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How Adult Students Experience Having Their Beliefs Challenged in an Undergraduate Religion Class: A Phenomenological Analysis

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Steven Blake Frye entitled "How Adult Students Experience Having Their Beliefs Challenged in an Undergraduate Religion Class: A Phenomenological Analysis." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

Ralph G. Brockett, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Katherine H. Greenberg, Howard R. Pollio, Mary F. Ziegler

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Acceptance for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges
Vice Provost and
Dean of the Graduate School

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How Adult Students Experience Having Their Beliefs Challenged
in an Undergraduate Religion Class:
A Phenomenological Analysis

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Ralph G. Brockett - Advisor

Steven Blake Frye
August 2007

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife and best friend Becky Frye. Without her support, encouragement, and belief in me, completion of this project would not have been possible.

It is further dedicated to the memory of my mother, Vivian Frye, who always supported her son, encouraged education, and modeled wisdom and self-sacrifice.

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ABSTRACT

The challenging of one's existing ideas has long been acknowledged as an integral component of the learning experience. In a university classroom, challenges are often inherent to the process. When challenges address personal beliefs, there is potential for the experience to be unsettling. The current study is designed to gain a deeper look into this phenomenon.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of adult students in a college religion class who have encountered questions about and challenges to their previously held beliefs. The study was conducted with adult non-traditional students who have participated in an academically-focused college level religion class at a Baptist affiliated university with a liberal arts emphasis. Using the phenomenological research method developed at the University of Tennessee (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), eight participants were interviewed regarding their experience. All were asked to talk about a time one of their beliefs was challenged in their undergraduate religion course.

Utilizing the concept of figure/ground as an interpretive framework, the data revealed three themes that stood out against the ground of the learners' expectations of being challenged. First, participants experienced an environment of challenge filled with varied and powerful challenges that often came quickly. While some spoke of theological beliefs that were challenged, others described challenges to beliefs about others and how they would be treated in a religion class, the teachers' pedagogy, and their own personal epistemology. The influence of professors stood out as a second theme as they set a tone for the class, and served as models for the environment. Professors had both positive and negative effects on the learners. The final theme deals

with the choices participants made: the challenges caused some to broaden their mindsets, while others chose to not allow their beliefs to be corroded.

These findings reveal highly individualized learning experiences laden with the potential for powerful challenges to the learner's beliefs and identity. The level of expectation for challenges to beliefs brought to the learning environment influenced the impact of the challenges. Teachers played a significant role in establishing an environment where effective reflective learning could occur.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The semester begins with the instructor entering a classroom filled with new faces: each from a different background, most relatively prepared for the college experience, and all full of potential. Over the course of the semester the instructor will present the material and strive to create an environment of open inquiry where questions are raised, new material is engaged, and learning occurs. By the end of the semester the instructor realizes there have been numerous responses to the classroom learning experience. Some students have actively engaged the material and struggled with new questions, theories, and opinions. Others have passively “made it through” the class. A few others have seemingly distanced themselves from the material and the experience, refusing to entertain the questions, and passionately clinging to their own opinions over those presented by textbook authors and the instructor.

The aforementioned scenario is a relatively common experience for those teaching in the college classroom. Over my eleven years of teaching I have engaged in conversations with numerous college instructors and have heard similar stories as to what happens with students. It appears to be a relatively normal phenomenon to have a section full of students experiencing the same material, and to have only a small number of these students actively engage the material and dynamically take on new ideas. This often leaves the teacher wondering what went wrong with the students who didn’t “get it”, and what went right with the ones who did “get it”? What does it mean to “get it” and what factors make it happen? Why were some unwilling to make connections with new ideas?

What happened with those students who did not want to engage new ideas?

As a college instructor who has taught introductory religion courses in a small private liberal arts college, I have repeatedly recognized this phenomenon among my own students. In a given semester some students will actively engage the material, ask critical questions, and question their own preconceptions about this potentially personal subject matter while others avoid the questions or simply disengage. A college religion class has the potential to be an especially engaging environment due to the subject matter and to the fact that students often bring with them strongly held assumptions and personal beliefs (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001). An example of this was demonstrated in a response to a questionnaire given in 2005 to graduating religion majors at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, TN. A former student said that she wished that “professors had not asked as many questions but had further reinforced her ideas”. This begs the question: what is the difference between this student and the student who digs deeper and discovers new arenas of belief? What stands out for students who have encountered a learning environment where their beliefs have been questioned or challenged?

The Problem

Since Socrates it has been postulated that learning is about ‘knowing that you don’t know’. At its core, education involves challenges and changes: changes in one’s store of knowledge, changes in life approaches and perspectives, changes in what we already know. In the adult education research literature, the questioning of “what we already know”, our assumptions, has been addressed on a theoretical level by learning

theorists like Mezirow, Brookfield, Jarvis, Illeris, Cranton, and Kegan. Studies of student assumptions often focus on the arena of students' epistemology; their particular beliefs about the learning process (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Bendixen, 1998; Call, 2004; Gallik, 2001; Perry, 1970; Schrader, 2004). A growing number of studies have examined how assumptions are questioned with particular reference to Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (Bailey, 1996; Harvie, 2004; Weisberger, 1995; Wollert, 2003). Gender-specific studies have examined this process from a female (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Vogelsang, 1993) and male (Weisberger, 1995) perspective. Two dissertations investigated changes in adult learners in an undergraduate setting (Fortunato, 1993; Ricci, 2000). Overall, these studies took a larger look at the transformative nature of the learning process and how it affects and is affected by mitigating factors in the students' lives. What is lacking in the literature is a look into the lived experience of learners encountering questions about their beliefs or assumptions in the classroom setting. The phenomenological method of Thomas and Pollio (2002), with its emphasis on understanding the essence of lived experience, offers a rich research tool for investigating these experiences. It is my goal to examine these experiences and allow the words of the participants to tell the story.

Adult learners continue to become a more visible and recognized segment of the educational terrain, and their numbers are growing within the ranks of higher education (Bash, 2003; Kasworm, 2003; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Adult learners are recognized as having great potential for reflection and dealing with dissonance in their assumptions (Kegan, 1994; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Mezirow, 1990), with Jarvis (2006) contending that this is the one difference between adult and child

learning. The spiritual development literature also recognizes this growing ability in adulthood in regard to questioning religious and spiritual assumptions (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000; Tisdell, 1999). With these factors in mind, I set out to investigate this phenomenon of questioning beliefs among adult students in a college religion class in a liberal arts setting. The confluence of these factors is a fertile field for examining this important learning phenomenon. Adult education, higher education, and religious education literature and practice should benefit from the outcomes of this study.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of adult students in a college religion class who have encountered questions about and challenges to their previously held beliefs. The specific research question addressed is: What is the experience of adult college/university students whose beliefs are challenged in an undergraduate religion class? Because of my concern for investigating challenges to beliefs, this study was conducted with adult students who have participated in an academically-focused college level religion class at a religiously affiliated college with a liberal arts emphasis. The liberal arts model seeks to provide an education that is broad, digs deep into the way students create meaning, and properly encourages and nurtures critical thinking (Harvie, 2004; Nord, 2002; Walsh, 2000). The study of religion in the liberal arts setting creates an environment rich in potential for the experience of questioning previously held beliefs.

A Place in the Literature for this Research

The college classroom is an environment where teachers introduce new materials, concepts, and ideas to students and assist them in a process of engagement, in the hope of bringing about learning. In discussing potential avenues for the study of transformative learning, Harvie (2004) states:

Given the purpose of undergraduate liberal arts education, the developmental phase of traditional undergraduate learners, and challenges occurring in educational institutions in a knowledge economy, explorations of students' perspectives within undergraduate courses may provide one of the most promising opportunities for exploring transformative learning in an educational setting (p. 41).

Within undergraduate settings there is now a growing population of adult or “non-traditional” learners. In 2003, adult learners composed more than 45% of college/university enrollments (Bash, 2003), and made up 34% of undergraduate populations (Kasworm, 2003). This growing population brings a unique complexity to the liberal arts college classroom as adult learners engage in the reflective process at a level of life experience different from the traditional 18-21 year old college or university student.

While many subjects in the liberal arts curriculum have the potential for raising questions, religion classes can be especially ripe for the creation of conflict in the minds of the learners (Burns, 2006; Cherry et al., 2001; Kofink, 1991). Simmons (2006, p. 39) has aptly stated that “like the liberal arts in general, religious studies content contains paradigms for human transformation. It would, in fact, be odd if our students were not transformed by the courses we teach.” In this environment, “educators introduce appropriate conflict, dissonance, and wonder so as to awaken the learner to a serious, disciplined, and vitalizing engagement with reality” (Parks, 1986, p. 142). The subject

matter of the college religion class and the concern for critical reflection inherent in the liberal arts model combine to create an environment with enhanced potential for the phenomenon in question.

In their study of religion on college campuses, Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield (2001) identified three different models for teaching religion on the college campus. Teachers utilize an *advocacy model* when they function as advocates for a particular religious tradition and actively encourage student spiritual formation among the students. The opposite extreme of advocacy is *distanced objectivity*. Here judgments are discouraged and the goal is a dispassionate study of the subject matter utilizing critical methodology. A moderating ground is the *empathetic analytical model* where professors show respect for the traditions without advocating for one particular tradition. Teachers utilizing this model “treat religion as important and worthwhile, while bringing the best critical scholarship to bear on it” (p. 288). In the courses attended by participants in the current study, it is a departmental desire to teach religion classes according to the third model (Personal conversation with Dean of School of Religion). Questions are encouraged and the best of current scholarship is employed as students engage religious texts in an environment of respectful open inquiry. This setting offers an inviting environment for an examining the experiences of students who have had their assumptions questioned in a higher education setting. Information from the student interviews in this study demonstrated this to be the case.

To better understand these experiences in the classroom, adult students were asked to share their own personal encounters with the phenomenon. Much traditional research in higher education has focused on the teacher/instructor’s perspective of

teaching and has resulted in frustrated students and instructors, with instructors blaming students for lack of expected progress (Davis, 1993; Harvie, 2004). Focusing on the students' perspective allows for an examination of the experience of challenges to beliefs, which offers a needed student perspective.

Adult Learning and Development

A number of adult learning theorists have highlighted the importance of questioning of assumptions in adult learning. Perhaps the most prolific and influential in this regard is Mezirow's (2000) theory of Transformative Learning. Mezirow speaks of critical reflection of one's own assumptions in response to a "disorienting dilemma" that leads to a transformation of "taken-for-granted frames of reference...to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (p. 8).

According to Mezirow (1991), reflecting on one's assumptions occurs on three levels: Content Reflection, Process Reflection, and Premise Reflection. When the learner engages in Premise Reflection, he/she makes "a taken-for-granted situation problematic, raising questions regarding its validity" (p. 105). When premise reflection occurs, changes can occur at the level of a person's meaning perspectives, those taken for granted assumptions. For Mezirow, the process of perspective transformation is the "central process of adult education" (p. 155).

Several other writers have presented ideas that address the questioning of assumptions. Friere's (1972) "conscientization" involves learners perceiving social, political, and economic contradictions, and taking subsequent action against the

oppressive elements of the reality they encounter. The constructive-developmental approach to transformative learning developed by Kegan (2000) looks at the epistemological challenges learners face as they form and re-form meaning in response to challenges to their own perception of what is “object” and “subject” in their life experience. Jarvis (1993) refers to a disjuncture between one’s own personal biography and experience that gives birth to the question “why”. He states:

Individuals enter every experience with their own biography, that is with a stock of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and values gained as a result of previous experiences, and if that stock of knowledge and belief is sufficient then they enter a meaningful situation and are able to operate on the world in a nonlinear manner. But when that reservoir is insufficient then there is a disjuncture between the biography and the experience. It is the experience of disjuncture which stimulates the question – why? The question constitutes that start of the learning process – for once asked it demands an answer. Sometimes the question can be answered from the perspective of one of the disciplines of knowledge, sometimes there is an ideological response and sometimes the answer comes from another form of belief or religious system. (p. 8)

As evidenced by the preceding theoretical literature, the questioning of assumptions is an important component in the adult learning literature. A more detailed and learner-focused exploration into the essence of this phenomenon will add to the complexity of understanding of how adults traverse the ground of reflection, assessment of assumptions and transformation.

College Student Epistemological Development Literature

Developmental theory regarding college students is informative to this study. Perry’s (1970) study on intellectual development posits that college students negotiate their way through a number of levels as they move from a dualistic form of thinking toward a more relativistic perception of reality. Perry states:

In its full range the scheme begins with those simplistic forms in which a person

construes his world in unqualified polar terms of absolute right-wrong, good-bad; it ends with those complex forms through which he undertakes to affirm his own commitments in a world of contingent knowledge and relative values (p. 3).

Perry identifies nine stages of development that serve to define three major developmental clusters: (1) the Modifying of Dualism; (2) the Realizing of Relativism, and (3) the making of a Commitment. Moving through these categories, the ability to ask questions and deal with presuppositions increases as the student becomes more capable of formulating opinions and of acting upon them. In the early stages truth rests in external authority figures and progresses toward active engagement in truth claims culminating in an eventual commitment to act on this growing realization of relativism. Perry concluded that most college students begin their college years in early stages of dualism and many end their experience entering some level of commitment, where they take an active part in applying a more relativistic approach to learning.

Recognizing the predominately male conception apparent in Perry's model, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) propose a sequential view of development that speaks to what they view as specifically female "ways of knowing". They classify these voices as Silence, Received Knowing, Subjective Knowing, Procedural Knowing, and Constructed Knowing. The stages in this theory are related to the perspective from which "women view reality, and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority" (p. 3). These "epistemological positions" are described as "frameworks for meaning-making that evolve and change rather than personality types that are relatively permanent" (p. 155). There are no age limitations placed on the stages outlined.

Marcia Baxter Magolda (1992) conducted research to investigate the roles of

impersonal and relational modes of knowing in the thinking of young adults, during and beyond the college years. She sought to understand “discrepancies between what she observed in student’s patterns of cognitive development and Perry’s forms of intellectual development” (Bock, 1999, p. 29). Both male and female students were studied in order to understand gender related differences. She concluded that there are four sets of epistemic assumptions, or ways of knowing: Absolute Knowing, Transitional Knowing, Independent Knowing, and Contextual Knowing. The first three were exhibited by the college students, with the fourth stage emerging more in the post-college years. She did discover gender-related differences in reasoning, but these differences were not mutually exclusive, with the males and females demonstrating more similarities than differences (Baxter Magolda, 1993).

Spiritual Development Literature

Spirituality has taken a figural position in recent higher education literature (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Hoppe & Speck, 2005; Jablonski, 2001) and adult learning literature (Dirkx, 2001; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; English & Gillen, 2000; Fenwick & English, 2004; Jarvis, 1993; Kauffman, 1999; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Palmer, 1998; Tisdell, 2003). Taylor (1996) has even described this proliferation in the adult education literature as a “wild explosion” (Fenwick & English, 2004). Theorists such as Tisdell and Fenwick are careful to point out a qualitative difference in the literature between spirituality and religiosity, with spirituality being more concerned with meaning making as opposed to the more sectarian nature of religiosity.

