview, or epistemological approach to living in the world. It didn't match at all how they were practically living out their daily lives, thinking about their life's purpose, or approaching moral and ethical questions. Interviewees articulated a clear dichotomy between what it means to be spiritual and what it means to be religious, but for many neither term seemed to authentically express their identity or experience. Sabrina, a senior in the social sciences, said:

> "I tell everyone I was raised Lutheran, but it doesn't actually mean anything to me, it's just what my mom told me we were when I was growing up, and I guess I am, but I don't really care about it. When I have to fill it out on a form I will, but it doesn't mean anything."

What's more, one interview participant, Eliana, a junior who identified in the survey as 'spiritual but not religious,' felt that 'spirituality' wasn't a word that she connected with, though it was a word that helped other people understand how she experienced the world:

> "I picked "spiritual but not religious" because I guess that's the closest thing to what I am, but I don't think I'm particularly "spiritual," you know? I love nature and I feel like if I did feel spiritual I'd feel it about trees and other parts of the natural world. But I still wouldn't call it spiritual, you know? Spiritual isn't my word. I'm just using because it's what everyone else uses, I guess."

Sabrina and Eliana both used the language I'd supplied to talk about their worldviews, but likely only because that was the language I was using and that was the language most other people seemed familiar with. It didn't resonate with them in any particularly personal way.

I began to interrogate my study design and my data with fresher eyes, and I began to see that my data was answering questions I hadn't anticipated. I'd wanted to know how religious and spiritual identities on campus affected moral convictions, and how these moral convictions translated into ethical actions. Instead of telling the story of diversity of religious identities and affiliations on campus, the data was telling me that most of our students don't affiliate with a religious tradition. This wasn't surprising, given what studies done by the Pew Research Center had already told us about national trends in declining religious affiliation. What did surprise me is that even though students were coming from fairly diverse religious upbringings, most had transitioned away from the religious affiliations they were raised with and many were identifying as non-religious/none, atheist/agnostic, spiritual but not religious, or questioning. 6.5% of all respondents said they were raised in an atheist or agnostic household, and 6.5% said they'd been raised in spiritual but not religious households. A staggering 24% reported that they now

identified as atheist or agnostic, an increase of 17.5% over the course of their ascent into adulthood. 16.7% now identified as spiritual but not religious, an increase of 10.2% of survey respondents.

Furthermore, and even more intriguing, was the language that students, across all religious upbringings and current religious affiliations, were using to talk about their values systems and their ways of knowing themselves, the world, and their place it in. This was the moment of breakthrough, when I began to see both the need for the creation of new identifiers for young people to more accurately express our worldview identities and also, and most importantly, the fascinating ways in which young people were processing the external world around us that suggested that there were culturally salient themes around the epistemological approach that most younger millennials were working with to navigate the world. The concept of millennial epistemology was born of this moment.

Chapter 2:

NOTHING IS REAL:
What is the millennial epistemology?

Studying a generational epistemology in the midst of the generation's formative college years opens a set of fascinating questions about what led the generation to its epistemology and how college and the transitions to adulthood is shaping it. It's one thing to try to articulate the popular epistemological framework of the day and to figure out what its major architectural features are, but it is another thing entirely to attempt any ascertaining of the factors feeding into the undergraduate millennial epistemology. My study is significantly limited—as has been said before, I can't make claims about the entire age cohort. My work can be generalized to other American millennial college students, but maybe even then we should say that it's only really generalizable to undergrads at small liberal arts school in the northeast. There is no way to really know how broadly pervasive these trends in thought-making world-processing are until we're able to conduct broader, nation-wide studies that aren't just limited to an undergraduate population with an *n* of only slightly over 100. There is something, however, that I find uniquely interesting about the undergraduate population, beyond it being a population I'm embedded within. Education isn't open to everyone based on socioeconomic structures that preclude a large portion of the generational cohort, though more people aged 18 to 24 are enrolled in college education than any previous generation ever before. College is a formative time in young people's transition from youth to adulthood, and at the small residential liberal arts school where I collected my data, "college" as a social institution was specifically articulated as a place where young people should come "to learn *how* to think, rather than just what to think." In this expression alone there's the clear understanding that college is meant to influence— and even transform— the mechanisms we consciously or unconsciously utilize to navigate the world. It

contains within it the clear goal for epistemological development. This in combination with the continuation of the shift from childhood to adulthood means that the epistemological frameworks of young people embarking on their college experience are likely undergoing a significant period of transition.

To say that with only a little over one hundred survey participants and ten interviewees we can determine the epistemological framework of an entire generation of American young people is foolish. We can at best begin to construct the epistemological framework of younger millennial undergraduates in the northeastern United States, and there would be some argument even then about the quality of that generalization. A nationwide study must be conducted before we can really point a finger at the precise pillars of millennial epistemology writ large. What I attempt to outline here in this chapter is what I found to be present within my sample population, but previous larger-scale studies leave us clues to suggest that a nationwide replication of this study would yield a resulting epistemological framework that reflects that major themes I was able to isolate with my $n=108$. Only further future study will really be able to prove that statement though.

The conclusions that I was able to draw, however, are still significant, in that they provide a window into the millennial epistemology that could one day open a door to even greater understanding. In this section, I'll explore some of the literature already out on the epistemological trends isolated by previous studies in the lives of millennials, and call into focus the major epistemological pillars I was able to isolate within the sample population. These pillars are antirealism, subjectivism, and skepticism, which collectively feed into a sentiment I heard echoed several times in my interview process: *nothing is real.*

Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults is one of the most prominent theoretical touchstones and sources of guidance utilized in the design and implementation of this study. Published in 2009 by Christian Smith and his colleague Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition* follows up on the original landmark 2005 study by Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers,* and is based on interviews with thousands of young adults aged 18 to 24 conducted nationwide in an attempt to outline ways in which religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are fortified, tested, and changed as individuals move into modern adulthood. This work proved to be a vital aid in my efforts to identify broad cultural trends within the age cohort, which will be discussed in greater detail as they relate to my college sample population data. The trends that Smith and Snell identified within the nationwide sample population included broadly shared anxieties over transition from childhood to adulthood, changing family dynamics, and financial pressure, and also included commonly held values like that of individuality and personal responsibility, "living with no regrets," tolerating difference, understanding all culture as relative and getting a good education (Smith and Snell 2009: 34-86). Smith and Snell also found that the lives of young people are marked with two layers of ambiguity that feed into the cultural anxiety exhibited among millennials: (1) the external uncertainties of changing family finances, political uncertainty, and evolving life circumstances; and (2) an internal ontological and epistemological subjectivism. It's into these ambiguities that I sank my teeth, thinking that perhaps ambiguity was a locus for the necessary development of our meaning-making skills.

In terms of epistemological perspectives, Smith and Snell found that

> "most emerging adults are functionally (meaning how they think and act, regardless of the theories they hold) soft ontological antirealists and epistemological skeptics and perspectivalists—although few have any conscious idea what those terms mean. They seem to presuppose that they are simply

imprisoned in their own subjective selves, limited to their biased interpretations of their own sense perceptions, unable to know the real truth of anything beyond themselves. They are de facto doubtful that an identifiable, objective, shared reality might exist across and around all people that can serve as a reliable reference point for rational deliberation and argument" (Smith and Snell 2009: 45).

Perhaps due to the heightened awareness of global civilization through mass media and social media that has never existed in the same way before, most emerging adults at the time of the study firmly believed in cultural relativism and the reality of differences. Subjectivism ruled the epistemological landscape of Smith and Snell's study. Moral decision making processes as a result were largely disassociated from any sense of universal moral rights and wrongs. The closest thing to a universal core moral principle was "the imperative not to hurt others. "Others" here means anyone else. In this, [emerging adults] are essentially ethical consequentialists: if something would hurt another person, it is probably bad; if it does not and is not illegal, it's probably fine" (Smith and Snell 2009: 47). This is perhaps a highly tolerant mode of moral decision making, but it also heavily relies on empathy and does not provide a thorough framework for moral decision making, and it will be discussed in much greater detail as it relates to this study's sample population in Chapter Four, when we get into how the epistemological approaches of young people influence the way they live together.