Because of the personal and potentially spiritual nature of the material discussed

in religion courses, the literature on spiritual development also informs this study. James Fowler's (1981) *Stages of Faith* theory is considered "seminal in the field of psychology of religion" and in the study of the religious experience (Chickering et al., 2006, p. 53). Fowler describes a stage-based developmental model that is heavily influenced by Piaget, Erickson, Levison, Perry, and Kohlberg. The theory contains six stages of faith development that individuals may negotiate throughout their lifespan. Stages three through six deal specifically with young adult-adult issues. In stage three, *synthetic/conventional faith*, authority is found outside oneself and is external to the learner. Authority begins to move from external to internal in *individuating-reflective faith*. Here the individual examines previously held beliefs and becomes less defined by others, choosing associates based on one's own self-chosen beliefs. There is a movement away from the self-preoccupation in stage five – *conjunctive faith*. In this stage there is a search for balance because "truth is more multi-dimensional and organically interdependent than most theories or accounts of truth can grasp" (Fowler, 1981, p. 186). This understanding often leads to tolerance and activity in service and commitment to others. Fowler has a stage six, which he calls *universalizing faith*, where the person's life is immersed in others while living absolute justice and love. This stage is rarely achieved, much like Maslow's (1957) concept of self actualization. Of particular interest for this study is the shift from stage three to stage four, where personal beliefs become internalized and "object" rather than "subject" to the learner (Kegan, 1994). Parks (1986) has theorized in detail on this shift, describing a journey from authority-bound meaning-making, through counter dependence and inner-dependence toward a state of inter-dependence that seeks deep relationships with others different than one self.

Tisdell (2003) offers a model for adult spirituality that differs from the linear-type model espoused by Fowler. She describes spiritual development as change over time that takes on a more spiral form with growth occurring as the individual moves forward toward authenticity, and then spirals back by reflecting on where he/she has come from. Tisdell points out the lack of context in Fowler's theory, and for this reason emphasizes that the spiral of development is influenced by cultural background, gender, historical context of upbringing, educational background, and religious upbringing.

These theorists all seek to understand the process of learning in the college years and beyond. Their ideas inform this study because they offer potential frameworks for understanding the underlying process that students encounter during this formative period of education. While developmental theories attempt to categorize the experience of the "average college student", in this study I will seek a deeper look into the particular experience of adult students encountering questions that challenge their previously held beliefs.

Rationale for the Method of this Study

As is evidenced by the aforementioned survey, the adult learning literature possesses an abundance of theories regarding the process of adult learning and how adults handle challenges to their existing assumptions. In light of the current theoretical literature, there seems to be a need for further investigation into the experiences of adult learners as they encounter questions or challenges to their assumptions or beliefs. When discussing the possibilities of understanding transformation as a lifelong endeavor, Kegan (2000) states "we will better discern the nature of learners' particular needs for

transformational learning by better understanding not only their present epistemologies but the epistemological complexity of the present learning challenges” (p. 59).

The phenomenological method, with its concern for describing the lived experiences of people, offers a detailed look into the complexity of learners’ experiences. Brookfield (1994, p. 164) states that “at present theoretical analyses of critical reflection (frequently drawn from Habermas' work) considerably outweigh the number of ethnographic, phenomenological studies of how this process is experienced”. In a discussion of what he considers to be ten important issues in the realm of adult learning, Brookfield (1994) points out the paucity of learning studies that explore learning from the learner’s perspective:

[a] way should be found to grant greater credibility to adults' renderings of the experience of learning from the 'inside'. Most descriptions of how adults experience learning are rendered by researchers' pens, not learners themselves. More phenomenographic studies of how adults feel their way through learning episodes, given in their own words and using their own interpretations and constructs, would enrich our understanding of the significance of learning to adults (p. 167).

In their detailed review of recent literature on how college affects students Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) repeat their 1991 call for

research on the effects of college to use naturalistic and qualitative approaches more extensively. To be sure, the decade of the 1990s saw a marked increase in qualitative studies of college effects, and much of this inquiry made important contributions to our understanding. But traditional quantitative approaches continue to dominate the research, regardless of the topic area. Although quantitative approaches provide a powerful set of tools for estimating the impact of college on students, these tools are probably most useful in painting the broad outlines of the portrait. Rendering tone, tint, texture, and nuance may require the finer brushstrokes characteristic of qualitative approaches. Indeed, naturalistic and ethnographic inquiries may be particularly well suited to identifying and examining indirect and conditional effects. Finally, although qualitative research may be viewed as less demanding than quantitative approaches, that is not the

case. The impact of postsecondary education on students is an immense and complex field of study. It is unlikely any single methodological approach can capture that complexity (p. 636-637).

Lawson (2006) has recently echoed this need in his discussion of the types of empirical research needed in the religious education literature. He states that,

A quantitative research model that focuses on testing theories has dominated much of the empirical research of the past forty years. Unfortunately given the limited amount of research in our field, this has often been premature. We are in need of more qualitative research to develop theories worthy of testing. Much can be learned from careful and rigorous case studies, phenomenological studies, and ethnographic research (p. 161).

Kegan (2000, p. 69) offers a further question to be addressed by a phenomenological study: “How might we better understand transformational learning differently – and our opportunities as educators – were we to better understand the restless, creative process of development itself, in which all our students partake before, during, and after their participation in our classrooms?” The phenomenological method offers an in-depth look at a major component of this developmental process.

These comments reinforce the need for a deeper exploration into the experience of learners in their learning environments. Asking adult students to reflect upon the questioning of their beliefs or assumptions could offer much needed data for a better understanding of the experiences of learners “from the inside” rather than from the perspective of theorists. A phenomenological look at the experiences of adult learners in the collegiate classroom offers an entry into the lives of students who encounter disjuncture in the learning experience that can further the knowledge base of teachers who seek transformative experiences among their students.

Potential Contributions of this Study

I anticipate that this study could contribute in several ways to an understanding of how students respond when their beliefs are challenged in the teaching-learning situation. First, a thorough investigation of the experience of questioning beliefs could benefit the literature on teaching approaches used by professors. Pedagogical theory, educational theory, and specifically adult learning concepts could be affected by a deeper understanding of this select group of students. These implications could also have an impact on adult education practitioners as they work with their students in the questioning of assumptions.

Second, professors in higher education could benefit from this study by better understanding how critical reflection occurs in the classroom and what students experience in the process. If the liberal arts model prescribes this type of high level questioning, understanding how it is encountered and assimilated has the potential to assist teachers in planning for positive experiences.

Third, the literature of adult learning theory and adult development could be enhanced by a deeper understanding of how learners experience such moments of dissonance. The centrality of this experience to the learning process has already been highlighted by numerous theorists. What is needed is a rich description of these experiences that will inform adult learning theorists and educators in the words of those experiencing the dissonance.

Lastly, similar studies could be carried out with students in different fields of study – math or science for example. Later, an investigation of the different studies for common themes could garner further information to inform learning theory and teacher practice.

Researcher's Assumptions

In phenomenological research, great pains are taken to ensure that the researcher remains aware of his/her own assumptions when engaging the phenomenon under investigation (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The outcomes of my bracketing interview will be discussed in greater detail in a Chapter Three. I have personally experienced the questioning of my own beliefs in the classroom and have watched it occur with colleagues and students. Based on personal experience, I assume that the questioning of assumptions is a significant component of the adult learning process.

A second assumption I make is that these experiences are meaningful and powerful components of the adult learning process. Conversely, I assume that those who do not critically address their own assumptions fail to experience the full potential of the learning experience.

Another assumption I take into this research is the importance of critical reflection and critical analysis in the learning process. Learning is a continuous process of examining new material in the context of what is already known.

I further assume that the college religion class is an environment of open inquiry that can elicit the questioning of beliefs. Also, due to the very personal nature of the subject matter, a college religion class is an environment in which one's presuppositions can be especially strong, potentially more so than for other college topics.

A final assumption I bring to this study is that the philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological research method are particularly fitting for studying of beliefs or ideas. The Thomas and Pollio (2002) method of phenomenological research is heavily based on the philosophical constructs of Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), a philosopher who

particularly enjoyed the investigation of ideas. These and other assumptions will be acknowledged and held out in front in an attempt to remain true to the data.

Limitations

There are two potential limitations to this study. The first of these is generalizability. It is generally argued that qualitative research cannot be generalized beyond the particular group under investigation (Merriam, 2001). For phenomenology, there is a current thread of contestation regarding this axiom. Thomas and Pollio (2002) contend for a *phenomenological generalizability* that is based not on traditional proofs, but rather by the readers: “when and if a description rings true, each specific reader who derives insight from the results of a phenomenological study may be thought to extend its generalizability” (p. 42). Ihde’s (1986) concept of *transposition* is helpful in considering this argument: the same phenomenon is recognized as occurring among the different participants amidst their variety of experiences. Popay, Rogers, and Williams (1998) emphasize that in regard to generalizability, “the aim is to make logical generalizations to a theoretical understanding of a similar class of phenomena rather than probabilistic generalizations to a population” (p. 348).

The second limitation centers upon context. The nature of the research environment has the potential to further limit this study. Students were enrolled in a university with a religious affiliation, and this could have potential for causing a heightened sense of religious introspection on the part of the participants.

Delimitations

The scope of this study was delimited to adult students enrolled in a re-entry program at a small, private, liberal arts university. In keeping with phenomenological method (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), participation in the study was limited to individuals who self-report having the experience of having a belief challenged or questioned in a college-level religion class. The motivation required for self-reporting could exclude less extroverted students, and experiences of those more willing to talk could be different from those less willing to come forward.

Definitions

The following definitions are operative in this study:

Adult Learner: The traditional definition of adult learners in a collegiate setting is any student 25 and over (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). For the purposes of this study, an adult learner will be any student enrolled in the non-traditional program at Baptist University.

Assumptions. Brookfield (1995, p. 2) defines assumptions as “taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it that seem so obvious to us as not to need stating explicitly”.

Belief. The word “belief” has undergone a shift in meaning in current usage, taking on a strong cognitive emphasis that implies mental assent to a set of propositions: “I believe it to be so...” The Anglo-Saxon origin of the word connoted “to hold dear, to prize...it signified to love...to give allegiance, to be loyal to, to value highly” (Smith, 1977, pp. 41-45). The Latin word *Credo* which means literally “I set my heart” was

translated as “I believe”. The derivation of the word “connoted an essential human activity involving the whole person” (Parks, 2000, p. 17). The Greek verb *pisteuein*, translated “I believe” in English New Testaments, derives from the same root as the noun “faith” (*pistis*). While this word may appear synonymous with assumption, the derivation of the word reveals a deeper emphasis. For the purposes of this study, a belief will be interpreted as an idea or presumption that is held dear to the individual, is valued, and has the potential to elicit strong affective/emotional responses.

Challenge: In the context of this study a challenge or question to a belief occurs when a learner has an encounter that causes some type of disequilibrium or conflict in his or her current conceptions. In particular, these encounters occur as part of the college religion class. These challenges are not necessarily overt challenges by the professor, but are directly experienced by the learner.

Critical Reflection: “The means by which we work through beliefs and assumptions, assessing their validity in the light of new experiences or knowledge, considering their sources, and examining underlying premises” (Cranton, 2002, p. 65).

Phenomenology: A phenomenological study is an exploration into the “essence” of a particular experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). The goal of the researcher is to gain a deep understanding of another person’s lived experience, as experienced by the other, in the words of the other.

Reflection: “Reflection is the aperceptive process by which we change our minds, literally and figuratively. It is the process of turning our attention to the justification for what we know, feel, believe, and act upon” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46)

Undergraduate religion class: The private liberal arts university serving as the

pool for potential participants requires two undergraduate religion courses as part of the general education requirements for undergraduate degrees. The undergraduate religion class stands in contrast to other forms of religious education: church or synagogue services, Sunday school or religious education classes, Bible study or other study groups.

Conclusion

As a classroom instructor, I have witnessed students struggle over their previously held beliefs, and have often wondered what this experience is like for them. The purpose of this study to describe this experience from the perspective of the students themselves. In this section I have offered an overview of the theoretical framework behind this proposed study, and how it could potentially benefit adult education and learning theory. Chapter 2 will survey the literature that informs the quest to understand the experience of adult students who encounter challenges to their beliefs. Chapter 3 will briefly describe the philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological method, and outline the phenomenological research method as developed at the University of Tennessee. Chapter 4 will describe the participants and outline the method used in this study. The phenomenological analysis of the data will be presented in Chapter 5. Finally in Chapter 6, I will present a discussion of the findings, along with recommendations and conclusions.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Thomas and Pollio (2002) contend that if one desires to understand the experience of another person, *ask the person*. It is my quest to more deeply understand the experience of university students who have experienced having a belief challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion course. With phenomenology's emphasis on investigating a particular phenomenon in the world and in the words of those who have experienced it, one might be led to conclude that a literature review is not only unnecessary, but potentially harmful to a phenomenological study. On the contrary, Thomas and Pollio (2002) recommend that a review of the pertinent literature precede research to ascertain what is not known, and already known about the phenomenon under investigation. In addressing this issue they state that,

Although the phenomenological researcher does not choose a theoretical framework to guide the study, he or she should be familiar with the theoretical lenses used by previous scholars to view the phenomenon. A critical analysis and synthesis of previous research findings is also essential in evaluating the potential contribution of this particular project to the ongoing stream of discoveries about the phenomenon. Having a sophisticated command of the pertinent literature does *not* imply that "biases will influence the researcher" (Carpenter, 1999, p. 61) – provided that the researcher initially brackets, and continually re-brackets, prior knowledge while interacting with participants and analyzing data (p. 46).

In keeping with this call to familiarity, the following chapter will focus on the literature that informs the main question of this study: what is the experience of adult university students whose beliefs are challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion class? This is a phenomenon with many different nuances; for this reason the literature review will have to encompass numerous lenses through which this

phenomenon could be viewed. With this in mind, the following review will highlight three major areas of research that inform this quest: learning and adult development, spirituality and development, and adult learning literature focusing on transformation and assumption challenging. The goal of this review is to gain insight into how this literature can inform my quest for understanding.

Learning and Development

The first area of literature that could inform this quest is the area of learning and development. Classic investigations of student learning inform this study because they set a tone for understanding learning as part of a developmental process, as well as a cognitive process.

Piaget: The Disruption of Learner Equilibrium

The first line of thinking involves adult development and its relation to cognitive development. Piaget proposed that learning is a process of learners seeking equilibrium through adaptation (Piaget, 1972; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). When an individual encounters new ideas, there is a disequilibrium that must be settled as new concepts are incorporated into the learner's existing mental structure or schema. Balance is brought about by the learner either assimilating the new material into the existing mental construction, or making accommodation to the existing mental structure for admitting new material. Piaget (1975) defined assimilation as "the incorporation of an outside element (element, event, and so forth) into the subject's sensorimotor or conceptual scheme" (p. 6). Accommodation is "the process of adapting to elements that the organism assimilates" (p. 7) by the "modification of internal schemes to fit reality"

(Piaget & Inhelder, 1969, p. 6). Adaptation, then, is the key to learning and development.

Piaget's conceptualization provides a launching point for discussing how the process of disequilibrium/adaptation/equilibrium is encountered by adult students in an undergraduate religion class. This learning and development section will review a number of theorists who have attempted to understand how this learning process works and how it fits within the developmental process.

Perry: Forms of Intellectual Development

William Perry (1970) conducted a study of college students, asking them at the end of each year about their experience of being a college student. In their interviews students were asked the following (very phenomenological) question: "Why don't you start with whatever stands out for you about the year" (p. 19). He found that these students began college with a very dualistic way of looking at the world and moved toward an openness to and acceptance of other views. In Perry's conceptualization, the student experiences questions and challenges to his or her basic assumptions of how truth, authority, and reality function which he calls "confrontations with diversity" (p. 3). Based on his findings he proposed a developmental scheme that "consists of an orderly progress in which more complex forms are created by the differentiation and reintegration of earlier, simple forms" (p. 44). His nine stages of development can be broken into three categories: (1-3) modifying of dualism to simple pluralism, (4-6) realizing of relativism and foreseeing the necessity of personal commitment, and (7-9) evolving of commitments.

Perry's Basic Model:

A. The Modifying of Dualism

1. Basic Duality. Student sees the world in polar terms – we/right/good vs. other/wrong/bad. Authorities are to teach them the right.
2. Multiplicity Pre-legitimate. Student perceives diversity of opinion and uncertainty and accounts for them as unwarranted confusion. These are given by Authorities so that the student can find truth for themselves. THE ANSWER.
3. Multiplicity Subordinate. Student accepts diversity and uncertainty, but these are merely temporary until the ANSWER is found.

B. The Realizing of Relativism

4. Multiplicity Correlate or Relativism Subordinate
 - a. Student perceives legitimate uncertainty and allows others to have “their opinions”, which are set over against the Authority’s realm where right/wrong still exist.
 - b. Student discovers qualitative contextual relativistic reasoning as a special case of “what They (the Authorities) want”.
5. Relativism Correlate, Competing or Diffuse. Student perceives all knowledge and values (including Authorities) as contextual and relativistic, and subordinates dualistic right/wrong functions to the status of special cases.
6. Commitment Foreseen. Student apprehends the necessity of orienting himself in a relativistic world through some form of personal commitment.

C. Commitment

7. Initial Commitment. Student makes an initial commitment in some area.
8. Orientation in Implications of Commitment. Student experiences the implications of commitment, and explores the subjective and stylistic issues of responsibility.
9. Developing of Commitments. Student experiences affirmation of identity among multiple responsibilities and realizes commitment as an ongoing, unfolding activity through which he expresses his life style.

In Perry's conception, “stages” are relatively stable forms, and “transitions” are less stable forms that mediate the experience between stages. He prefers to use the term “positions” rather than “stages” because: a) no assumption is made about duration, b) positions refer to a central tendency that occurs during a period of time, and c) a position

refers to a point of outlook, or a position from which one views the world.

Perry's model assumes sequential stages of development, indicating that there is a "better" goal toward which individuals are progressing. He illustrates this when he refers to the process as an 'epistemological Pilgrim's Progress' (p. 44). He summarizes this movement in saying:

In its full range the scheme begins with those simplistic forms in which a person construes his world in unqualified polar terms of absolute right-wrong, good-bad; it ends with those complex forms through which he undertakes to affirm his own commitments in a world of contingent knowledge and relative values. The intervening forms and transitions in the scheme outline the major steps through which the person, as evidenced in our students' reports, appears to extend his power to make meaning in successive confrontations with diversity (p. 3).

Parks (1986, p. 44) has "collapsed, modified, and extended" Perry's nine positions into four: authority bound, unqualified relativism, commitment to relativism, and convictional commitment. This condensation of Perry's stages portrays the journey of college students from dualism to a more unique person-owned approach to learning and life in general. Parks diverges from Perry in holding that the latter stage is achieved most often well beyond the college years.

Although Perry supposes this is a natural progression students go through, he proposes three "conditions" that account for a lack of progress across the stages: 1) temporizing – the student delays in some position for a year, exploring its implications or explicitly hesitating to take the next step; 2) escape – the detachment offered by structures of positions four and five is exploited to deny responsibility through passive or opportunistic alienation; and 3) retreat – the student entrenches in dualistic, absolute structures of positions two or three.

For Perry, progression through the stages is expected and occurs as adults

encounter an ever-widening construction of reality in their everyday lives. It is not a process to be “completed”, because few if any actually reach the final stage of developing commitments. Although a student may occupy more than one position at a time, Perry believes that it is possible to ascertain what position a person is operating in at a given time. The theory also allows for regression to previous forms when a student encounters a new learning or environment that he/she cannot make sense of. The “functional regression” allows the individual a place of emotional respite during a time of developmental turmoil (Love & Guthrie, 1999b). This period of regression will be left behind when the individual moves on to the next level of development.

Perry’s basic work is essential for taking a deeper look at students as they experience challenges to their beliefs. While his study focused on traditional age learners, these ideas have formed a structure upon which to build further theory.

Belenky and Colleagues: Women’s’ Ways of Knowing

Because Perry did not include females in his data, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) offered a sequential view of development that speaks to what they view as specifically female “ways of knowing”. The stages in this theory are related to the perspective from which “women view reality, and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority” (p. 3). These “epistemological positions” are described as “frameworks for meaning-making that evolve and change rather than personality types that are relatively permanent” (p. 155). There are no age limitations placed on the stages outlined. These authors contend that women’s self-concepts and ways of knowing are intertwined, and these realities were not adequately accounted for in previous developmental theories.

Although Belenky and associates maintain that this model is not sequential, there is an underlying premise that the later voice, which has a strong component of critical reflection, is preferable and considered developmentally superior.

The different “voices” of women’s ways of knowing are as follows:

Silence – In this stage the woman’s voice is passive, subdued, and silenced. A woman in this stage accepts her “place” and the status quo.

Received knowing – Knowledge comes from listening to others as authorities (outside the self). These voices are concrete and dualistic. These knowers are intolerant of ambiguity

Subjective knowing – Self becomes an authority. Truth resides within the person and outside voices can be questioned, although they proceed more cautiously than men. There is a move away from external authority toward a stronger trust of inner knowing – just “knowing it”.

Procedural knowing – The emphasis is on procedures, skills, and techniques for obtaining and communicating knowledge. It must be ferreted out. Communication is important in this way of knowing. Separate and connected knowing are both utilized as two distinct voices.

Constructed knowing – “All knowledge is constructed and the knower is an intimate part of the known” (p. 138). Reason is necessary, but not fully sufficient, because the role of feeling and passion must also play a part. For the woman knower, the two must work together. External and internal voices must both be heard. There is an integration of what they learn from others with what they feel is right.

In this model, development is a process of movement from one voice to the next. That the knower is on a quest for self and voice is a major component of moving from one voice to the next. In the process there is a movement as to which voice stands out as dominant in a person’s life. Development in the ability to question assumptions is evidenced as the voices of authorities are openly accepted, questioned and superseded by internal voices, reasoned with and judged, and finally integrated with internal voices in a constructed knowledge.

Experiences or events play an important role in transitions between perspectives (Love & Guthrie, 1999c). Critical reflection on the role of self also plays an important role, especially in the transition to constructed knowledge. Interconnections with others create opportunities for reflection. Political, family, and other systems of oppression play an active role in women's progression from stage to stage. These realities may prevent a woman from ever transitioning from one knowing to another.

Perry's male dominated model omitted important voices by utilizing only the male perspective of dealing with challenges to ideas. Belenky and associates offer an important extension of Perry's theorizing of the process of student intellectual change.

Kitchener and King: Reflective Judgment Model

Building off of Perry's model, King and Kitchener's (1994) Reflective Judgment Model hypothesizes that there is sequential development in the forms and adequacy people employ to justify their beliefs. Seeking to further understand what happens beyond Perry's position 5, they identified seven stages of development progressing from dualistic absolutism, to the realization of objective reality, to skepticism toward the understanding that there is an objective reality against which ideas and assumptions must be tested. The model is developmental with higher stages developing out of lower stages, with a move toward consciously reflecting upon one's own problem solving abilities. This reflective ability develops along a continuum toward a highest level called "reflective judgment", a term taken from John Dewey who regarded it as the "end goal of good thinking" (King, 1992).

Stages 1-3 represent *Pre-reflective Reasoning*. Here there is a conception that "knowledge is gained through the word of an authority figure or through firsthand

observation, rather than, for example, through the evaluation of evidence" (King & Kitchener, 2002, p. 39). Stages 4-5 are classified as *Quasi-Reflective Reasoning*. Recognition knowledge claims contain elements of uncertainty, which these thinkers "attribute to missing information or to methods of obtaining the evidence" (p. 40). At this stage judgments are seen as "highly idiosyncratic" because they lack understanding of how evidence necessitates a conclusion in light of the acknowledged uncertainty (p. 40). The third division of stages of thinking is *Reflective Reasoning* (Stages 6 and 7). At this level of thinking uncertainty in making judgments is accepted, but it does not immobilize the thinker. Judgments are made that are the "most reasonable" that they can be "relatively certain" of, in the light of available data. With this relative uncertainty there is a willingness to reevaluate judgments in light of new data or methodologies (p. 40).

In a study with possible applications to this research, Janet Dale (2005) of Alliance Theological Seminary investigated the problem solving abilities of 38 male theological students using the reflective Judgment Model (RJM). The purpose was to understand the ways in which seminarians understand and deal with ill-structured problems in life and ministry in a postmodern world. Participants were administered an intelligence test (Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale – Revised), an Impact of Faith Questionnaire, and underwent an interview where they were presented three dilemmas from the Reflective Judgment Interview to ascertain their level of reflective judgment. These dilemmas represented both secular and religious problems. Entering and graduating students did not score significantly different on the RJM scale. Both groups scored in the 4th level (4.58 and 4.98 respectively). Dale concludes that the seminary

experience did not significantly help these students develop reflective judgment.

Baxter Magolda: Epistemological Reflection Model

Continuing this look into the development of college/university students, Marcia Baxter Magolda (1992) conducted research on students' epistemological assumptions to investigate the roles of impersonal and relational modes of knowing in the thinking of young adults. She sought to understand "discrepancies between what she observed in student's patterns of cognitive development and Perry's forms of intellectual development" (Bock, 1999). The longitudinal study beginning in 1986 consisted of 101 college freshmen chosen randomly, 50 male and 51 female. The study began with freshmen exclusively so as to exclude the influence of collegiate experience as a "confounding variable". The group was followed longitudinally for a total of seven years with 53 students remaining in the study for the entire seven years. The gender balance remained throughout the study (Baxter Magolda, 1993).

The study was carried out utilizing both written "tools" and semi-structured interviews. The Measure of Epistemological Reflection (MER) is designed to measure six domains of intellectual development: 1) decision making, 2) roles of the learner, 3) peers, 4) the instructor in learning, 5) evaluation of learning, and 6) the nature of knowledge. The second technique utilized in the study was a semi-structured interview that addressed the same six domains addressed by the MER. The questions were open-ended, asking the interviewee to respond in any way he or she wished regarding the domain. Three broad questions were asked regarding domain six (nature of knowledge). They asked for the most significant learning experience of the past year, the value of what had been learned and if the respondent would make any changes in their learning

experiences. A third instrument administered called the Learning Styles Inventory (LSI) addressed questions of preferred learning styles. This identifies the extent to which respondents endorse concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation as learning modes.

The study concluded that there exist four sets of epistemic assumptions, or ways of knowing. *Absolute knowing* is characterized by the learner viewing knowledge as certain as received from an instructor. In *transitional knowing* the learner exhibits an understanding of his or her knowledge, but with a growing uncertainty in some areas of knowing. *Independent knowers* create their own perspective and acknowledge that most knowledge is viewed as uncertain. A fourth phase, *contextual knowing*, is characterized by the learner thinking for him/her self. At this stage the learner is beginning not only to have his or her own ideas, but also is coming to understand that these ideas exist in a context of knowledge generated by others, looking at all aspects of a situation or issue and seeking out advice in context. This phase is characterized by an integration of one's own views with the views of others in making cognitive decisions, by balancing the relational and impersonal modes. It was observed that this fourth phase was rarely achieved by college students (2% of seniors and 12% in fifth year interviews). This finding is consistent with both Perry (1970) and Parks (1986).

Recent Research on Epistemological Views

Gallik (2001) studied college students at a small private college to better understand their epistemological beliefs. Students in two philosophy courses and one biology course were administered two questionnaires that probed epistemological beliefs and a sampling of students were then interviewed for qualitative data. Instructors in the

courses were interviewed to determine epistemological stance. The researcher also observed the courses to better understand teaching styles. The study found that exposure to different ways of thinking had an effect on changing epistemological beliefs and encouraged students to become more relativistic and more appreciative of multiple perspectives. In the qualitative component of the study, Gallik found that students became “more open to multiple perspectives as a result of both classroom and social experiences” (p. vi). Classroom exposure to differing perspectives influences students’ epistemological beliefs, and this encourages them toward more relativistic thinking and an appreciation of multiple perspectives. Factors outside the classroom influence these changes: “residential living and on-campus class experiences (as opposed to on-line or distance learning) are necessary factors in effecting changes in perspective” (p. 117). She did not find a significant correlation between college level and epistemological stance, nor did she find any significant correlation between age and epistemological stance.

Schrader (2004) discusses the issue of safety as it relates to a student’s ability to deal with challenges in the classroom environment. Forty-seven undergraduate students in a psychology course were surveyed using a structured written survey designed to explore the students’ emotional reactions to classroom environments and their perceptions of “intellectual safety” in the classroom (p. 94). Building on the work of Perry (1980), Schrader hypothesized that students feel secure in challenging their own epistemology when they are in an environment they consider “safe”. Schrader found a mutual relationship between the epistemic fit between the teacher and student and the moral environment of the classroom. Students who are at a point of development ready for challenge can be successfully challenged in a safe environment that includes a

challenging teacher and a supportive and open environment. Five domains of the classroom affected students' feelings of safety: 1) Self, 2) Professor, 3) Class Structure, 4) Materials and Subject Matter, and 5) Peers.

The aforementioned adult development literature offers a look into the process by which students/adults encounter ideas that are dissonant to their previously held beliefs. Perry's early work categorized the experience as stages through which undergraduates navigated their challenges. Subsequent theory has built on that model to gain an understanding of this experience by looking at women's unique experience, the development of reflective judgment, and student epistemological development. In all of these models there is a clear shift from dualistic thinking, to questioning, to a more open approach that allows for diversity of opinion and belief. The literature has moved away from assigning ages to stages as data have continuously shown a diversity of experiences when related to age. This survey offers a framework for understanding students as they encounter questions or challenges of their personal beliefs in the undergraduate classroom. This understanding has informed contemporary theory on faith and spirituality, which will be the next area of discussion.

Spirituality and Faith Development

Spirituality is an important component of adult development. In the recent adult education literature, spirituality has grown as an area of prime interest (Davis, 2002; Dirkx, 2001; English, 2001; English et al., 2003; English & Gillen, 2000; Fenwick & English, 2004; Flemming & Courtenay, 2006; Jarvis, 1993; Kauffman, 1999; Luckie, 2005; Merriam et al., 2007; Palmer, 1998; Tisdell, 2003). To account for the totality of

the developmental experience, the spiritual components of adult development and experience must be acknowledged as significant. Tisdell (1999) stated that spirituality is “all encompassing and cannot be torn from other aspects of adult development” (p. 94). With the highly personal nature of the experiences of participants in the current study, and the spiritual nature of the university religion courses they have participated in, the spiritual development literature is informative to this research. The following section will examine several of these perspectives.