Subjectivism, cultural relativism, and soft ontological antirealism.

The students I interviewed exhibited many of the same epistemological tendencies that Smith and Snell identified, chief among them being subjectivism and cultural relativism. Some sociologists call this stance "social constructionism." The concept of an absolute God, universal truth or moral code, or perfect religious doctrine has very little foothold with these students. Rather than believing we can know the objective truth of the world, students understand truth

and reality as being largely subjective and dependent on one's cultural and/or social contexts. In short, perspective matters. What is real, true, or accurate is largely dependent on who's seeing it. The statement I made at the opening of this chapter about epistemologies being located socially, culturally, and temporally, is a great example of millennial subjectivism and cultural relativism at work.

Few interviewees used words like subjectivism, but it was clear in the conversation that an implicit reliance on subjectivism and personal perspective mattered. Timothy prefaced most of his sentences with "in my experience" or "from my perspective." Sarah relied heavily on "for me as an[____], I think that….". Sabrina and Jasleen both frequently used the "I feel like" construction. These speech patterns appear to be pretty unintentional or habitual.

Young people then tend to relativize our perspective. This can be a good thing. It shows that we understand the nuances of the world around us. But it also leads us to make pretty weak statements about what is morally right or wrong. Some of my interviewees came off as downright indecisive. It was hard for me to see at first, as someone who routinely uses "I feel that" and "as I see it" statements, but students appear to be taking reality to ultimately consist of a plethora of subjective experiences that never add up to one objective reality that we are all tapped into. If this is not what they're doing, then this tendency to relativize our perspectives is an effort to announce who we are and how that identity shapes our understanding, and in doing so be careful not to hurt other people who aren't coming from the same background or point of view. In any case, it tends to produce statements and stances in which claims aren't staked and rational arguments aren't often well developed. Instead of helping us to navigate difference, self-relativizing epistemology actually makes it harder for us to meaningfully engage with our

differences and points of contention. Instead of digging into our differences, instead we more frequently acknowledge them and put them aside.

Because students adhering to this millennial epistemology don't have an objective sense of reality, they also often behave very much as epistemological skeptics. "I don't trust much that comes out of anyone's mouth these days," Max, an English major, said casually. "Everyone's got their own agenda, people see things differently from how other people would. One person could see the same situation totally differently than the person right next to them. Nothing's real, everything's kind of just up to interpretation." Max certainly wasn't the only one. The perceived absence of definite truth means that there is no way to really know the world outside of our own experiences. We must interrogate our perspectives. As a social scientist, I resonate deeply with this thought and the importance of knowing the cultural contexts that build the lenses through which we see the world. As a religious person, I sometimes experience this as a jarring but ultimately exciting challenge to conventional religious wisdom.

Chapter 3:

EVERYTHING HURTS
What aspects of millennial culture inform the millennial epistemology?

All epistemologies are culturally located. This was something I never realized until I started struggling to make the data I'd collected answer the questions I had originally asked, but to believe that epistemology could ever be stagnant is to make a fundamentally flawed assumption. Epistemologies are constructed and lived out in particular times with specific events and attitudes that shape them. We have a tendency to think of our ways of thinking and processing the world as being relatively consistent across generations. We're comfortable saying that the limitations of one's language or the influence of one's material culture play roles in teaching us how we can know the world, what thoughts we are capable of thinking, and how that leads us to behave with others, but we do not pay quite as much attention to the differences between generations within the same cultural context that can arise due to our experiences of the cultural moments we are situated within during our formative years. The cultural moment in which my adolescence occurred was very different from those of my parents' generation or my great-grand parents,' and yet the memory of those moments and their aggregated effects are carried on through time to construct this current moment and inform how this current cohort of young people think about how they know the world.

Let's consider the cohort of college seniors that are on track to graduate in the spring of 2018. The majority of these soon-to-be graduates began their undergraduate careers in the fall of 2014; we began high school in 2010 and kindergarten in 2001. Our childhoods were marked with specific and significant cultural events that gathered together, carried through time in our bodies as we aged to inform the cultural moment we live in today. The September 11th attacks on the

World Trade Center fell for many of us in our first week of kindergarten. Our earliest conscious

memories of news media do not include a time when there were not endless tickertapes running

frantically across the bottom of the screen. We entered into puberty as the housing bubble burst

and many of us watched as our parents or adult relatives lost their jobs and our homes were

foreclosed on, and those who were insulated from the worst of the Great Recession's effects by

wealth still watched as that tickertape rolled on. Our adolescence witnessed political swings from

Barack Obama to Donald Trump, a shift that articulated a deep cultural divide and a

frighteningly erratic political arena that shook young people regardless of what side of the

political spectrum they fell on. We have always been at war with someone frightening but far

away; our planet has always been tottering on the brink of total climate calamity; we believe we

must go to college to be financially successful but the high cost of higher education mean we

will likely begin our adult life with substantial debt. The cultural moment is ripe with ever-on-

the-edge crisis: nothing is ever perfectly safe, and often it feels as though everything hurts. In the

words of Cassandra, an English major:

> "I honestly just like never know how to get comfortable. This maybe is just my
> anxiety but often I feel like the world is about to crash down at any minute. Like,
> the news just makes me so sad. The Trump thing messed me up particularly badly
> but I feel like it's always been bad. Everything is at least a little unstable or
> difficult, except maybe cute dogs. I love dogs."

I realized a few months ago that I was using this construction of the millennial childhood

quite a bit in the sermons I was giving when I preached in our student-led chapel services. I'd

often used it to explain how the high prevalence of anxiety and depression among our age cohort

is situated within a broader cultural context. I'd tie it to how important I think it is for folks our

age to find a sense of faith that makes sense to them, within or without Christianity, simply as a

survival tool for making sense of the world we are situated within. Once while I was mid-

sermon, elaborating once again on the theme of childhood as an inculcation in broadly diffuse cultural anxiety, one of our more regular congregants became so overwhelmed that she ran from the room, and I was left standing at the pulpit with the very real understanding that the memory of this childhood of social upheaval and fear had very real embodied effects on us as children and young adults. Some students clearly still carried those memories with them everywhere they went—arguably, all of us did, though we carried them differently. What does living with that fear do to the way we understand the world? How does it build us into particular assumptions or expectations about what the world is and what are place within it is supposed to be? I became pretty overwhelmed myself. I'd never made someone run out of a room before while I was at the pulpit, and I was grateful that someone else, in barely even a moment, had already followed her out of the chapel. How must we be good to people, knowing what we know of the fear we carry with us and the truth that we must speak anyway? How could we take care of each other? I put my notes down, took a deep breath, and reread the scripture I'd chosen for the day before continuing:

> "God is our refuge and strength,
> A very present help in trouble.
> Therefore we will not fear,
> Even though the earth be removed,
> And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;
> Though its waters roar and be troubled,
> Though the mountains shake with its swelling. *Selah*
>
> There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God,
> The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.
> God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
> God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.
> The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved;
> He uttered His voice, the earth melted.
>
> The Lord of hosts is with us;
> The God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

> Come, behold the works of the Lord,
> Who has made desolations in the earth.
> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
> He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
> He burns the chariot in the fire.
> > Be still, and know that I am God;
> > I will be exalted among the nations,
> > I will be exalted in the earth!
> The Lord of hosts is with us;
> The God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*" (Psalm 46 NKJV).