Fowler: Stages of Faith

One of the most influential theories of spiritual development among both religious and secular educators is James Fowler’s (1981) Faith Development Theory. Although some significant questions remain about the universal applicability of these theories, Fowler (and his student Parks) “represents the most thorough investigations to date into how individuals develop their religious and spiritual attitudes and beliefs” (Chickering et al., 2006, pp. 63-64). Fowler’s work represents a look at spirituality that is a synthesis of Piaget’s structural development theory; Erikson’s psychosocial development theory; Kohlberg’s moral development theory; Selman’s concepts of role and perspective taking; and theological ideas from Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004).

Fowler (1996) defines faith as “a dynamic, evolving pattern of the ways our souls find and make meanings for our lives” (p. 21). It functions to form a way of seeing our lives in relation to holistic images of what we may call the *ultimate environment* (p. 24, italics in original). Contending that faith is both a verb and a noun, Fowler (2004) describes Faith Development Theory as combining “a phenomenological account of what

faith *does*, with a conceptual model of what faith *is*” (p. 412, italics in original).

Demonstrating similarities to Kohlberg’s (1981) Moral Development Theory, Fowler depicts the experience of spiritual development as one that is moving toward a universalizing of meaning and the self. His theory is based on data derived from detailed interviews with 359 subjects who ranged in age from four to the 80s (Fowler, 1981). In the adult years faith moves from an authority-based belief system to one that is questioned, internalized, and then externalized toward service to others. Fowler’s stages of faith are illustrated by an upward moving and ever-widening spiral with each subsequent part of the spiral linked to and building upon the previous one. “Each stage is a new set of capacities or strengths in faith. These add to and contextualize previous patterns of strength without negating or supplanting them” (p. 274). This process cannot be reduced to climbing stairs or ascending a ladder (Nipkow, 1991). Rather than steps, his stages are spiral movements that overlap each other, moving toward higher levels of complexity. This overlapping allows for the individual to straddle stages and moves away from clear-cut divisions between stages.

The six stages of Fowler’s system are comprehensive and describe spiritual development from childhood to adulthood, but for the purposes of this study I will look only at those that address adulthood. In stage three, *synthetic/conventional faith* (adolescence and beyond), authority is found outside of the individual and accepted as true. At this stage “one’s ideology or worldview is lived and asserted; it is not yet a matter of critical reflection and articulation” (Fowler, 1996, p. 61). In the fourth stage, *individuated-reflective faith* (young adulthood and beyond), the locus of authority moves from external to internal. Old assumptions are reexamined and responsibility is taken in

a new way. The individual moves away from being defined by the group, and relationships are chosen based on self-authored beliefs or values. There is a move away from self-preoccupation in stage five, *conjunctive faith* (mid-life and beyond). In this stage there is a search for balance, and alternate conceptions of truth exist and have validity. Even another's conceptions of truths may be valid and true "for them". This often leads to tolerance for others and activity in service and commitment to others. In this stage the individual struggles with the notion of universality, while at the same time maintaining individuality. The final stage of faith, *universalizing faith* (midlife and beyond), is a rare achievement in Fowler's system. Here there is a step beyond individuality toward the external, and absolute love and justice are lived. Life is immersed into others. This final stage bears strong similarities to Kohlberg's final stage of Universalizing Principles.

In discussing their own approach to faith development, Everding Jr., Wilcox, Huffaker, and Snelling Jr. (1998) include a comparison table that offers a helpful look at how Fowler's theory compares to other structural/developmental theories (see table 1). I have adapted the table to make Fowler the focal point of comparison.

One particularly helpful concept is Fowler's idea that the focus of faith moves from outward, then inward, then back outward. Early faith is someone else's faith, transmitted through family or society. In Fowler's fourth stage the developing individual struggles with beliefs that are not internalized and often walks away in a muddled confusion. In this process, questions that are dealt with lead the struggler toward owning or authoring his/her own faith. When this occurs, *conjunctive faith* begins to emerge, a

Table 1. Comparison of Fowler with developmental theories

Fowler	Piaget	Kohlberg	Perry	Parks	Belenky & Associates
Stage 3	Low Formal Operations	Stage 3	Positions 1-3	Adolescent	Received Knowing
		Stage 3 ½	Positions 4-6	Young Adult	Subjective Knowing
Stage 4	High Formal Operations	Stage 4	Positions 7-9	Adult	Procedural Knowing
Stage 5		Stage 5		Mature Adult	Constructed Knowing

faith that is tolerant and service oriented. This is not the end of the process, for Fowler sees further development as a precious few step beyond individuality to *universalizing faith*. Here the person steps outside of self and is able to view others as more important than themselves. Parks (1986) has theorized in detail on this shift, describing a journey from authority-bound meaning-making, through counter dependence and inner-dependence, toward a state of inter-dependence that seeks deep relationships with others who are different than oneself.

Fowler (1996) points out that there is a danger in these faith development stages appearing more like “snapshots in a photo album” than an “unfolding drama” – a metaphor he clearly prefers to snapshots in time (p. 67). He views faith development as a dynamic process of the changing self. Transitions between stages are not necessarily changes in the content or direction of one’s faith per se, but “changes in the ways one holds, understands, and takes responsibility for living one’s faith” (p. 68). They represent a widening of values and vision, with a corollary increase in the level and depth of the

self. This conception is closely tied to Piaget's concept of equilibrium. Transitions occur as the individual experiences disequilibrium in his/her development. The transitions "from one spiral level to another are often protracted, painful, dislocating and/or abortive" (Fowler, 1981, p. 274). Levels are achieved at the right time for a person's life and involve interaction of others-self-world.

Fowler views that these transitions are predictable by age, but he does allow for individual difference in the age of onset. Not everyone works completely through all of the stages. Some individuals find a sense of equilibrium at an earlier stage than others, and thus cease to proceed further through the stages. Fowler concludes that many never move past stage three: synthetic-conventional faith.

Consistent with Fowler's theory, Holcomb and Nonneman (2004) found in a study of Christian liberal arts undergraduates that crisis, in the Eriksonian (1959, 1968) sense, is a "key driver" in this developmental process. They define a crisis as entailing "anything that challenges people to examine what they believe and why" (p. 100). For development to take place the person needs not only to recognize other viewpoints, he/she must also engage alternative viewpoints. The participants encountered "cognitive dissonance" through prolonged exposure to diverse ways of thinking, multicultural exposure, and general emotional crisis. Their experience of being around others with divergent viewpoints or of having their beliefs challenged was experienced by an overwhelming majority of students demonstrating development according to Fowler's scale.

A person's environment maintains an important role in Fowler's developmental program. Faith is always a context-dependent experience, so environmental influences

are regarded as having a strong influence on development. Tisdell (1999) is critical of this aspect of Fowler's theory, contending that he does not allow enough latitude within his developmental framework for context. She contends that the effects of such influences as culture, ethnicity, and family of origin are so figural in spiritual experience that they must play a much larger role than allowed for in Fowler's conceptualization.

An alternative approach to understanding how people approach faith involves viewing faith not as stages to be achieved but as forms or styles of faith experienced and expressed by individuals. Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis (1993) offer an alternative approach by presenting three different styles of faith, or approaches to faith. These are not to be understood as a step-wise view of a developing faith, but rather as unique perspectives through which persons approach faith and religious experience. The first style involves an orthodox adherence to traditional beliefs. Persons adopting the second style approach faith from the perspective of critical analysis and believing for oneself. The final style involves a more "symbolic and paradoxical interpretation of religious concepts" (p. 75).

The cognitive developmental focus in Fowler's system has also been a point of contention. Streib (2001) has offered a revision of Fowler's approach that calls for a re-emphasis on the person "being in the world", and in direct connection to others (p. 145). He states that the revision works on the assumption that "interpersonal relationships and their psychodynamics are both indicators and promoters of religious development" thus accounting for the affective and social dimensions of spiritual development (p. 146). Streib also prefers to describe religious experience as styles rather than hierarchical steps. These styles move from a basic trust he terms Subjective, through Instrumental-

Reciprocal, Mutual, Individuative-Systemic, to a Dialogical religious style. There is an interconnectedness of the styles and they can overlap in a “cumulative disposition of layers” (p. 150). While there is a de-emphasis on the cognitive aspect of development in Fowler’s approach, Streib’s styles also have a definite movement toward a more desirable manner of religious interaction and interconnection.

In response to criticism that would call for *types* of spirituality rather than *stages* of spiritual development (C. D. Batson et al., 1993; Streib, 2001), Fowler (2001) has proposed a theory of four types of spirituality that “crosscut” stages rather than replace them (p. 169). The *Totalizing Type*, often found in members of Fundamentalist groups, demonstrates an emotional rigidity combined with a legalistic spirit where the locus of authority rests in leaders, creeds, or ideologies. The *Rational Critical Type* has a clear conviction that is open to questions and discussion. Other sources of authority are examined and dialogued with. A third type is the *Conflicted or Oscillating Type*. This restless, “existential seeker of truth” has lost connection with early faith relationships and is seeking intellectual and moral integrity in a difficult world. The final type, the *Diffuse Type* has a fragmented, incoherent, or nonintegrated quality that causes one to drift with “limited capacity for intimacy and commitment” (p. 170).

Parks: The Faith of the Young Adult

A student of Perry and associate of Fowler, Sharon Parks (1986) has continued Fowler’s work with an emphasis on the faith of the “twenty-something”, or the more traditional college-age students. While referring to similar phenomena, she employs a much less philosophical and more understandable terminology (Parks, 2000). Her approach is more user-friendly than Fowler’s, as evidenced in the names of her stages:

for example, Authority-Bound faith (Parks) vs. Synthetic/Conventional faith (Fowler). Agreeing in essence with the constructivist-developmental approach of Fowler, she outlines faith development as a five stage process: authority-bound, unqualified relativism, probing commitment, tested commitment, and convictional commitment. Her additional contribution to the overall theory is in her third stage that she calls Young Adult Faith, which she views as an extension of Fowler's stage four and Kegan's (1994) Fourth Order Consciousness.

Tisdell: Spirituality and Adult Education

Tisdell (1999) in many ways represents a more inclusive conception of spirituality that is growing more prevalent in the current learning literature (Chickering et al., 2006; Dirkx, 2001; English & Gillen, 2000; Flemming & Courtenay, 2006; Hoppe & Speck, 2005). Fenwick and English (2004) identify this current trend as an "eclectic" spirituality free from the influence of religious sectarianism. These theorists are adamant to differentiate between spirituality and religiosity. Here spirituality is understood more as the person's search for meaning. Tisdell (2003) sums up this contrast when she states,

Religion is an organized community of faith that has written doctrine and codes of regulatory behavior. Spirituality, however, is more personal belief and experience of a divine spirit or higher purpose, about how we construct meaning, and what we individually and communally experience and attend to and honor as sacred in our lives (p. 29)

Religiosity is more tied to sectarian approaches to religious experience that may or may not include this search for meaning. In this vein, Tisdell offers a model for adult spirituality that differs from the linear-type model espoused by Fowler. She describes spiritual development as change over time that takes on a more spiral form with growth occurring as the individual moves forward toward authenticity, and then spirals back by

reflecting on where he/she has come from.

It is clear from the literature that the influence of spirituality on learning has come to the forefront in an “outburst of writing and discussion” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 199). Fowler’s influential theory offers a framework for understanding the unique experiences of students encountering challenges to their beliefs. The individual’s current level of development will have direct affect on his/her approach to navigating through the challenge. Like Perry, these theorists also hold that a move toward a more relativistic view of spirituality allows for healthy attempts at resolving challenges to beliefs. While the students in the current study are reflecting on religion classes in particular, the influence of personal spirituality must not be overlooked.

Adult Learning Literature on Transformation/Assumption Challenging

The challenging of assumptions in the learning experience has been an important topic of theoretical discussion in the learning literature. The unsettling result of such challenges has been identified in numerous ways utilizing terms such as disequilibrium (Piaget, 1975), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), the disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991), and disjuncture (Jarvis, 2006). Piaget (1975) viewed disruption of cognitive equilibrium as an essential component of human learning. The learner would strive to seek equilibrium by either assimilating new information into existing schemas or by accommodating the schema to allow for the adoption of new material. Festinger’s (1957) early theory of cognitive dissonance proposed that two elements are in a dissonant relationship if “the obverse of one element follows from the other” (p. 261). This dissonance can be caused by new events or new information “that creates at least a

momentary dissonance with existing knowledge, opinion, or cognitions concerning behavior” (p. 4). The result is that “there is pressure to produce consonant relations among cognitions and to avoid and reduce dissonance” (p. 264). As with Piaget, Festinger saw this as the key to learning. The aforementioned ideas portray an experience of challenge in which the learner’s encounter with dissonant ideas creates a need for resolution or balance within the learner. For these theorists, the resolution of dissonance is the essence of learning.

Peter Jarvis is an adult learning theorist who also writes in the area of religious education (Jarvis & Walters, 1993). Jarvis offers a modern, comprehensive look at this experience. According to Jarvis’ (2006) comprehensive theory of human learning, “it is at the intersection of us and our world that we are presented with the opportunities to learn” (p. 17). He states that learning is:

The combination of processes whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical, and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, and senses): experiences a social situation, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person’s individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experienced) person (p. 13).

At the heart of this process is the experience of what he terms “disjuncture”. In this very human activity of learning, persons encounter experiences in which “our biographical repertoire is no longer sufficient to cope automatically with our situation, so that our unthinking harmony with the world is disturbed and we feel unease” (p. 16). These occur as a result of changes in our exterior life-world, and also as “a result of our learning, beliefs, values or changed aspirations and so on” (p. 30). These experiences of disjuncture cause us to desire change:

Disharmony becomes a motivating factor driving me to learn so that I can re-establish that harmony through new learning. Indeed, harmony with their social world, or more significantly with their life-world, may be amongst the most important factors for most individuals to learn – it may be an even greater need than those specified in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs...A feeling of disharmony with the life-world – a sense of disjuncture – remains the greatest learning need that individuals have so that they can return to the original state of harmony (p. 77).

This experience of disequilibrium/dissonance/disjuncture lies at the heart of adult learning. In the adult education literature, Mezirow, Brookfield, Kegan further inform this discussion by looking at change through forms of critical reflection. The following section will outline each theorist’s approach to assumption/belief challenges and subsequent changes that occur within the learner.

Mezirow: Transformative Learning Theory

Jack Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, 1991; Mezirow & Associates, 2000) holds a dominant position in the adult learning literature (Taylor, 1997). Mezirow (2000) defines learning as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future action” (p. 5). Transformative learning is the “process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (pp. 7-8). These changes are triggered by what he calls “disorienting dilemmas”.