What does it mean *to know*? Did psalms like this and all the things I could say about them really *matter*? Did they help anyone? Where kinds of hurts are we carrying and where are they located within us? What more had built into the anxiety that I, my congregants, and my fellow classmates felt so deeply that it could chase one of us from a room? I left chapel that morning wondering how a religious epistemology could fit within this broader cultural current of anxiety and the resulting ways of knowing and being that anxiety engenders.

The epistemological framework of the undergrads I studied is influenced by a number of different factors. The influence of the frameworks they inherited from their parents' cannot be ignored, but millennial undergraduates have been developing their own unique framework as they wrestle with their own unique realities. In the interview and survey process, I was able to isolate six interrelated factors that appear to be influence epistemological development. These are: cultural anxiety, family upheaval, major life transitions, distain for traditional religious structures and their professed epistemological approaches, and widespread trauma and mental illness.

Cultural Anxiety.

To understand the level of cultural anxiety present in the lives of millennial Americans, we have to return to that narrative of September 11th as our first day of kindergarten that I began

this chapter with. This cannot be over-stressed. Very few students referenced this same cultural

arch in its entirety in interviews—in fact, only one student even brought up September 11th—but

pieces of the picture were present in all of the interviews, regardless it seems of the

interviewee's specific worldview or religious identity, their race or gender, or other demographic

markers. Though cultural anxiety has been a present factor of many previous generations'

upbringing—I've been reminded to consider the Cold War when writing this chapter more times

than I can count—there is something distinctly different about the anxiety we're living within

now and just how broadly pervasive and multilateral it is. "Nobody really knows what to do or

what's going on," said Sabrina, the senior majoring in the social sciences. "Everything is a little

scary; often I feel as though nothing is ever truly safe. And I don't think our parents' generation

had to deal with this in the same way, but I really don't know."

In probing the effects of cultural anxiety on epistemology, I became deeply intrigued by

what it might mean for other young people to be coming of age in a world that seems to be

constantly transitioning to a new mode of being as new technologies and new geopolitical

conflicts emerge, all the while simultaneously teetering on ecological climate collapse. What

does it mean for our sense of stability and trust of social systems that we experienced the most

significant economic downturn in American history since the Great Depression in 2008 when we

were entering middle school? For myself, it means that I have very little trust in the efficacy and

integrity of governing bodies and I know that every move I make contains an ecological

consequence, and no matter how careful I am the ice caps are still going to melt.

Most interviewees, many of whom were coming from a liberal, progressive, or

unaffiliated political identity (though not all), referenced the 2016 Trump election in our

conversations together. They often cited it as a moment that shifted the way they thought about

our country, its politics, their fellow citizens, and their college classmates. Often they brought Mr. Trump's election and presidency up unsolicited, indicating the heaviness with which it still weighed on their mind. Geopolitical events have taken a profound toll on the young American psyche. We're reminded with constant public safety announcements and post-Patriot Act policies that we could be attacked on our home soil by a foreign national at any time, but even more likely, one of our own will betray us and perpetrate another school shooting. Our politicians are seen generally to be essentially ineffective, and we regard our political system as being relatively untrustworthy in its current state. "Politicians were never in it for us," interviewee Max said passingly in the middle of another thought, almost as though it were a given he didn't need to mention in the first place. The international world isn't much better, as we've been at war with one foreign entity or another for the entirety of our conscious lives. Trust and security are not qualities of a society with which we're particularly familiar.

Many of the other features of our present state of cultural anxiety are explored in greater nuance and depth in their own sections within this chapter. Of the students surveyed, 18.5% had divorced or separated parents. When asked to discuss their sense of their family's financial stability when they were growing up, over half of the total respondents reported that family financial insecurity had been a feature of their childhood and/or undergraduate years. Students also expressed distrust in various kinds of social institutions like religious organizations, government agencies or American government as a whole, and medical professionals and institutions. The major pillars that once seemed so stable and reliable within students' perception of the American social arrangement were now fraught with corruption or otherwise untrustworthy.

Family Instability and Tension.

Young millennial undergraduates are very familiar with instability and change in the households they grew up in. Family, for the students that I interviewed, was often a source of great tension and a locus for continued pain, even long after they'd moved away for college. Others found their family to be nurturing and supportive, a stable pillar in an otherwise unstable world, but this was certainly not the majority of cases.

The interconnected connotations of family and religion were incredibly strong for many interviewees. For some students like Jasleen, a senior who had been raised Sikh and now identifies as Sikh and also spiritual and not religious, family and religion were two interwoven pillars of stability. For students like Elijah, who was the child of missionaries and grew up in several different countries, religion and changing family situations go hand in hand. For yet another cadre of students, Timothy's story represents that significant tensions linking religion to family disunity and unkindness. Timothy was raised by parents who were, in his words "very, very fundamentalist Christian. I only had the Bible to read when I was growing up." His parents went through some periods of financial instability which were especially bad before he came to college but improved significantly when he went away to college, which coincided with his parents taking more lucrative jobs. But what Timothy really found disturbing was his father's abusiveness towards his mother, and his mother's refusal to get a divorce.

> "My parents had a lot of relationship problems-- this is confidential right?-- and my dad started becoming physically abusive with my mom and it became clear to me after a few months of this that they really shouldn't be together. And I was at the age when I could say that like you really need to get out. I was a junior in high school, 16 or 17. And she refused to get a divorce because it goes against her religion."

Timothy cites this as one of the early moments when he knew he needed to transition away from

the religion he'd been raised with. His associations between family and religion run somewhat

deeper though.

> "[My mother's conservative Christian values] extend even further now than I realized, out into her beliefs on life, so for example there's one time when me and her were traveling down to [tourist location], my dad and sister were already down there for a different event. I was probably 11 or 12 at the time. I had a small bag because as an 11 or 12 year old you don't need that many clothes, and my mom had like two large suitcases, and she is very into diet soda and she believes that she needs it, textbook definition of addiction, that is her literal drug and she goes through withdrawal if she doesn't get it. So we stopped by a convenience store on our way from the airport to pick up a 12 pack. And she says to me, alright, you're the man, you have to carry all of this stuff because that's your role. And when I was like, no, I need some help with this, I'm 11, I need some help of this, and I put the soda on top of one of the suitcases to try to wheel both of them and because it was just too much for me it ended up falling off and shattering the soda all over the place and I was yelled at for weeks, maybe even months, because I couldn't live up to what my role as a man was supposed to be.
>
> "[Interviewer: I don't want to make assumptions here, but in terms of socially salient issues like abortion or gay rights or marriage rights, was that part of the conversation when you were growing up?]
>
> "None of these things-- okay, abortion-- mmhh--okay so there was a part of the conversation was in terms of homosexuality. She said if I ever brought a boy home, I should just leave and never come back. I was in middle school maybe. She outright said that I would be abandoned if I was gay She would disown me. That was made very clear to me, from the time that I had mentioned that I had liked an individual, it was clear that it could not be a boy. Basically she said I will give you the food, water, and house you need so that I don't get sued by the government for child neglect, but I won't speak to you, I won't talk to you, I'm not paying for anything else other than the absolute bare necessities. Don't speak to me even as your parent."

Timothy, who know identifies as an atheist, links that memory back to this first understanding

that his parents' love and support was conditional upon his acquiescence to certain values

systems and a performance of masculinity he had felt too young to perform well. He has not told

his parents that he no longer attends church or believes in Christianity. He's waiting for a time

when he is not financially dependent on them and feels some unhappiness in knowing that he is living a lie when he goes home.

Emerging Adulthood and Constant Transitions.

According to Smith and Snell, there are four major macro social changes that have contributed to the life stage that young millennials currently inhabit—a bizarre space between not quite child and certainly not quite an adult by traditional understandings of the word. Smith and Snell call this phase "emerging adulthood," and cite "the dramatic growth in higher education, the delay in marriage by American youth over the last decades…, changes in the American and global economy that undermine stable, lifelong careers and replaces them instead with careers with lower job security and an ongoing need for new training and education…, and parents [who] seem increasingly willing to extend financial and other support to their children, well into their twenties and perhaps early thirties" (Smith and Snell 2009: 5). The features marking this life-stage are "intense identity exploration, instability, a focus on self, feeling in limbo or in transition or in between, and a sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope" (Smith and Snell 2009:6). The life stage young millennials have entered into is in these ways fraught with interesting tensions.

One of the most consistent features of emerging adulthood that came up in the interview process was its tendency to lead a life of constant transitions. It's almost impossible not to. For the sample population, transition is a hallmark of their experience. Not a lot in our lives is stable or enduring, especially when we take into account the family instability trends mentioned above or the cultural anxiety or the pressure to stand out in a job market that collapsed once when we were children and could one day collapse again, this time under the growing bubble of student

debt we're all taking out to ensure we get that college degree we need to be successful. Most of us are also moving for school, working several different jobs, and anticipating moving and transitioning into the next stage of adulthood post-college.

One of the biggest transitions marking the sample population's transition towards adulthood was the transition they underwent in their religious or spiritual identities. It's unclear when students started knowing the world through the millennial epistemological approach. Each interviewee nonetheless had a story of grappling with the religious or spiritual tradition they were brought up with and ultimately casting off the epistemological approaches of their younger years in exchange for an updated version—sometimes radically revised, sometimes only slightly amended—of a way of knowing the world that they could claim ownership over.

Distain for Traditional Religious Epistemological Approaches.

A distain for or rejection of traditional religious epistemological approaches permeated the conversations I had with interviewees. They had replaced them, updated them, or transitioned out of them for a reason. There was a sense among interviewees that the religious epistemologies of their childhoods simply "don't work" to help them navigate the world, and they didn't work for several reasons. A commonly cited reason was that religion and millennial worldviews were incompatible. The new knowledge and wisdom that students had gathered from their years of past experiences didn't match up with the knowledge and wisdom that their religious upbringing had presented to them or that mainstream religious discourse presented writ large. They'd moved into new understandings of the world that felt more accurate to their reality and perspective but weren't compatible with religious teachings. Some students, like Jasleen, stayed with their religious tradition because they were able to reconcile their faith with their millennial worldview:

"Oh, [I have a] super positive [relationship] with Sikhism, I do not have a positive relationship with religion as a whole. I try very hard not to bash religions, because I think everyone who follows a religion finds solace in it, as far as any other faith I've come across though, there are things in it that bother me a lot. And I think one of the reasons I like Sikhism so much is because Sikhism acknowledges that there are multiple paths to God. You don't have to be Sikh in order to get to God. I've also heard arguments that Sikhism isn't a religion but rather a way of life, which totally makes sense to me. There are Sikhs who choose to be baptized Sikh, but just because you're baptized doesn't mean you'll find salvation. And that's something I like, because a lot of times I see people who are religious who behave really unkindly but assume they're already saved so it's fine."

Beyond this rejection of traditional religious teachings was a deeply-rooted sense that religious organizations, particularly Christian ones, were unkind, untrustworthy, and dangerous. Several students cited a departure from Catholicism because of the sexual assault and pedophilia allegations that had broken out in recent decades. Others said they left the churches they'd grown up in because the homophobia or sexism present within the community was directly at odds with their values. Many students felt a distance between themselves and religion because people close to them used it against them as a tool of punishment, judgement, or coercion, as was the case with Timothy and his mother. When I asked him if he believed that religion was inherently good or bad, Timothy kept well in line with his highly individualistic stance:

"I think it depends heavily on the individual. For example to compare it to another hot topic, gun control. I compare religion to guns not in that they both need to be regulated, but that it all depends on how they're used. You can use it as an extension of yourself, like if you want to go out and hurt people, it's a great tool to hurt people with. There are positive uses for it as well. It basically comes from who you are as a person, like if you're a good person you'll use it for good, if you're bad you'll use it for bad purposes. I don't think it's either inherently good or inherently bad. I think it makes good people better in certain situations. I think it makes bad people worse. And then there's this spill over where just as much as it can make a bad person good it can make a good person bad. It's equal exchange there."

Some had to reject the unkind expression (and sometimes all expressions) of religion they'd experienced, naming it outright as fundamentally incompatible with truth and hateful towards themselves and others at some point in their lives as part of their healing process. Others, like Cassandra, whose story is laid out in the next section, loved their relationship with God but had to move away from it for a long time following a traumatic incident. Cassandra and Timothy both cited pedophilia allegations in the Catholic church as reasons why their fathers had each decided to move away from Catholicism, and each made note of the way this colored their own view of Catholicism and organized religion in general. Timothy had additional experiences though with organized religious institutions as the locus for community exploitation:

> "My church that I had gone to since I was a little kid, we had had the same two reverends the whole time, actually one of the reverends had grown up with my mother and she was really embedded in the family, really good family friends, and then the other one was a very elderly gentleman who was like a grandfather to me. She ended up getting a really good opportunity at one of the biggest churches in the nation and he decided to retire at the same time so we had two new individuals come in all at once and it turns out after a few months that things were going strangely with the budget for the church and the two of them were embezzling funds out of the church so that was one part of it."

Trauma and Mental Illness

One of the most heartbreaking themes identified in both the survey and interview data was the presence of mental illness, emotional unwellness, and trauma within research participants. One survey item asked students how frequently they felt lonely, sad, depressed, or anxious in the past year. Of the students sampled, about one quarter responding saying that they felt one or more of these feelings more than once week but not daily. Approximately another quarter responded that they felt one or more of these feelings once daily or more. Taken together, this means that over half of our population experienced feelings of loneliness, sadness,

depression, or anxiety on a weekly basis, with a significant portion experiencing that every day. This data corroborated my own experiences with classmates, but to see it so clearly articulated across the sample was painful.

In interviews, many subjects referenced their own past or on-going mental health challenges, which ranged from mild undiagnosed social anxiety to bipolar II disorder. Many also spoke about specific trauma they sustained from sexual and gender-based violence, relationship abuse, parents' drug addiction, car accidents, a loved one's serious mental or physical illness, multigenerational experiences of family trauma, living in poverty or financial uncertainty, the trauma of homophobia, and/or other life events and circumstances. A number of subjects had also associated religion as a source or promoter of deep fear or shame associated with their trauma or mental illness.

Cassandra and Sabrina were among the six interviewees (of ten) who shared stories of sexual trauma and/or mental illness. Cassandra was raised Catholic by conservative parents but has since moved away from Catholicism. "Art is religion and art is people. I think art is my religion," she said when I asked her whether she felt in touch with any religious or spiritual identity. Later she said, "Can I change my definition of spirituality? My spirituality is Chris. My best friend Chris. Who is just so good. The kindest human I know. Everything about him makes me happy and he is so good."

Cassandra told the story of her first sexual experiences, shared with her boyfriend when she was still in the earlier years of high school. Cassandra tells the story without hesitation or much prompting or prying—as an English major, she says she's found a lot of comfort in writing about her experience and is now very used to sharing it.

"My mom found out I'd had sex and made me and the boy tell the boy's parents, who were deeply, deeply religious, evangelical, and they freaked out. His mother screamed, very viscerally, the only sound I can truly call a scream is the sound that woman made. She bent over herself like she had been stabbed. It was intense. I'm not crying now because I've spent the last three months in an English class writing about this. So that's progress. His parents got crazy and made him go to a church camp. And then he came back from the church camp and broke up with me because God told him to. So that was really religiously confusing and also deeply traumatizing. The year after that all happened was "theology of the body" in Catholic confirmation, which was basically year-long sex-shaming class… At this point I decided I really didn't want to be confirmed Catholic, not for a lack of belief in God but for a lack of belief in the Catholic church and my parents were very confused and disappointed… After everything happened I was for a time very deeply depressed, and for a time suicidal, and I saw some unhelpful counselors and that wasn't good."