Mezirow (2000) bases his theory of transformational learning on Habermas’ three domains of learning: instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory. Instrumental

learning involves “task-oriented problem solving to improve performance” (p. 8). In communicative learning learners assess the meanings behind the words of others, and these meanings are controlled by the assumptions of the “other”. Emancipatory learning is the most informative to Mezirow’s concept of transformative learning, where one’s own assumptions become the target of reflection and potential change. Assumptions held by learners include: (1) intent, (2) that which is taken for granted, (3) inherited religious worldviews, and (4) frames of reference, or “the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions” (p. 16). Mezirow sees the transformation of perspectives the “central process of adult development” (Mezirow, 1991).

According to Mezirow (2000) individuals encountering perspective transformation often follow some variation of the following process (p. 22):

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective

At the heart of transformation, as Mezirow views it, are one’s frames of reference, or meaning perspectives: “the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions” (p. 16). These are made up of habits of mind and points of view. Habits of mind are broad and generalized assumptions that filter how one interprets the meaning of experiences. Points of view are clusters of “meaning schemes”

or those “immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality” (p. 18). Our values, and our very selves, are anchored in our frames of reference.

Merriam (2004) points out that experience itself is not enough to facilitate transformation, effective reflection must ensue to effect the change. Reflection, or “turning back” on an experience, is the predominant avenue to encountering our assumptions as learners (Mezirow, 1998a). Mezirow (1991) defines reflection as “the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience” (p. 104). This reflection upon assumptions occurs on three levels: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. Content reflection addresses the content or description of a problem. Process reflection deals with the strategies or procedures used when solving a problem. In premise reflection, an individual makes “a taken-for-granted situation problematic, raising questions regarding its validity” (p. 105). This process opens the possibility of perspective transformation because when premise reflection occurs, changes occur at the level of a person’s meaning perspectives, those taken for granted assumptions. As Mezirow states, “premise reflection is the dynamic by which our belief systems – meaning perspectives – become transformed” (p. 111).

At the epicenter of this reflection is what Mezirow calls “critical reflection” (Mezirow, 1998a). Mezirow views critical reflection as “questioning the integrity of assumptions based on prior experience. It often occurs in response to an awareness of a contradiction among our thoughts, feelings, and actions...In essence, we realize

something is not consistent with what we hold to be true and act in relation to our world” (Taylor, 1998, p. 9). Critical reflection can either be implicit, as in mindless choices between good and evil driven by assimilated values, or explicit as when “we bring the process of choice into awareness to examine and assess the reasons for making a choice” (Mezirow, 1998a, p. 186). “Reflection is the aperceptive process by which we change our minds, literally and figuratively. It is the process of turning our attention to the justification for what we know, feel, believe, and act upon” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46). Mezirow emphasizes the use of “reflective discourse” where an individual searches for a “common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or a belief” (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 10-11).

It must be noted that while Mezirow is clearly influenced by Habermas regarding the learning process, his references to Habermas’ influence has led to Mezirow being chastised for not using “critical” reflection in the same manner as others in adult education with a penchant for critical theory and adult emancipatory education (Collard & Law, 1989; Inglis, 1998; Newman, 1994; Pietrykowski, 1998; Taylor, 1997). It is clear through his repeated responses in the pages of *Adult Education Quarterly* that Mezirow has a more cognitive view of “critical” reflection than the view clearly described in Brookfield’s (2005) recent survey of critical theory (Mezirow, 1989, 1994, 1996, 1998b, 1998c). Mezirow (2000) summarizes his view when he states that,

Critical reflection, discourse, and reflective action always exist in the real world in complex institutional, interpersonal, and historical settings, and these inevitably significantly influence the possibilities for transformative learning and shape its nature. The possibility for transformative learning must be understood in the context of cultural orientation embodied in our frames of reference, including institutions, customs, occupations, ideologies, and interests, which shape our preferences and limit our focus. We need to become critically reflective of their

assumptions and consequences (p. 24).

Brookfield: Critical Reflection

A second adult learning theorist who emphasizes critical reflection on assumptions is Stephen Brookfield (Brookfield, 1987). Brookfield (1995) defines assumptions as “taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it that seem so obvious to us as not to need stating explicitly” (p. 2). Brookfield identifies three broad categories of assumptions: 1) paradigmatic assumptions that we use to structure our world into categories 2) prescriptive assumptions that express the way we think the world should be and how things should happen, and 3) causal assumptions of how we predict things will work and how things can be changed. Causal assumptions are the easiest type to uncover because they are predictive in nature and deal simply with everyday issues of cause and effect. Paradigmatic are the most difficult because we may not even recognize these as assumptions, rather we may see these as “objectively valid renderings of reality, the facts we know to be true” (p. 2-3). For Brookfield, adults grow in the reflective process as they become more capable of defining and summarily critically encountering the more difficult prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions.

Brookfield (1987) presents the process of critical thinking as a series of phases through which the developing thinker passes while addressing and challenging assumptions. First, some *trigger* event “prompts a sense of inner discomfort” (p. 26). Secondly, a period of self-scrutiny or *appraisal* of the situation follows where the thinker vacillates between minimization and denial, and broods over the nature of the contradiction. Self-examination and search for others encountering similar struggles ensue. The third phase involves *exploration* for new ways of explaining and living with

discrepancies. Next, a period of transition begins where the individual begins to *develop alternative perspectives* that “make sense” for his/her situation. The final phase, *integration*, involves finding ways to integrate these new ideas “into the fabric of our lives” (p. 26-27)

Kegan: Forms of Consciousness

Robert Kegan (2000) describes two types of learning: informative and transformative. Informative learning “seeks to bring valuable new contents into the existing form of our way of knowing” (p. 49). Transformative learning on the other hand puts the very form of our way of knowing itself at risk of potential change. It is an “epistemological change rather than merely a change in behavioral repertoire or an increase in the quantity or fund of knowledge” (p. 48). Informative learning changes *what* we know, transformative learning changes *how* we know.

The concepts of subject and object are essential to Kegan’s constructive-developmental approach to learning. If a form of knowing is *object* we can reflect upon it, take responsibility for it, control it, and integrate it with other aspects of our knowing. If it is *subject*, we are owned by, identified with, and at the mercy of that knowing. What we “have” is *object*, what we “are” is *subject* (p. 53). In Kegan’s conceptualization, development is a process of that which was “subject” becoming “object”.

Kegan contends that society is an ever-evolving entity that is continuously growing in complexity. As daily life becomes more convoluted, the demands placed on people who interact within this system must become more complex. The result is to cause a change in the depth of development necessary to navigate the complicated demands of a postmodern society. Kegan proposes five orders of consciousness that

comprise a life-long process wherein people seek to make explicit the “complexity of the individual’s way of knowing” (p. 181). These orders of consciousness follow a developmental pattern where individuals move from self-centered consciousness, to interpersonal, to inter-individual consciousness, to inter-institutional consciousness.

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on orders three and four because they deal directly with adult life (his fifth order is elusive and rarely, if ever, achieved). Third order (Traditionalist) consciousness is characterized by the ability to “think abstractly, identify a complex internal psychological life, oriented to the welfare of human relationship, construct values and ideals self consciously known as such, and subordinate one’s own interests” to others (p. 75). In this order, a person views the self as something other than its component parts. The movement from level two to level three can be summed up as a movement in perspective from “I am a point of view to I have a point of view” (Love & Guthrie, 1999a, p. 71).

The shift from third order to fourth order consciousness (Modernist) is the most significant change in adulthood according to Kegan’s conception. “The claim of modernity is the call to fourth order consciousness” (Kegan, 1994, p. 105). In this stage adults have the ability to “subordinate, regulate, and indeed create (rather than being created by) our values and ideals” (p. 91). This idea that one *creates* rather than is *created by* is crucial to comprehending the fourth order. Not only can values be created, values about values are within the limits of possibility. Self can exist apart from relationships, values, and beliefs. The change is from “experiencer” to “maker” of our internal psychological life (p. 133). As Box Pierce (2004) so aptly put it, at this order the individual can *have* an opinion, rather than being *controlled by* his or her opinions. I find

it interesting that Kegan views a person who fails to achieve level four as functioning successfully at level three. This is not a failure of development, but a settling in at a different level.

Cognitive Dissonance in the Classroom: Challenges, Choices, and Change

In light of the aforementioned theories regarding the importance and developmental impact of change in the adult learner, what option does the learner have when challenges or questions are encountered in the religion class? Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance is clearly applicable to religious studies, and offers a comprehensive look at the options faced by students as they encounter challenges to their beliefs. Cognitive Dissonance Theory holds dissonance may be reduced by: 1) "changing one or more of the elements involved in dissonant relations [cognitions or behaviors], 2) adding new cognitive elements that are consonant with already existing relations, 3) decreasing the importance of the elements involved in the dissonant relations" (p. 264) or avoiding information likely to increase dissonance. Harmon-Jones and Mills (1999) add a fourth option: 4) increasing the importance of consonant cognitions. Concerning beliefs they state that,

Dissonance is aroused when people are exposed to information inconsistent with their beliefs. If the dissonance is not reduced by changing one's belief, the dissonance can lead to misperception or misinterpretation of the information, rejection or refutation of the information, seeking support from those who agree with one's belief, and attempting to persuade others to accept one's belief (p. 6-7).

Drawing directly from Festinger's influential theory, Burns (2006) offers what she calls four "usual strategies" for handling dissonance that can be encountered when the academic teaching of religion engages the learner's previously-held assumptions.

One option is that the learner rejects the dissonant elements and assigns the teacher to the category of liberal or atheist or purposefully misunderstands how the teacher wants the student to engage the text. The student also could adopt relativist attitudes and reduce the importance of the dissonant ideas (“this is just a stupid intellectual game”). A third approach is to increase the importance of ideas that are consonant with what the learner already accepts. A fourth way to reduce the pressure of dissonant ideas could be to add new consonant ideas, like “I could use this stuff to missionize liberals and atheists” (p. 6).

Burris, Harmon-Jones, and Tarpley (1997) conducted research into the “Belief Disconfirmation Paradigm” of cognitive dissonance literature, an area of research they consider “remarkably underutilized” (p. 19). This paradigm assumes that when a belief is disconfirmed and leads to cognitive dissonance, individuals can alleviate the dissonance through “dissonance-reducing strategies such as belief intensification” (p. 19). They sought to discover whether reduction of belief disconfirmation would reduce negative affect, and whether dissonance could be reduced by using transcendence, by “reconciling dissonant cognitions by appealing to a superordinate principle” (p. 20). An example of this would be when a person might reconcile God’s permissiveness of evil by ascribing to a superordinate principle like God’s transcendental nature (God just understands more than we do), rather than by just dealing with the issue itself. This study found that participants reduced their negative affect by using transcendence, and that the higher the level of importance attributed to the religious belief, the more likely the individual was to utilize transcendence to reduce cognitive dissonance. This study also exemplifies the importance of dealing with cognitive dissonance associated with questions to one’s beliefs.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory has provided a rich arena for research. Kofink (1991) states that over 1000 studies have been carried out utilizing the cognitive dissonance paradigm. In a conference panel discussion in 1999, Festinger offered an interesting critique of how cognitive dissonance has been researched throughout the 30 years after his book was released. Discussing the abundance of laboratory-type experiments conducted on cognitive dissonance (like the previously mentioned study), Festinger (1999) shared with the audience that,

I think we need to find out about how dissonance processes and dissonance reducing processes interact in the presence of other things that are powerful influences on human behavior and human cognition, and the only way to do that is to do studies in the real world. They're messy and difficult. You don't expect the precision out of those studies that you can get in the laboratory. But out of them will emerge more ideas which we can then bring into the laboratory to clarify and help to broaden and enrich the work (p. 385)

The cognitive dissonance paradigm offers a framework for understanding the ways in which adult learners navigate challenges to their previously held beliefs. Festinger himself, reflecting on the abundance of research carried out, laid out the need for research into this phenomenon within "real world" settings, on the messy and difficult stage of life experience.

Related Dissertation Research

As is evidenced in the previous survey, the questioning of assumptions has been a major focus of the literature regarding adult learning. Taylor's (1997, 2003) survey of research in transformative learning theory revealed a number of dissertation studies have looked at how adult learners question their assumptions and make subsequent transformations in their lives. Three dissertations are particularly relevant to the current

study: two examine how graduate seminary students experience transformations (Bailey, 1996; Wollert, 2003), whereas the third investigated how undergraduates' beliefs were affected by the classroom experience (Kofink, 1991).

Bailey (1996) studied doctoral students at a theological seminary to examine the nature of significant learning and to identify what factors influenced the process of perspective transformation in the learning process (p. 51-52). Through the use of semi-structured interviews Bailey found that adult students experience conceptual changes in five different ways: 1) assimilation, 2) accommodation through forming new categories, 3) accommodation through integration, 4) accommodation through restructuring, and 5) perspective transformation (p. 139). Perspective transformation was the most frequent type, with its key element being the "students' examination and modification of distorted premises resulting in the adoption and validation of new perspectives and action consistent with those perspectives" (p. 140). The structure and culture of the seminary program proved to be the most influential factors promoting transformations. The transformations described by the graduate students focused on primarily on epistemological assumptions.

Wollert's (2003) recent dissertation studied theological students to determine the relationship between faith developmental stages as defined by Fowler (1981) and Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning model. In a mixed method study, students were administered a questionnaire to determine position on Fowler's stages of faith. Volunteers were then recruited to participate in qualitative interviews to explore their transformative experiences in seminary. Three thematic roles emerged from the experiences of these seminary students: the personal role, the ministerial role, and the

academic role. Transformative learning “can come from any direction, and it can be at any place in the time frame relative to the seminary experience. Any arena may serve as a catalyst for perspective transformation” (p. 87). Wollert found that Old Testament and New Testament introduction courses were both postulated as promoting changes in thinking because of the courses’ “power to cause discomfort” (p. 93) and “profound confusion” (p. 126).

A third dissertation investigated university students’ encounters with conflict between the methodologies and objectives used in religious studies and personal beliefs. Kofink (1991) studied 144 undergraduate students in a university who had participated in a university religious studies course. The volunteers were administered surveys to determine their religious orientation, conflicting beliefs, acceptance of methods and objectives of religious studies classes, and their level of dogmatism. The outcomes of these surveys were then compared with the success level of the students in a university religious studies class. Two effects were found, although they were somewhat weak: 1) Students who reject the methods and objectives were less likely to succeed in the course, and 2) the strongest effect was found when students with a high level of dogmatism encountered conflict with the methods and objectives of their university religious studies courses. It was therefore concluded that “acceptance of the methodologies and objectives of religious studies has a significant effect on a student’s success in a religious studies course” (p. 139). Those who disagree are less likely to succeed in the course. Level of dogmatism serves to exacerbate the situation.

While these dissertations deal with issues surrounding the topic of the current study, they do not address the central question of this research project: what is the

experience of adult students who have had a belief challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion course? While the literature does address questions around this topic, an investigation into this phenomenon in a direct manner from the perspective of the student can add a great deal to our understanding of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

The surveyed literature offers a framework for understanding the experiences of students who encounter challenges or questions to their previously held beliefs while members of a university religion class. Adult and student development literature offer a framework for understanding where students are in their own personal and epistemological development as they encounter these challenges. Spiritual development literature offers insight into the stage of spiritual development or the approach individuals take in their own faith development. The transformation literature emphasizes the importance of this phenomenon for learners and offers reflection on how this is often encountered in general. While it is the pronounced intent of this study to remain true to the lived experiences of participants, all research is truly conducted while standing on the shoulders of giants (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

While there is definitely no lack of theory regarding the learning experience of adult students, what is lacking in the literature is deep examination of the essence of what it means to students to have a belief or assumption challenged in the classroom. While studies looked at and theorized about this phenomenon, the focus is usually on the epistemological stance of the student or attempts to test against the concept of perspective transformation or paradigms of Cognitive Dissonance Theory. This current

phenomenological study offers a detailed look into the world of the learner, as experienced by the learner, in the words of the learner. In Chapters Three and Four I will offer a more detailed look at the phenomenological method used to gain a deeper understanding of the essence of this experience.