Later, when asked if she experienced any mental or emotional health issues now, Cassandra told me that she experienced extreme anxiety now whenever she and her current partner of two years try to have sex.

"I don't really experience any of the depression anymore, and I'm stressed, but just like college-stressed, you know. Really there's this thing that I live with, maybe once a week or more [pause][sigh]—wow, okay, this is weird. Didn't think I'd be talking about this today. Okay. I have a condition called vaginismus, specifically secondary situational vaginismus, which is where when I try to have sex, my vagina closes, essentially, because my pelvic muscles tense up. There's a lot of anxiety about that, and a lot of shame. I tie it back to my first sexual experience, which wasn't painful and my vagina didn't close, to everything that happened after and all the people and trauma of that time. There's an anxiousness, there's a feeling of shame, there's almost always a feeling of loneliness after sex in a way that shouldn't in a relationship where no one's going anywhere and no one's feeling broken. But it is there. And I do live with that. And sex does hurt. And it really changes the way I think about things too. Like, would I have gotten confirmed [Catholic] if I didn't have this new way of seeing the world because something bad happened to me?"

Cassandra's reflections indicate the importance of the spiritual practice she developed around art and writing, and the interconnection of family, faith, sexuality, and trauma that she contained within her. She was distant from religion, and disinterested in religious community, but still deeply spiritual in her own ways. Her experiences with traumatizing events had shaped the ways

she understood what her place within a community was and how she wanted to live out her faith

on her own.

Sabrina was raised Lutheran in a socioeconomically disadvantaged household in a rural

area and she now identifies as "none/no affiliation." She also spoke about the first time she'd had

sex. Her mother had also found out and had threatened to throw Sabrina out of the house.

> "She has a lot of conservative values. Not just politically—unfortunately, definitely politically, but also socially too. It's weird because she didn't wait to have sex, she also had premarital sex, but when she found out that I had premarital sex she screamed at me and she told me to quit my job so she never had to see me again. I live at school, but I'm local enough to commute home to work on the weekends. And it was terrible. It was recent too. Like, within-the-last-month recent. For the longest time I know if I was going home for Thanksgiving break or not."

Beyond this though, Sabrina also carried anxiety related to a car accident she was in

when she was eleven that left her in a coma for several weeks. A drunk driver had swerved and

hit her as she was walking along the side of the road. Following the accident she had pretty

severe anxiety and depression that she tried to seek help for, but was often stymied by her

mother, who sent her to counselors that Sabrina described as "unhelpful at best," and by

challenges finding the right medication at the right dosage. Sabrina's mother was also addicted to

pain pills, and this had a huge emotional and financial impact on their family. Their family

general practitioner had been caught several years ago hooking his female patients on pain killers

so he could take advantage of them sexually in exchange for medication. Sabrina doesn't know if

this is how her mother became addicted but says that is does add to her mistrust of medical

professionals. Sabrina's sister is also heavily dependent on the family. She is several years older

than Sabrina but does not work or go to school, and instead she lives at home with her parents

and her boyfriend, who also does not work. Sabrina describes her as emotionally manipulative.

Sabrina has been working at a local grocery store throughout her college years and sends money home to support the household. In the interview room, I watched Sabrina's body language tense up as she was thinking about this, her shoulders tensing as though to indicate exactly how heavy the load she was carrying at home was. Sabrina's stories made clear the relationship between family instability and the mental illness of family members and our own mental health struggles.

Trauma and mental illness often get wrapped up with religion, generally because people close to the interview subjects imposed a religious meaning on the trauma or mental health issue, or because religion and spirituality are two of the most commonly used epistemological tools we have available to us to help us make meaning out of the world when terrible things happen. Sometimes it is religion itself that students feel is doing the work of traumatizing them, or those that hurt them did so with religious justifications. Many instances of trauma or mental illness that came out in the interview process were directly tied to religion because I had asked about family upbringing specifically with regards to religious upbringing. Future iterations of the study will need to be careful to avoid this association so as to invite the full range of experiences into consideration.

Chapter 4:

CULTURE AND EPISTEMOLOGY IN PRACTICE
How does millennial culture and epistemology lead us to behave together in community?

Perhaps the most interesting part of the millennial epistemology is how it influences our behavior and interactions with one another. The structure of our knowledge-making processes structures our moral and ethical commitments, which is turn are lived out in our day to day lives with one another. It alters how we think about community-building and social responsibility. In my original project I attempted to get at a similar question in a very narrow way by looking at religion and community service activity. Now, we look instead at how culturally pervasive epistemological trends like skepticism, antirealism, and relativism produce accompanying actions and ethical responses to the challenges of living among others.

The millennial epistemology among my surveyed undergrads was found to influence community behavior and social ethics in four major ways. This is in the importance placed on personal responsibility and individualism, the do-no-harm moral philosophy, the development of community care ethics and the creation of transactional communities, and the widespread preference for personal spirituality over adherence to a religious tradition and involvement in its community structure.

The Do-No-Harm Moral Philosophy.

Students were living out their epistemology in a fascinating approach to determining moral right and wrong that I'm calling here the do-no-harm moral philosophy. Moral decision making processes were heavily influenced by the epistemological assumptions that we cannot know other peoples' contexts, stories, or perspectives and the desire to both never appear as too

judgmental and never risk being judged unfairly or harshly themselves. Moral decision making

was therefore largely disassociated from any sense of universal moral rights and wrongs. What I

found present within my sample population corroborated the similar findings of Smith and Snell.

The closest thing to a universal core moral principle was "the imperative not to hurt others.

"Others" here means anyone else. In this, [emerging adults] are essentially ethical

consequentialists: if something would hurt another person, it is probably bad; if it does not and is

not illegal, it's probably fine" (Smith and Snell 2009: 47). This is perhaps a highly tolerant

mode of moral decision making, but it also heavily relies on empathy and does not provide a

thorough framework for moral decision making. Timothy, the most individualistic of the

interviewees, named the do-no-harm philosophy without prompting:

> "I think there is a generally agreed upon moral right and wrong that's literally just
> don't hurt or kill other people unless they're trying to hurt or kill someone else.
> And that's it. That is the moral consensus on like "we shouldn't do that thing" but
> other than that I think that sense of moral right and wrong is entirely dependent
> upon the person. There's the blanket "don't hurt people" but then beyond that it's
> more or less do your own thing."

In the survey results, when asked if they believed in universal or definite standards of moral

rights and wrongs, 72% of respondents reported that they believed right and wrong depended on

context and situation. 17.8% reported that they do believe there are absolute standards. The

remaining participants each wrote in their own answer. These write-ins included:

> "There are absolute standards, but applying them is tricky. The fact that certain
> things may be situationally justified doesn't mean that there aren't higher rules that
> present, just that they are hard to find."

> "Each person has their own sense of right and wrong. There are also some general
> social conventions that define right and wrong, though not everyone follows
> them. Finally, there are biological factors such as empathy that control all healthy
> humans."

> "Everyone has their own standards of right and wrong."

"Yes [there are absolute standards], but [these standards] are not always clear."

"There are core rights and wrongs that are universal and everything else is situation-dependent."

"A mix of the two options. I believe that there is always a right or wrong answer, but rarely do two situations have the exact same answer."

This conversation captivated me around moral rights and wrongs and the ways that epistemology seemed to be effecting the development of our moral decision making mechanisms and assumptions fascinated me. I can't claim causation, but I think that there's something very important at work here that undergraduates can go through the world acknowledging a deep level of complexity, context, nuance, and unknowable-ness and manage to work that into their moral standards as they go. The level of trauma, mental illness, and tensions within their childhood homes, schools, and worshipping communities predisposed us to thinking about difference, judgement, and context. I asked interviewees to try to identify the most important parameters they used to evaluate their moral actions in the world—guiding moral principles, if you will, around what it means for them, personally, to be living a morally good life. To quote Timothy again:

> "I never want to enter a situation and leave it worse than I entered it. That goes back to doing no harm for me. That's always like my number one. I think the others stem from my Christian background, but it's a bit different, it's treat others how you would like to be treated if you were them, I add that on there for myself because a lot of times there are ways that some people want to be treated that other people absolutely would not want to be treated. One of [my moral principles] is also view others complexly, never treat someone as though they are just a one dimensional individual and they're trying to do just one specific thing because I know that I'm not."

Here, Timothy, the most individualistic of the interviewees, lays out an argument for ethical living that's again quite based on the do-no-harm philosophy and is so because of his

commitment to acknowledging what he perceives to be the reality of diversity and complexity of human contexts and conditions.

The Importance of Personal Responsibility.

There was often a general sense in most interviews that subjects believe that we all must behave kindly and live morally as individuals because we can only control our own actions and we cannot rely on others to be good moral actors because we have clear evidence that often they won't. There was a profound sense of aloneness that permeated some of these comments. "I just don't really trust people to be good these days, you know?" Cassandra said, laughing casually as though she was too well acquainted with this reality to feel very disappointed about it. Sarah, a sophomore Unitarian Universalist who was among the few interview participants who still identified with the faith tradition she was raised with, on the other hand, said this:

> "I dunno, I don't think people are all good, but they're usually not like always all bad. When I find people who also want to be good to each other I feel happy. I got involved in [campus community service organization] because I wanted to be with people who also felt like it was their job to change the world and make it better. And I really like that."

This seems to exist on a macroscopic systems level and a microscopic relationships levels. Our larger social institutions like government and religion cannot be trusted and are usually working against us. Our families often are unkind in their politics or religion and don't align with our beliefs or treat us as we believe people should treat each other. On the whole, relationships with family seemed to be on the up for most of the interviewees, but the memory of that tension was still quite present even in their efforts to mend relationships. In friendships and peer groups, students understood that we should expect our peers to be over-stressed, over-busy,

and operating under massive social pressure to be successful, and this, more than some kind of innate selfishness or stupidity, means that we should expect self-centered behavior from them. It's survival-oriented more than snobbish, and students understood that but also conveyed to me that they're somewhere on the spectrum between indifferent and deeply disturbed that social pressure gets in the way of relationship building.

Some students took all of this to mean that because they could not rely on other people or institutions to fix big social or political issues, the burden of community-care and self-care was on them. They were the only ones who could be trusted to do anything, so they had to do something. Timothy, the senior on the pre-medical track, was explicit in his convictions around the importance of the individual in society.

> "My moral imperative is always on the individual. We have to make things happen for ourselves because no one else will. I look around and I see everyone trying to get through and be okay and do stuff and some people really not doing their best at all and I just know that if I want something to happen I have to make it happen. That's it. I'm the bottom line. I guess a lot of it is "If I don't, who will?" I'm a very individualistic person. That permeates throughout my own personal views, political views, everything about how I view the world is incredibly individualistic. "

When I asked him what this meant for serving his community as a doctor, he said:

> "Well, see, I think that ties back into what I was saying about doing no harm, right, and all this too. It's my job to care for people because not everyone else can step up the way that I can."

It clicked a little when I had him outline his personal moral code, as first referenced in the previous section. Individualism was so written into his way of thinking and engaging with the world that is infiltrated everything, even in some interestingly complex ways. Here Timothy, explains how winning is one of his moral imperatives. He must find a way to win or he has failed morally. This seems on the one hand to be such an individualistic sentiment, especially in any

praxis outside of a teams sports setting, except that Timothy learned this value from within a

team sports context, and which indicates at least some level of comfort with and appreciation for

working together on a collaborative level.

> "And my last [guiding moral principle] is not really a moral one but something
> that's just come from my life, and that's always find a way to win. So I played
> football from when I was five through my senior year of high school, so when I
> was 17, so that's 12 years, and in high school I had this football coach, a short
> Irish man, and you could've called him Napoleon because he had such a
> Napoleonic complex (I know that's not imagining others complexly, like I just
> said, but it's the best way to describe it). And his definition of find a way to win
> was basically just cheat. Like do whatever you have to do, including cheating. Me
> and my friends would like jokingly say it to each other, but through a lot of the
> more difficult practices we held ourselves to a really high standard and it changed
> the meaning from what he had it as to "you better not cheat, because you can find
> a way to win outside of cheating. So we took his meaning and spun it back for
> ourselves. No matter how hard things get, if you put enough effort and energy into
> it, you can find a way to win without breaking the rules as long as you do
> everything the right way and put your all into it, don't just back down from the
> challenge."

The imperative of personal responsibility is also something of a survival tool. Students

are highly aware of the financial realities of debt, which is pervasive, and of the job market,

within which we receive what feels like almost daily reports of our bleak prospects. Survey

results showed that 57.4% of students worked during all or most of their years away at college,

and six of ten interviewees mentioned the competitiveness of the job market they were trying to

get into after graduation. "I have to work hard," Sabrina said. "I don't really have a choice.

There's no safety net." Steven, an agnostic sophomore, said, "I'm an English major. Of course

I'm scared about life after college." When asked what kinds of activities they were involved in,

students rattled off a list. When asked to write it responses to why they participated in

community service and civic engagement, 11% of students said they participated for reasons of

social pressure or the social status associated with volunteer work. As Nathanial put it, there is

"social collateral that people could collect by putting service on their resumes." This premium on the individual is therefore a premium placement on cultivating their professional and social value, thereby commodifying their labor and themselves.

Community service, responsibility, and care.

Because a large portion of the original survey questionnaire and general study design revolved around community service and community activism, I was left with a vast collection of data that addressed these questions on the sample population campus. Students are also showing a demonstrated interested in non-traditional/non-religious moral communities or nurturing communities, communities which gather together informally or formally that help facilitate the exchange of care for one another and create a circle of accountability that pushes them to be their best self or to take care of themselves. Despite the trend away from church affiliation and participation, many millennials still identify personal spiritual needs and/or resonate with aspects of spiritual life untied to traditional religious institutions (Oppenheimer: 2014). They're turning to their community to help them address those needs and are also looking into creative and imaginative ways to care for and serve the people around them.

This in turn is contributing the development of a "spiritual marketplace," in which participants have almost endless options available to them to seek out or create the spiritual tools and communities they feel best suit them. Timothy, who had grown up attending church Spaghetti Mondays and Bible Study Wednesdays, had started having Mozzarella Sticks Mondays and Wine Wednesdays with his friends on campus. Sabrina said that her academic major department felt like a community that helped her become a better activist and academic. Elijah loved a campus group that met to play a fantasy role-playing game, which he said pushed him to

investigate empathy more and helped him make friends and feel connected. Sarah felt deeply connected to a community service organization that pushed her to think more critically about justice-work and activism.

For young millennials, the present moment represents a point in time where unprecedented decline in religious affiliation and dwindling public trust in religious and political organizations converge with major life transitions like starting a college education, entering the workforce, and/or beginning families. Students are moving away from conventional religion and many are joining non-traditional moral communities, like support groups, book clubs, meditation and mindfulness circles, yoga classes, Crossfit programs, and political activist organizations. They are also engaging in service work and community service/volunteering activities, especially while they pursue undergraduate or graduate study.