Chapter 3

PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PHENOMENOLOGY

As was presented in the previous chapter, the purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of adult students in a college religion class who have encountered questions and challenges to previously held beliefs. Because of my concern for investigating the challenges to beliefs and assumptions, this study was conducted with adult students who have participated in an academically-focused college level religion class at a religiously affiliated college having a liberal arts emphasis. The liberal arts model seeks to provide an education that is broad and digs deeply into the way students create meaning, and properly encourages and nurtures critical thinking (Harvie, 2004; Nord, 2002). The study of religion in this setting creates an environment rich in potential for students to experience questions to previously held beliefs. The Thomas and Pollio (2002) approach to phenomenological research developed at the University of Tennessee provided an appropriate method to gain a deeper understanding of what this experience is like for students. My doctoral work at the University of Tennessee offered an opportunity to study with both Drs. Pollio and Thomas and to learn their method in an interactive manner. Dr. Pollio's course in Existential Phenomenology provided a detailed look at the background and theory that ground the method. Dr. Thomas's course in Qualitative Research and the Phenomenological Research Group she leads at the School of Nursing provided a laboratory in which to directly experience this method. These experiences demonstrated the appropriateness of a phenomenological approach to

studying the research question.

In introducing their approach to phenomenological research, Thomas and Pollio (2002) contend that if one desires to understand the experience of another person, you need to *ask the person*. Deeply rooted in the philosophies of Husserl (1962), Heidegger (1962), and Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), phenomenology offers a means of exploring the experiences of research participants by getting to the “things themselves”.

Phenomenology, with its radically inductive approach to research, offers a rigorous approach for the researcher seeking to explore the domain of “lived experiences” that cannot be appropriately examined without a thorough and disciplined approach that takes into account the diversity of individual experience. “Existential-phenomenology seeks to be a descriptive science that focuses on the life-world of the individual. Rather than separating and then objectifying aspects of the life-world, the purpose is to describe human experience as it is lived” (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989, p. 136).

Racher and Robinson (2002) have stated that at the present time researchers are “advocating that a necessary condition of scholarly research is congruence between philosophical positions and research approaches” (p. 465). To adequately comprehend the scope of the Thomas and Pollio approach to phenomenology, it is necessary first to introduce its philosophical underpinnings. In this chapter I will offer a brief philosophical survey and then outline the particulars of the systematic method developed by Thomas and Pollio. In Chapter Four I will present a detailed description of how the method was applied to this particular study.

What is the “Essence” of a Phenomenological Investigation?

A phenomenological study is an exploration into the “essence” of experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). The goal of the researcher is to gain a deeper understanding of another person’s experience, as lived by the other. This type of investigation is a quest for meaning (Van Manen, 1990). To achieve this understanding, researchers enter into dialogue with people who have encountered a particular phenomenon. Participants are asked to talk about a specific experience and what stood out to them, and the resulting dialogue is guided by the interviewer to keep the discussion focused on the experience rather than on the participant’s theoretical constructs. Special concern is taken to recognize the researcher’s own preconceptions so that the participant’s description can remain the central focus. The researcher seeks commonalities that stand out across the experiences of different participants. The end product is a rich description of the experience under investigation, as lived by the participants. Willis (1999, p. 93) sums this up quite nicely:

Expressive knowledge is generated by the knowing person adopting a receptive listening stance, allowing an element of the world to present itself for contemplation, then attempting to construct a text which accounts for that experience in its wholeness. The tool for this project is not the surgeon’s analytical scalpel but the poetic pen or the artist’s brush.

Philosophical Underpinnings

To understand the phenomenological method, one must address the philosophical underpinnings of this approach to research. This is true because the “methods used in a discipline reflect the worldview espoused by investigation in that discipline” (O'Donnell & Levin, 2001, p. 75). Differing from traditional quantitative methods, phenomenology, with its “radically inductive” and first-person approach, offers a thorough and disciplined

approach for the researcher who seeks to explore the domain of lived experience (Pollio, 2004, personal conversation). Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) state that “Existential-phenomenology seeks to be a descriptive science that focuses on the life-world of the individual. Rather than separating and then objectifying aspects of the life-world, the purpose is to describe human experience as it is lived” (p. 136). Valle, King, and Halling (1989) sum up this concept:

Joined together...*existential phenomenology* can be viewed as that philosophical discipline which seeks to understand the events of human existence in a way that is free of the presuppositions of our cultural heritage, especially philosophical dualism and technologism, as much as this is possible. Representatives of this joint tradition include Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel (p. 6)

Philosophical Influences

There are a number of key theorists who have influenced the philosophy of existential phenomenology. These include Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. In the following section I will present a brief overview of their contributions.

Existentialism and Kierkegaard. The Thomas and Pollio (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) method of phenomenological research is deeply immersed in both existentialism and phenomenology, and must be understood in relation to the blending of these disciplines. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is generally regarded as the founder of existential philosophy, a school of thought concerned primarily with the reality and essence of human existence (Valle et al., 1989). “Existentialism is a philosophy about who we are and how we may come to live an authentic life” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 9). As a philosophy, existentialism’s aim was to “elucidate the fundamental themes with

which human beings invariably struggle” (Valle et al., 1989, p. 6).

Husserl. German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is credited with being the founder of phenomenology. As Idhe (1986) aptly stated, “Husserl cannot have the last word about phenomenology, he must have the first word” (p. 119). Husserl (1960) sought to access the human struggle for understanding through a focus on “the things themselves” as his starting point for investigation. His goal was the “rigorous and unbiased study of things *as they appear* so that one might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience” (Valle et al., 1989, p. 6, italics in original). At the center of this perspective is the *Lebenswelt*, a term that refers to the “world as lived by the person and not the hypothetical external entity separate from or independent of him or her” (p. 9). The domain of this project was consciousness, and his method was careful description to get to the “essence” of experience. These essences are “patterns of meaning that were universal, unchanging over time, and absolute” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 9). He believed that through careful reflection one could strip away preconceptions, opinions, and outside influences and get to the core of pre-reflected experience itself through what he termed the “transcendental ego”. Thinking he had discovered the key to unlocking “pure” science, Husserl went so far as to claim that phenomenology could provide a foundation for all the sciences.

Heidegger. A student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) combined existentialism and phenomenology in a quest to understand phenomena as experienced. Criticizing the work of Husserl, Heidegger contended that the pure “transcendental ego” was an unattainable goal because a person cannot be extracted from his/her world. While Husserl’s goal was ontological truth in a realm outside of experience through the

transcendental ego, Heidegger focused instead on the person as *Dasein*, or “human-being-in-the-world” (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 135). While Husserl sought to get to the “things themselves” on a realm separate and above lived experience, Heidegger located the “things themselves” in the reality of lived existence in the world.

Merleau-Ponty. This perspective was continued and expanded in the work of Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). Standing in direct opposition to Descartes’ separation of the mind and body, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) appreciated the interconnectedness of all that makes up a person and his or her perceptions. “There is no inner man [sic], man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (p. xii). This whole person is continuously related to the world, and the person is interconnected with the person’s life-world (Thomas, 2005). A major concept in Merleau-Ponty’s thought is *intentionality*: a person’s directedness or the way a person is related to the world. Thomas and Pollio (2002) offer this maxim to help understand the concept of intentionality: “what I am aware of reveals what is meaningful to me” (p. 14). What stands out for a person is what is important in his/her experience in the world. Therefore, to understand another person’s experience, one needs to explore the perception of that person. “Existential-phenomenology seeks to be a descriptive science that focuses on the life-world of the individual. Rather than separating and then objectifying aspects of the life-world, the purpose is to describe human experience as it is lived” (Thompson et al., p. 136).

Bracketing of Assumptions

The bracketing of assumptions and presuppositions, or *epoché*, is a central concept of phenomenology. While it is generally accepted that assumptions cannot be completely eliminated from the human experience (Husserl did make such a claim,

speaking of the transcendental ego), in bracketing, the researcher identifies and puts in abeyance his/her preconceptions, theories, and presuppositions on an ongoing basis throughout the research process (DeRobertis, 1996; Merriam, 2001; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Valle et al., 1989). Valle et. al. (1989) sum up this concept:

Joined together...*existential phenomenology* can be viewed as that philosophical discipline which seeks to understand the events of human existence in a way that is free of the presuppositions of our cultural heritage, especially philosophical dualism and technologism, as much as this is possible (p. 6).

The Perspective of Lived Experience

As a research methodology, existential-phenomenology stands out as radically different from scientific method. While traditional scientific methodology seeks to understand life in quantifiable terms, phenomenology begins from the perspective of lived experience. For the phenomenologist, lived experience is something that cannot be counted, averaged, or correlated. Meaning is the central concept. The phenomenologist “attempts to simply describe the meaning of a person’s experience and behavior without referring to systemic explanations of behavior, ready made formulations about what *causes* behavior, or the *effects* of such causes” (DeRobertis, 1996, p. 17, italics in original). In any phenomenological exploration, two operational rules are in effect: (1) “attend to the phenomena of experience as they appear”, and (2) “describe, don’t explain” (Ihde, 1986, p. 34). Although cause and effect may possibly be inferred from experiential data, the emphasis for the phenomenologist is on the meaning of the experience itself. Meaning must be searched for, “re-searched” in a manner that goes beyond the constraints of traditional experimentation (Giorgi, 1973). Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1997) sum up this concern of existential-phenomenology:

What existential phenomenology offers to psychology is the possibility of overcoming the split between mind and body, spirit and world, and subjective and objective knowledge not by denying one in favor of the other but by demonstrating they are interrelated moments of a more dynamic and interconnected totality—that of contextualized human existence forever committed to a world it can never totally comprehend but toward which it is continually directed. Only if such interconnectedness is acknowledged will it be possible for psychology to pursue its overriding aim: to describe human existence in a way that is methodologically rigorous and conceptually attuned to the complexity of its topic—the nature and meaning of ongoing human life (p. 365).

It is upon this philosophical foundation that phenomenological research is built.

From participant selection, to bracketing of presuppositions, interview protocols, and thematic analysis, keen attention is given to detail to approach as near as possible a pure description of experience. Inquiry focuses on “what” rather than “why” questions and Findings are presented in the words of the participants and are considered valid and reliable if they express the lived experiences of the research participants.

Phenomenology as a Research Method

With the preceding philosophical discussion as a backdrop, the process of conducting a phenomenological research can now be explored. While differing greatly from the experimental paradigm, it must not be assumed that phenomenology is remiss in vigilance in its methodology. In the following section I will explore this process, through the phenomenological approach developed at the University of Tennessee (Pollio et al., 1997; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Thompson et al., 1989) that is used in this study.

The Research Question

It is an adage of research that method should never drive the research, but that “it is the question or problems to be addressed that determines which research approach is appropriate” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 16). This value is essential to phenomenological research. As was stated in the discussion on philosophy, phenomenology as a method is wholly devoted to lived experiences. Therefore the only studies that are appropriate to this method are those seeking to understand the meaning of lived experience from the perspective of those who have experienced it.

The wording of the research question is vital when using phenomenological methods. Researcher questions that begin with “how”, “why”, or “how often” are rarely appropriate for phenomenological research. The questions motivating phenomenological research are not designed to elicit quick or already presumed answers, nor are they designed to search for the theoretical; instead they are meant to have within them the possibility of eliciting “thick descriptions” of lived experience (Pollio et al., 1997).

Bracketing

The “subjective” nature of research questions addressed by phenomenological researchers could possibly lead to the researcher biasing the project through his or her own presuppositions. Phenomenological method preemptively addresses this concern in its concern for “bracketing”. “In order to understand a given phenomenon, one attempts to suspend or put in abeyance one’s preconceptions and presuppositions (i.e., one’s biases)” (Valle et al., 1989, p. 10). Thomas and Pollio (2002) state that “bracketing, as we use the term today in phenomenological research, is an intellectual activity in which one tries to put aside theories, knowledge, and assumptions about a phenomenon.” (p.

33). Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) refer to this as a “way of seeing” the data whereby the interpreter applies a worldview that allows for first-person description (p. 48). Merriam (2001) contends that when assumptions are temporarily suspended, “consciousness itself becomes heightened and can be examined in the same way an object of consciousness can be examined” (p. 16). The word “suspend” literally means to put something out in front, to make it noticeable (Isaacs, 1994). Recognizing that it is literally impossible to identify and set aside the totality of one’s assumptions, the bracketing process allows the researcher to place his or her “commonly held beliefs within parentheses, allowing greater openness to the specific experiences being described by the unique human being before them” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 34).

The keystone to the bracketing process is the bracketing interview. Prior to conducting any interviews, the researcher participates in a bracketing interview with the purpose of learning about the his or her preconceptions regarding the particular phenomenon in question. The bracketing process is designed to “sanitize (the researcher) to any potential demands that he or she might impose on participants either during the interview or in its subsequent interpretation...once noted, the researcher’s task is to make every effort to maintain an open, nonjudgmental attitude when conducting and interpreting interviews” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 33). This is done while accepting the fact that it is literally impossible to recognize and set aside all of one’s assumptions. DeRobertis (1996) contends, “still, in order to be as rigorous as possible, the phenomenologist is compelled to account for his [sic] own limited openness to phenomena” (p. 17). Acknowledging and accounting for this limited openness is paramount to the bracketing process.

In addition to the researcher's bracketing interview, this process is continued in two other ways. First, whenever possible, interpretations are rendered in the words of the participants rather than in abstract theoretical language. Second, at least some of the transcripts undergo group interpretation with colleagues familiar with the tenets of phenomenological research. The group can notice "theoretical suppositions not recognized by the primary interpreter(s)". Further, the group can offer alternative perspectives on the text that allow the interpreter to avoid stereotypical interpretations. The group also can seek to maintain fidelity by providing a "public test of whether an interpretation is directly supported by the text" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 49).

Selection of Participants

Participants in a phenomenological study must meet two criteria: "(1) having experienced the phenomenon; and (2) a willingness to talk about the experience to an interviewer" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 30). While random samples are the keystone of experimentation, "purposeful" would best describe how a phenomenologist chooses who will participate in a particular study. In discussing this difference, Polkinghorne (1989) states that "rather than seeking to describe the mean and standard deviation of a group as it relates to the experience, the phenomenological concern is with the nature of the experience itself...The point of subject selection is to obtain richly varied descriptions, not to achieve statistical generalization" (p. 48).

Polkinghorne describes variety as a concern that affects sample selection. Understanding that "a full range of variation" naturally adds to the richness of experience, phenomenologists "use subjects to generate a fund of possible elements and relationships that can be used in determining the essential structure of the phenomena" (p. 48).