Rejection of traditional religious affiliation and preference for personal spirituality.

Young millennials are transitioning rapidly away from the religious affiliations they were raised with and towards a sense of religiosity and spirituality that they can claim full ownership over. Some students, to be sure, and choosing to stick with the religious faith they were raised in. Jasleen, a Sikh; Nathaniel, a conservative Jew; and Sarah, a Unitarian Universalist, all continued to claim the faith tradition their parents brought them up in, but each went through significant periods of discernment and even, in Sarah's case, a period of leaving the church, as they cultivated a mature personal relationship with their faith. Jasleen spent a lot of time elaborating on this journey. It was important to her to clearly articulate that she had gone through a significant period of investigating her faith and making it work for her given her understanding of her life and what is important within it.

"So I definitely still identify as Sikh, like when people ask I will proudly tell them that I am, and I am very interested in learning more about Sikhism and its history, the Holy Book. Last summer I read the entire holy book in English. I also say that I think I'm much more spiritual than religious. I feel like people usually put the two together, and I don't think they're the same thing at all. Religion is much more structured, something with rules, something you have to follow, and I definitely believe in a lot of Sikh beliefs, I definitely feel connected to the foundation of Sikhism, but a lot of littler rules-- like you're not supposed to eat meat, which doesn't really make sense because it's not in the holy book explicitly, but like culturally you're not supposed to do it-- like I feel like God has better things to judge me on. You're not supposed to be intoxicated, which I also agree with, it just means you should never be out of control, you should always be in your senses, which I agree with, but at the same time I don't think it's so strict that you should never drink. I'm not supposed to cut my hair. I don't feel like it's important enough for me, at least in this moment, to follow. But I feel like spirituality is like a sense of connectedness with a higher being, or just like the universe in and of itself, and I feel a lot more spiritual, I'm much more confident in my connection to God with or without a surrounding religion."

When Jasleen walked me through her faith journey, I felt it resonating with my own, but according to the survey data this is by no means the common route. Instead students are frequently either wrestling with their faith and then leaving that tradition abruptly or growing away from their faith and drifting apart from the tradition over time. Millennials are either leaving the faiths they grew up in for organizations that suit them better, or they are inactive within their original communities. This is yet another of those constant major life transitions that young millennials are so familiar with.

Many students have given up on organized religion entirely and plenty more are generally indifferent to religion as a whole. I'm again drawn to the data on religious affiliations of students when they were growing up and the religious affiliations that students claim now. If you remember, only about 6.5% of all respondents said they were raised in an atheist or agnostic household, and 6.5% said they'd been raised in spiritual but not religious households. A staggering 24% reported that they now identified as atheist or agnostic, an increase of 17.5%

over the course of their ascent into adulthood. 16.7% now identified as spiritual but not religious, an increase of 10.2% of survey respondents.

Many students said that religion and spirituality just didn't make sense within their worldview. They struggled to reconcile the truth and meaning-making processes that religion was teaching them with their understanding of the lived reality of the world. Jasleen didn't like the little rules that got in the way of her spiritual relationship with God. She didn't see how the necessity of little rules could be reconciled to the life she wanted to be leading with God. Timothy, however, believed that religion and spirituality didn't help him to move ethically in the world as well as his atheism did, and so he gave up the religion his mother had raised him with in exchange for a spiritual platform that could be better reconciled to the epistemological framework he'd developed over the years.

> "No, [life has] no purpose whatsoever. I think that the universe has existed for billions of years, and it's gonna exist for billions of years after I'm gone. Hopefully. If life really had purpose, I think it would've been right at the start, why would it take so long for life to get here?... So for me, I am someone who does a lot of different things on campus and in my life and I don't have a lot of time to rest and I need the energy to come from somewhere and so a lot of the times I found that when I believed in Christianity I was more willing to pass things up for people who needed help because I thought to myself, oh, if I don't have the ability to help them, well God will make sure that they're on their way, God will find a way to make things work for them. What I noticed when I realized that I had to stop doing that was that I realized I only have a limited amount of time, someone else only has a limited amount of time, if I don't help them no one else is going to, and for me it's kind of that driving factor when I ask myself do I want to be a better person, should I go out of my way to help someone else, I always think to myself well there's no one else who's going to, and I believe in helping people. That is separate from religion. I believe in treating others the way you want to be treated. That's a great way to organize a society; and you need to help people. And I try to emulate that outside of religion. There's a lot of growing that's been done over the years, just from age and growing up, but I think I am a much more caring person now and I can live in the world as the world is better, than I would have been if I continued to believe in religion."

In interview sessions, subjects were asked to define "spirituality" and "religion" in their own words. Religion was commonly construed as communal and structural, an organizational institution promoting certain values-systems and building communities around these values-systems. Spirituality was frequently described as personal beliefs and practices that helped subjects feel connected to a sense of awe, divinity, inner peace, and/or human interwovenness, all of which was often distinctly separate of and unrelated to any larger religious framework. Spirituality was highly individualistic and often reflective of the subject's personal experiences and/or attempts to reconcile their interactions with the world around them with larger epistemological structures like theology or scientific method or social conditioning. What can first be observed almost immediately is a keen social awareness of "religion" and "spirituality" as two separate concepts and a preference for "spirituality" over "religion" among students (Figures 1-3).
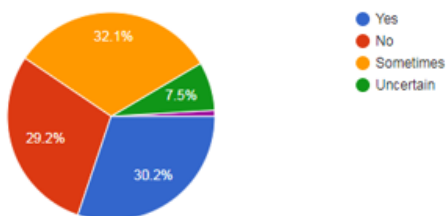

Figure 1. Survey response break down: "Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual and/or religious person?" n=106.
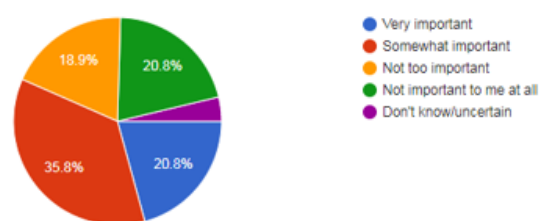

Figure 2. Survey response break down: "Is spirituality personally important to you?" n=106.
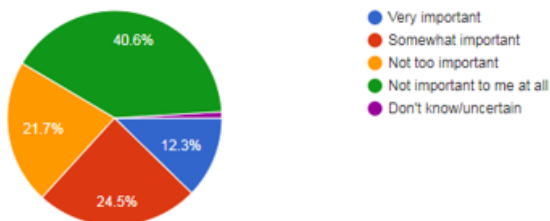

Figure 3. Survey response break down: "Is "religion" personally important to you?" n=106.

In interviews, students tended to profess a greater personal affiliation with spirituality than with religion, but as was seen in the survey data, there's a sizable portion of students who identify with neither religion nor spirituality. Many were distrustful of religious institutions, which seemed to many subjects to be psychologically and socially harmful, and even down-right dangerous, because of what students considered religion's disposition towards prioritizing values-systems and conformity to community standards over the needs of individuals. Several students also sited sexual abuse sandals within the Roman Catholic Church, the bigotry of American evangelical Protestants, and other culturally salient examples of what was considered by some to be a deep hypocrisy and betrayal of religion's promise to promote love. Others saw these events to be evidence of a clear tendency within religious institutions to appropriate religious power for use against vulnerable or unsuspecting individuals inside or outside of the institution's congregation. Some students were not so specific, and simply said that religion felt too hateful and unkind. Here, many mentioned that they often suspected religious institutions, explicitly, Christian ones, to be prone to homophobia, sexism, racism, and a general intolerance for ideas that did not conform to congregational standards. Religion had hurt them too much, and they saw nothing worthwhile in returning to it right now. Timothy, Sabrina, and Cassandra, for example, were all very firm in their need to stay distant from religion if they wanted to take seriously their need to recover from those instances when religion had been used against them by close family members.