The methods for acquiring useful participants are numerous. Thomas and Pollio (2002) identify newspaper articles, posters and flyers, professional intermediaries, community intermediaries, and word of mouth as reliable and useful methods. The central concern is to gain access to people who have actually experienced what the researcher desires to study and are willing to share that experience.

Sample sizes vary greatly, and are driven by the information needed rather than by a standardized decision by the researcher. Polkinghorne (1989) describes study sizes along a continuum that ranges from Van Kaam's study of 325 high school students' experience of feeling "understood", to de Koing's use of 3 participants to investigate the experience of "being suspicious" (p. 48). Although there are no definitive rules, Thomas and Pollio (2002) recommend that an appropriate size could be 6-12 participants, with sample size adjusted as the study proceeds. The key to ending the participant search is data saturation: "If no new patterns or themes emerge...the phenomenon is thought to be well-described, and there is little or no need to seek additional exemplars or participants" (p. 42). The main consideration is that the size of the pool provides relevant information to describe the lived experience under examination.

Interviewing

Phenomenological research is dependent on consistent and rigorous interview techniques consistent with the tenets of the method. Interviews are commonly open-ended and require enough time to explore the topic in depth. The goal of the interview process is meaning, therefore the length of the interview is driven by the question. Interviews commonly begin by asking a single question that is designed to elicit a response that delves into lived experience. "The opening question in any

phenomenological interview is worded to allow for a broad range of descriptive responses from each participant” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 32). The phenomenological questioner must “unlearn much of his or her previous ways of asking questions” (p. 24). In accordance with their method, questions routinely begin with a statement like “tell me about a time...., or what were you aware of when...” Researcher and participant enter into dialogue where the investigator “assumes a respectful position vis-à-vis the real expert, the subject” (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 29). The researcher is not the authority figure, and “must approach the study participant from the humble stance of perpetual learner” (Thomas, 2005, p. 73). To researchers accustomed to traditional scientific methodology, this type of question might appear overly open-ended and lacking sufficient structure to offer any “useful” information. It must be kept in mind that the phenomenological researcher is seeking to describe the experience of the respondent.

It is important to create an environment that is comfortable and safe when conducting phenomenological interviews. The interview begins with the opening question and is driven by the interviewee’s responses. The interviewer engages in a dialogue or discourse with the respondent, mining the conversation for the “life world” of the participant. The conversation is “circular rather than linear” with questions employed by the interviewer flowing “from the course of the dialogue and not from a predetermined course” set by the researcher (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 138). The interview is complete when the interviewer senses that no further useful information is being developed.

In an introduction to qualitative research interviewing, Kvale (1996, cited in Thomas & Pollio, 2002) offers an overview of the interview techniques utilized in phenomenological research projects. 12 main points are covered:

(1) it is centered on the interviewee's life-world; (2) it seeks to understand the meaning of phenomena in that life-world; (3) it is qualitative; (4) it is descriptive; (5) it is specific; (6) it seeks to be presuppositionless; (7) it focuses on themes relating to the phenomenon under consideration; (8) it is open for ambiguities; (9) it is open for changes; (10) it depends upon the sensitivity of the interviewer; (11) it takes place in an interpersonal context; and (12) it may be a positive experience for both the participant and the interviewer (p. 27).

Thematic Analysis

After completion of a sufficient number of interviews, the researcher begins the task of analysis, what Polkinghorne (1989) called the "core stage" of phenomenological research (p. 51). This process is inductive, with the researcher allowing more generalized themes to rise out of the particulars of the interview data. The text of each interview is treated as an "autonomous body of data" containing reflections on the respondent's lived experiences. Fidelity to this autonomy contains two vital components: 1) there is no attempt to "corroborate reflections with some external verification" and 2) the interpretation should "not incorporate hypotheses, inferences, and conjectures that exceed the evidence provided by the transcript" (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 140). The goal of this process is to get a description of the "essential structure of the experience being investigated" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 51).

The phenomenological researcher seeks to ferret out meaning from interview data while focusing on language as the primary medium of communicating meaning as perceived and described by the participant. Hermeneutics, a word common to the world of biblical/theological studies, deals with meaning and interpretation (Gadamer, 1976). Rather than merely defining words, the researcher accepts the task of hermeneutics, or of interpreting the meaning an experience holds for those he/she is studying (Valle et al., 1989). Ihde (1986) describes this process as the search for "transposable" themes in the

experiences of the participants. Just as the essence of a melody is consistent even when it is played in a different key, so the essence of lived experience is consistent among the different participants, even though the particulars of the experience might differ considerably. Valle, King and Halling (1989) describe themes as the “commonality running through the many diverse appearances of the phenomenon” (p. 14).

Foundational to this process of interpretation is the concept of figure/ground. “Human experience is a patterned event defined by focal and background aspects” (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 13). Thomas states that the figure and ground “co-create each other in human experience” (Thomas, 2005, p. 69). The essence of an experience that stands out as figural, stands out against a particular ground of experience. The researcher is searching for what emerges as figural in the description of participants, in the context of a shared ground of their experiences: “I experience _____ in the context of _____”. Thomas and Pollio (2002) contend that these grounds are time, body, others, and world.

The concept of figure/ground is often illustrated by reversible figures such as Rubin’s classic illustration where one perceives either a white vase or the dark image of the faces of two children. One image stands out in the foreground and is noticed, while the other remains in the background. One powerful reality manifested in this concrete illustration is that the figure cannot stand out unless it has a ground against which to emerge. Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) identify four properties of figure/ground illustrations that shed light on this relationship:

1. The figure appears to have a definite form and a sharp boundary: the ground is less defined and appears more diffuse.
2. The figure is experienced as closer than the ground, which is experienced as

behind the figure

3. The figure is more easily named and/or described than the ground.
4. The figure is experienced as in clearer focus than the ground (p. 12).

These properties expose the importance of ground for allowing figure to emerge and the less apparent nature of the ground. Ground can be difficult to grasp, yet it is ever-present and must be identified to clarify the meaning of the figures.

Thematic interpretation involves the concept of the hermeneutic circle, where the interpreter continuously relates parts of the text to the whole of the text. After individual transcripts are mined for “patterns of description that repetitively recur as important aspects of a participant’s description of his/her experience”, the hermeneutic circle expands to seek more general thematic descriptions across interviews (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 37). Thus in this process the interpreter seeks to discover meanings that transcend the individual and to expand out into the larger context presented by all of the interviews.

In the University of Tennessee approach to phenomenological research, it is recommended that the interpretive process be carried out in a group or team setting, thus “sharing the burden of interpretation” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 35). A transcript is brought before the group and read aloud “with frequent pauses to discuss potential meanings and possible interrelationships among meanings” (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 50). This process serves to ensure bracketing of assumptions, offer broader perspective, avoid monotony, and to overcome the sheer bulk of the data (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 141). Spiegelberg (1975) offers the following gains of what he calls “sym-phenomenology”: 1) stimulation, 2) control for irresponsible subjectivism, 3) intersubjective exchange, 4) enrichment and compliment of analysis, and 5) attuning the analysis of researchers (p.

32-33). Because the overarching goal is to allow all insights to flow from the data, “all proposed thematic interpretations are continuously challenged until group members agree that an interpretation is supported by the text” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 34). The group process functions as an internal check for validity on the part of the interpreters. This rigorous process is completed on each individual interview protocol presented before the group.

The final step in this process is accomplished by the researcher directly synthesizing “the transformed meaning units from the various protocols into a final general description” of the experience under investigation (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 55). Thomas and Pollio (2002) describe the outcome of this process as an “overall thematic structure” that is often presented as a “diagram that depicts the themes and their interrelationships” (p. 38). This concept of transformation involves a synthesizing, or tying together, of all meaning units in commonsense language enlightened by the phenomenological perspective. Each theme is presented in the written report with representative quotations in the words of the participants to ensure that interpretation stays as close to the words of the participants as possible. Care is also taken to incorporate statements from different participants in order that the full range of the experience receives representation. An adequately composed analysis must be true to the lived experiences of the participants. As Van Manen (1990) has stated, “*a good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience – is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience*” (p. 27, italics in original).

Thomas and Pollio (2002) recommend that the analysis process contain another

interactive component that re-introduces participants back into the process to continue the dialogical nature of the process. Participants are re-contacted and asked to consider the overall findings of the study, and to “judge whether the thematic structure reflects their own individual experience” (p. 38). This process allows the participants further involvement in the process, and serves as an additional check against the researcher misrepresenting the participant’s words or meanings.

Figure 1 offers a visual outline of the basic process involved in carrying out a phenomenological investigation using the method developed by Thomas and Pollio (2002, p. 45, with correction as directed by author).

Conclusion

The phenomenological research method developed at the University of Tennessee (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) provides a framework for conducting a rigorous and responsible investigation into lived experience. In this chapter, I briefly outlined the philosophical underpinnings of the method to better understand the foundational concepts that undergird this process. Next, I provided an overview of the Thomas and Pollio approach to phenomenological research. In Chapter Four, I will offer a detailed description of how this method was carried out in investigating the experience of adult students who have experienced having a belief challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion course.

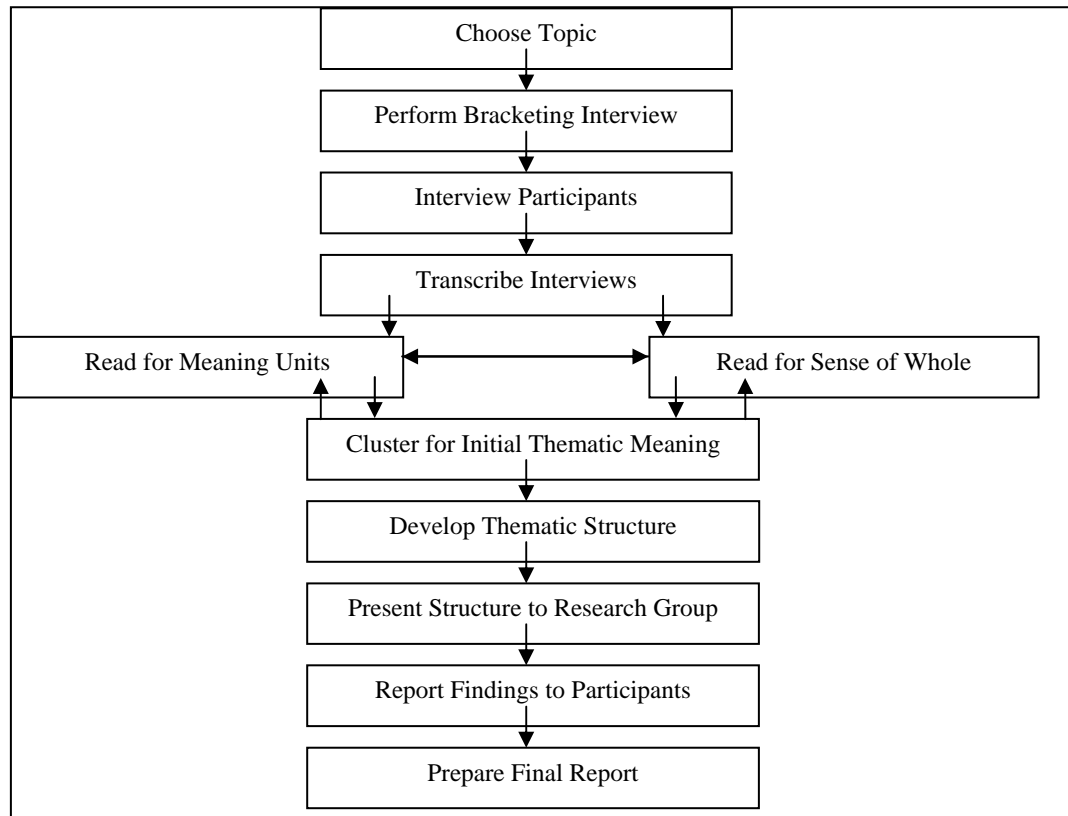


Figure 1 – Phenomenological Research Process: Thomas and Pollio (2002)

Chapter 4

METHOD OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Van Manen (1990) states that the a real understanding of phenomenology can only be accomplished by “actively doing it” (p. 8). In the previous chapter I summarized the philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological method, and outlined the phenomenological research method utilized at the University of Tennessee (Pollio et al., 1997; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). I now will give a detailed account of how this method has been applied to this particular study.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of students who encounter challenges or questions of their own presuppositions in the learning process, specifically in a college religion class. I am singling out academic religion classes because of 1) their propensity to engage critical questions that challenge presuppositions/beliefs (Burns, 2006; Simmons, 2006), and 2) the potential strength of presuppositions students bring to the classroom. The reason I am choosing the phenomenological method of Thomas and Pollio is that it fits my research question: I want to explore what these students have experienced in the educational process. What happens to students when a belief they hold is challenged or questioned? The particular strengths of this method are the focus on lived experience, concern for bracketing, hermeneutical analysis, consistent concern to remain true to the words of the participants, and the focus on group analysis.

The Setting: Baptist University

Baptist University (pseudonym) is a private university in a medium sized city in the south-eastern United States with a long-standing denominational affiliation. The participants in this study were all students in the Non-Traditional Students Program. It is required that applicants into this program be returning, degree completion, or non-traditional age adult students. The students in this study were employed full-time, all are married or divorced, and all attended classes on a part-time basis.

I chose Baptist University as my research site because of the similarities between it and the college in which I taught religion courses. The university requires that all students complete six credit hours in religious studies as part of the general education requirement. This would allow me to talk to religious studies majors as well as to majors across the spectrum of degree programs. I made contact with the Dean of the Department of Religious Studies and was put in contact with the Director of the Returning Student's Program. We three together discussed the possibility of conducting research at Baptist University, and both Deans agreed this would be beneficial for the university, as well as for my dissertation study.

I received Institutional Review Board approval from both the University of Tennessee and Baptist University. Although the nature of the study required Form B approval, this was a relatively cumbersome process because of the coordination required between the two universities. The process began in February, 2006, and received final approval in May, 2006. After IRB approval was gained in May, I immediately began seeking participants. This process is outlined in below in the *Interview Participants* section.

The Process

The current study was carried out according to the process presented by Thomas and Pollio (2002). A detailed description of the bracketing process, interview participants, participant interviews, data analysis, and reporting back to the participants is presented below.

Bracketing

I do not hold to the theory that presuppositions can be alleviated or taken out of the process, as originally proposed by Husserl. I contend that they can be suspended, or held out in front, made visible. When presuppositions are suspended, they are held up for recognition so that it is made apparent when their influence could potentially overshadow the words of the participants in the interpretation process. It is essential that bracketing be an ongoing process that does not end with the bracketing interview, but continues throughout the interpretive process. The researcher must be diligent in this process, continuously referring back to the bracketing interview, and allowing the interpretive group to hold the researcher accountable for bracketing assumptions.

Keeping with the underlying philosophy of phenomenology described in Chapter Three, the first step in this research process was a bracketing interview where I as the researcher was interviewed in the same manner as the participants. The interview began with the following query: “talk about a time when you had one of your beliefs challenged or questioned in a college religion class”. This interview was then transcribed and subsequently analyzed with the assistance of the Phenomenological Research Group that meets every Tuesday for two hours at the University of Tennessee School of Nursing. After openly discussing the interview with the group, I continued to analyze the interview

for insight into the assumptions I was bringing to the study. This interview yielded a number of assumptions that are discussed in detail at the end of this method chapter.