Other interviewees cited logistical challenges to keeping up with religious involvement they had participated in while growing up or seeking out new opportunities for religious activity. The time constraints and emotional and intellectual exhaustion of being a full-time student was a frequently mentioned logistical obstacle to religious involvement, closely followed transportation

challenges and difficulties locating a congregation or community that would match their spiritual needs and/or moral values. This generally seems to have led many students who might have been inclined to seek out religious activities to develop deeper personal religious and spiritual practices to lose or deprioritize their religious identity over time.

CONCLUSION:

It is clear that much further analysis of my own current data and the implementation of many future broader nationwide studies is necessary to properly continue the work that I picked up when I decided to make a study of the meaning-making processes and community building practices of my classmates. There is a lot left in the data that I desperately wish I had time to process properly and articulate clearly within the breadth of this paper. But I've come away know with a better understanding of the culturally and generationally located millennial epistemological framework, and I now find myself thinking of what that must mean for us as students as we try to move forward in this complex, not quite real, never quite knowable, often anxiety-making world of ours. And I'm left wondering specifically how scholars and practitioners of modern day religion and spirituality need to act in order to reach a generation of students who need knowledge-making and meaning-making guidance and support just as previous generations have, but who approach these tasks with a language that does not quite fit within the existing discourse.

A large constituency of students identified as atheist, agnostic, or none/no-affiliation. Another large constituency identified as spiritual but not religious. Of the remaining students who did identify with a faith tradition, many either claimed a identity because they had grown up claiming it but were now generally indifferent to it, and many, like Jasleen, Nathanial, and Sarah, were wrestling with the faith traditions they were raised with in an effort to reconcile these traditions with the world they were experiencing and processes around them. Other many claimed that that spirituality and religion weren't particularly important to the or had minimal meaningful impact on their lives, the interview experiences I had with students made me believe with more conviction than before that perhaps we really were approaching those big

conversations about community building, morality, and ways of knowing with a language young people didn't like or speak very well.

My interviews were meant to last half an hour. I did not plan that more time would be required than that and asked students to budget that much time out of their busy mid-November, pre-final exams life and did not anticipate that we would go over. I was so wrong. Three interviews stayed within the 30-40 minute range. The rest took close to an hour, with two lasting almost an hour and half and one scraping an hour and forty five minutes. So why were people so engaged in these conversations that were then at the time still heavily oriented around religion, spirituality, and community service, rather than the new language I tried to develop later?

I think the answer to question reveals a lot about young millennials and undergrads. People seem to want to have conversations about these big existential and epistemological questions. Whether we love our faith traditions, carry some deep sadness associated with them, or feel totally indifferent or up in the air, it seems clear to me that young people want those spaces where they're invited to talk about how they know the world and how this influences what they believe about it. We want to have this conversation inclusively though, and in ways that don't put our epistemological assumptions into too much conflict or move us into spaces where we might feel unsafe. One of the reasons I think students felt so comfortable with speaking to me, even though a fair number of students on campus know that I'm involved in our ecumenical chapel program and going to graduate school to study to be a pastor, is because the researcher-interviewee boundaries limited the amount of judgement I'd be allowed to impose on them in the interview setting. It's not because we're necessarily as a rule all squeamish, coddled, or feel in some way entitled to emotional and epistemological comfort, though some of us individually might be. Millennial epistemology and ethics developed out of necessity given the

cultural climate we're living in, the rapidity of the global scene's constant evolution, our awareness of complexity and perspective, and the lack of stability running through all of this. Based on what came out in interviews, I am quite willing to posit that there was even more in the way of traumatic or emotionally exhausting life-events associated with student's believing, knowing, and doing philosophies that did not come up in the interview setting. I am also very willing to stipulate that for many students who surveyed but did not interview, past negative experiences and associations with religious conversations and communities were very likely one of the reasons they did not feel very inclined to interview in person.

There were often moments in the interview room where I felt as though I had entered into a very holy sacred space. To share stories with students across so much difference and to hear a common thread of millennial culture and epistemology linking them all through was certainly very exciting intellectually, but to know with some certainty that students were wrestling with big questions of faith, of knowing, and living well beside others in a world filled with anxiety, transition, and confusion was deeply moving and impactful. As an interviewer, my identity in those rooms was very important: I wore a cross and clearly articulated my own faith stance as a progressively minded Protestant Christian. I even shared stories of my own faith journey when they felt relevant and meaningful for others to hear. But even as I was careful in owning my own identity, I was also exceptionally careful to use inclusive language and build the interview room into a space of nonjudgmental openness, where the interviewee could hopefully feel free to lay out their truth honestly and openly because I had already laid out mine in a humble and hopeful spirit of total nonjudgmental affirmation. This ownership of self, openness to other, and a researcher's ethical imperative of non-judgmental listening combined together to create spaces

where some students felt empowered to share their honest journey to process, know, and act in the world for all its complexity, anxiety, and nuance.

Students want, and perhaps need, to have these conversations about these journeys but they frequently feel disempowered by the language we traditionally associate with processing, knowing, and acting in the world, that language being so closely tied to religion and spirituality. What better place for undergraduates to probe these questions than on their college campuses, where for many students the development of the knowing and meaning making processes is under such an intense revision and augmentation. They don't want someone judgmental, someone closed off or disinterested in the complexity of the world and the wide variety of contexts and possibilities and ways of knowing, being, and doing in the world. This is too much at odds with the do-no-harm moral philosophy and too much at odds with the millennial understanding of the world as place with countless perspectives and therefore multiple kinds of reality at play. Millennial folks enjoy conversations about metaphysical frameworks. This was clear from the hour-and-half long interviews. I don't doubt that people are clearly very interested in conversations about God, spirituality, and how they know the world. They want more from their metaphysics, but they're afraid of being judged and they reject that which presents as unkind narrowmindedness.

The essentialness of this research and all the necessary future iterations of it which might occur is clear. If we are interested in engaging morally responsible leaders and community members, we must learn more about how those leaders and community members see the unfolding world around us, and make sure that we are developing useful language and conversations around which students can grow, create, and mobilize. We must strive to acknowledge the evolution of epistemological assumptions and see how a cultural and

generational epistemology could undergird a generation of young people even though they might identify across a range of religious and spiritual affiliations. And we must acknowledge and embrace the reality of pluralism and strive to make our teaching models and study tools effective and kind across a broad matrix of difference.

REFERENCES

Basu, Tanya. 2015. "Millennials: Don't Call Us Millennials." *Time Magazine,* September 5.

Bryant, Alyssa N., and Helen S. Astin. 2008. "The Correlates of Spiritual Struggle during the College Years." *The Journal of Higher Education* 79(1): 1–27. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25144648.

Fuller, Robert C. 2010. *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Largen, Kristin Johnston, et al. 2014. "Our Interreligious Life in the Twenty-First-Century North American Context." Pp: 1-36 in *Interreligious Learning and Teaching: A Christian Rationale for a Transformative Praxis.* Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9m0spt.4.

Oppenhiemer, Mark. 2014. "Examining the Growth of 'Spiritual but Not Religious.'" *The New York Time*s, July 18.

Pew Research Center. 2015. Religious landscape study. Retrieved from http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/ Google Scholar

Pew Resarch Center. 2017. "More Americans now say they're spiritual but not religious." *Pew Research Center,* September 6. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/

Smidt, Corwin E. 2009. "Religion, Civic Engagement, and Political Participation." *The Future of Religion in American Politics*, edited by Charles W. Dunn, University Press of Kentucky. 173–208. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jcnpd.13.

Smith, Christian and Patricia Snell. 2009. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.