Interview Participants

Participants were obtained through a purposeful sample. The non-traditional student program office at Baptist University sent emails through their listserv to all students enrolled in the program at the end of the Spring, 2006 semester (See Appendix C). The first attempt yielded five potential participants. Each prospective participant was emailed a description of the intent of the study and the criteria for potential participants: having experienced the phenomenon and being willing to talk about it. Four individuals agreed to participate in an interview – two males and two females. A conference room was secured on campus for the interviews.

These interviews were held on two different days. During the second interview trip a fifth participant was identified through a personal conversation. Upon hearing of the study in a personal conversation, this graduate of the program expressed extreme interest in being interviewed about her experience. After a discussion with the dissertation supervisor I agreed to pursue this interview with the intent of either including it with the data, or using it for triangulation purposes. She was interviewed in her home. Her interview proved to be consistent with the other interviews and was included as part of the interview set.

When it became clear that no more participants were responding to the initial appeal, a second appeal was sent through the email listserv as the Fall, 2006 semester began. This appeal, while opened by a significant number of students, did not yield any responses. This was followed by a second appeal, and this yielded one candidate who

was interviewed in the same manner as the previous participants.

In keeping with the approved Institutional Review Board protocol, the chair of the religious studies department was consulted for advice on obtaining more participants. It was agreed that a personal appeal could offer a more detailed explanation of the research project while making the intent of the study more explicit than the appeal for participants sent through the email listserv. The Dean recommended a particular professor who was teaching a religion course made up of primarily students in the Non Traditional Student Program. I contacted the professor who invited me to attend his class and share about the study. I attended a class that consisted primarily of upper-division ministry studies majors and explained the study in detail and made an appeal for participants. Two of the students expressed interest and scheduled interviews for the following week. These interviews were held on campus in the room provided by the Non Traditional Student program.

Participant Interviews

Students were interviewed in a conference room on campus at Baptist University that allowed for privacy and anonymity. One participant, Darla, was interviewed in her home. Each participant first completed a demographic data sheet (Appendix A). I explained the nature of the study and asked again if they were willing to participate. After agreeing to the interview, each read and signed the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B). Interviews began with the following query: “tell me about an experience where you had one of your beliefs challenged or questioned in your college religion class”. Using the phenomenological interviewing method described by Thomas and Pollio (2002), I assumed a listening tone and gave participants the freedom to direct the

conversation toward what stood out in their own experience. Follow up questions were used to attain further explanation of words or experiences described by the participants. Interviews lasted from 40 minutes to one hour. Protocols were transcribed by the researcher's wife, a professional transcriptionist, who signed a Transcriber's Agreement of Confidentiality (Appendix H). These verbatim transcripts were then printed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Keeping with Thomas and Pollio's emphasis upon the group interpretive process, I met with the Phenomenological Research Interpretive Group at the University of Tennessee School of Nursing for assistance with analysis of the transcripts. This multi-disciplinary group meets every Tuesday afternoon and includes members from Nursing, Educational Psychology, Exercise Science, Child and Family Studies, Religious Studies, Forestry, and Psychology. Due to the eclectic makeup of the group, they are experienced at working with transcripts from an array of fields. At these meetings the transcripts were read aloud, and members worked together to analyze the data. Each member present signed a Research Team Members' Confidentiality Agreement Form (See Appendix G). Of the eight total transcripts, six underwent partial or full group analysis. Ihde's (1986) two essential operational rules for analysis were followed: 1) "attend to the phenomena of experience as they appear", and 2) "describe, don't explain" (p. 34).

After working through a sampling of transcripts with the interpretive group, I continued to carefully read through all of the transcripts individually to discover the "transposable" thematic structure from the participants' accounts (Ihde, 1986). I methodically read each individual transcription, first searching for metaphors and

descriptions of experience – what stood out for the participants. Representative quotes were collected together in Word documents, one document for each participant. These data were coded and compiled, cutting and pasting quotations until the quotes were arranged according to subject areas. Themes began to emerge from each interview, and thematic concepts were arranged with appropriate quotations from the transcripts to highlight the participant's words.

The next step in the interpretive process involved a cross comparison of interview data. This was an ongoing process throughout the data analysis segment of the project. Individual interviews were compared with one another to ascertain any consistent themes between the interviews. Data from the individual compilations were pasted together in larger Word documents with representative quotations from the participants. These larger thematic documents became the source of the larger thematic structure.

An initial thematic structure was then presented to the Phenomenological Research Group for their input. At the meeting, I presented four tentative themes to the group: 1) Environment of challenge, 2) Surprise/Expectation, 3) Powerful role of the teacher, and 4) Expanding/closing my mindset. The first theme, environment of challenge, was proposed as the ground of the experience. A lively discussion ensued regarding what serves to ground the experience of having a belief challenged in the classroom. The second theme of surprise/expectation was heralded by most of the group as grounding the experience of the environment of challenge. It was also recommended that the theme be renamed "Expectation" with sub-themes of "surprise/anticipation". I returned to the interview transcripts after this meeting for another full pass over the data, reading the transcripts with a specific concern for discovering the ground of the

experience. After this reading it became clearer that the majority of the research group was correct in their contention that expectation served to ground the experience.

Expectation: Surprise/Anticipation was moved to the ground position with three figural themes.

The thematic structure was presented to the phenomenological research group again six weeks later, this time with an illustration depicting the relationship between the three themes and the ground. The group asked a number of questions about the themes and suggested some minor rewording to simplify the themes and maintain consistency between the themes. The handout presented to the group is found in Appendix I.

One particular issue of discussion surrounded the position of the individual on the drawing. It was recommended that *Me and My Beliefs* be added to the drawing in the center of the triangle, depicting the interactive relationship between the individual and the themes. “I affect them and they affect me”. The revised diagram (see Appendix J) is presented with the analysis in Chapter Five.

Reporting Back to Participants

After working through the thematic structure, I presented a summarized version of the findings to participants to ascertain whether the structure represented their own experiences. Philosophically, if the findings represent the essence of the experience for the participants, they should “speak” to the individual participants. I sent an email to the participants with an attached document summarizing the thematic structure (see appendix D and E). After 10 days none of the participants had responded. I followed up this email with a second request for feedback, this time requesting a return receipt when emails were opened (see appendix F). This second request resulted in three responses within 12

hours. Participants shared detailed comments, emphasizing their agreement with the description of the experience. Henry stated that, “I feel you were right on track with the summary”; Barry said that “your summarization rings very true to me”. Their responses are recorded in more detail in the data analysis in Chapter Five.

Analysis of the Bracketing Interview

The bracketing interview was held immediately after I received Institutional Review Board approval for the project in May 2006. A classmate and fellow researcher trained in phenomenological method conducted the interview, which was audio taped and transcribed for analysis. The interview began with the following query: “Tell me about a time or times when an important belief of yours was challenged or questioned as part of your experience in your religion class”. The interview was transcribed by the researcher’s wife, a professional transcriptionist. The transcript was taken to a meeting of the Phenomenological Research Interpretive Group that meets at the School of Nursing at the University of Tennessee. The group worked together to analyze the interview, focusing on manifestations of the researcher’s assumptions. Some very important concepts were revealed in the bracketing interview that could definitely color the way I interpret the experiences of other students who have a belief challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion course. Those assumptions are described below.

Assumptions

One assumption I bring to this research process is that students bring a lot of beliefs to the classroom and that these beliefs are important to them. One of strongest metaphors that came out of my bracketing interview is that students bring “baggage” with

them to the classroom. At one point I use the phrase “tons of baggage” when referring to how the student enters the classroom. Challenges serve to “engage their upbringing” because this baggage comes in the form of parental beliefs, the views of preachers and other significant religious figures in the students’ lives. Questions engage “things people warned them about college”.

One of the strongest assumptions made evident in the bracketing interview is that I consider it an educational goal for students to ask deep level questions and to struggle with their own presuppositions. In speaking of students stepping out and engaging their own questions, I state that, “in my Western way of thinking about education, I think its good when they take that step” (220-221). I am clearly drawn to students who are willing to ask questions “It is fun to watch students engage questions”, and “interesting papers” deal with deep level questions.

The bracketing interview revealed that I already had reflected on this process and had developed a conceptualization of a process of how students experience challenges in learning. Through my own experience I have watched some students encounter challenges, and this has led me to develop a theory that I had not put into words prior to the bracketing interview. I call this “different levels of questioning”:

And then at first the question is very uncomfortable. And then...and then you go, you know, “that’s interesting. Maybe I need to think about that some more”. And then...the next step seems to be, you know I want to find out more and that seems to make some sense. And at first the question didn’t make any sense at all until I took some time to think about it and I guess for me, the question I want to – this gets right down to the heart of what I want to study – “what happens right there?” Not why – but what? What happens with the person? Because is everybody’s experience like mine? I don’t know that it is but I’m very interested to find out what happens when some of these students encounter and they seem to enjoy it and some don’t. And in my western way of assuming things about education, I think it’s good when they take that step.

What is evident here is that I have developed a step-wise process that students engage in when encountering questions about their own beliefs. In the bracketing interview, I give an example of my own experience dealing with challenges to beliefs. In this passage, I am discussing dealing with the concept of Constructivism, a new concept I encountered after entering my Ph.D. program of study. A passage from the bracketing interview shows how this concept is worked out:

I guess that my first reaction was kind of dismissive. And then after I was dismissive, I was a little more, a little more open to questioning, but I think that some of that for me is that fact that I am used to questioning. You know, it is part of my training. Its part of my three previous degrees, are all about questioning things. And so I started looking at the, OK, does this make sense? Does this concept actually...does it have any validity? Does it have any backing? And as I looked at it and I thought about it from the experience level I thought, you know, "I can see this being actually accurate." And so for me at that point, the fear thing started going away and for me then the curiosity took over. And I became really curious about it. "Ok, if this has some validity, well then how does it have validity?" And so the curiosity part of me really kind of took over and I ran with it quite a bit and had a lot of fun with it then. But I'll be honest, at first it was a pretty unsettling thought...

The example is consistent with how I felt others deal with challenges. First there is a dismissal of the new idea. Later I became more open to the questions through being exposed to asking questions in the classroom. This developing openness served to make the questions less threatening and eventually led to a growing curiosity about the proposed dissonant ideas. As curiosity grew, so did positive affect regarding the whole idea of asking questions and critically engaging beliefs. The final result was that it became fun.

There is an underlying assumption revealed about the value of openness in a learning environment. This is summed up in the following statement: "You don't have to buy everything that is said". This reveals a personal view of the value of relativism.

Along with this openness to questions is an assumption that the student is free to choose. “Do I really want to go here or not? It becomes a moment where you have to decide...Am I going any further, or am I going to stay where I am?” Some choose to say no, “they just don’t want to do it”, others on the other hand will “get all excited and they will run with it”. It is not an easy process, and it can take considerable time to work through significant challenges, “this didn’t happen overnight – this was something that probably took a couple of years to work through for me.”

I use powerful language when I talk about the challenging of one’s own personal beliefs. I understand challenges as “profound” experiences. Words like “frightening”, “scary”, “feeling alone”, “unfamiliar”, “threatening questions” describe this experience. It “freaks people out to talk about stories from a literary viewpoint”. For me, the key to this fear seems tied up in being on shaky ground, for I state “If I’m not grounded, I get scared, unfamiliar”

Clearly, for me, the questioning of my own beliefs and assumptions has been a significant event in my life on a number of occasions, and I am very aware of others encountering similar significant events. I hold a strong affinity and respect for students and their experience. Since experience is such a foundational component of human learning, I desire to see students have positive experiences in the classroom where they can come to terms with the baggage they bring to the classroom.

The bracketing interview offered an excellent opportunity for me to delve into the possible presuppositions I brought to the study. Working through the interview transcript with the interpretive group offered further validity to the bracketing process because many of the same group members were also present when we analyzed participant

interview transcripts. This bracketing process revealed to me a number of strong presuppositions that I needed to keep suspended throughout the interview and interpretive process.

Conclusion

The questioning of one's assumptions and beliefs has the potential to be a powerful component of adult learning. While this phenomenon has been frequently discussed and theorized upon in the literature, a focused investigation of how the questioning of beliefs and assumptions is experienced by adult learners was needed to understand this phenomenon from the perspective of the learner. The phenomenological research method espoused by Thomas and Pollio (2002) provides a rigorous and thorough method to gain deeper insight into this experience. I have outlined the structure I followed in conducting the study in this chapter. In the next chapter I will present the thematic structure gleaned from the participant interviews, with particular emphasis on remaining true to the words of the participants.

Chapter 5

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The purpose of this study is to further understand the lived experience of adult students who have had one of their beliefs challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion class. Eight adult students who have taken religion courses as part of the non-traditional learners program at Baptist University were interviewed about their experience of having a belief questioned or challenged in their religion class. The phenomenological method of research developed at the University of Tennessee (Pollio et al., 1997; Thomas & Pollio, 2002) served as a guide for the research process.

All of the participants in this study experienced challenges to their beliefs in an undergraduate religion class. Three major themes were uncovered from the interview data. They have experienced an **environment where they were challenged** that produced very diverse and powerful challenges to their beliefs. This environment of challenge was established quickly in the evolution of the class. **Professors played an influential role** by modeling openness and setting a tone that encouraged openness. This environment yielded questions that caused them to **make significant choices** about what they would do with this newly encountered information. Would they choose to expand their mindset, or choose to not allow the challenges to corrode what they already believe? These potentially powerful experiences occurred against the backdrop of the students' expectations. The more surprise encountered, the more powerful the experience of dissonance. While this expectation had a powerful effect on the experience, the resulting

resolution of the challenge was not necessarily driven by the existence or non-existence of expectancy.

One of the most surprising revelations for me as the researcher is the diversity of challenges experienced by the participants in this study. Going into the study I had assumed that most or all of the participants would discuss encountering challenges to their previously held theological beliefs and describe the anxiety that followed. This has not been the case for all of the participants. Encounters with human diversity, unexpected teaching approaches, personal prejudices, and an unexpected openness by people the participants assumed would be more closed are discussed as much as theological dissonance.

This chapter will begin with profiles of each participant. Next the ground of their experience will be discussed to set the context in which the three themes emerged. Each of these three themes will be discussed in detail with appropriate quotes from the participants in an attempt to remain true to the words of the participants (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Participant Profiles

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) contended that experience is always an embodied experience, lived out in the fullness of a human context. Because of this reality that phenomena are always experienced “in-the-world”, the following section will include a profile of each participant in the study to flesh out some of that context. With each profile I am also including a brief look at the basic types of challenges the participant encountered. I have chosen quotes that depict the participant’s experience of challenges

to offer the experience in their own words.

Participant 1 – Anthony

Anthony is a 27 year old African American male majoring in Ministry Studies. He is married with a two year old daughter and works full time as a city firefighter and part-time as a church youth minister. His long-term goal is to be a full-time church minister, maybe following in the footsteps of his grandfather who is a missionary in Africa. He has been a student for seven years and at the time of the interview had two years remaining part-time. Anthony is upbeat with an infectious smile, and he speaks often about his positive experience at the university. He vividly recalls being the only person of color in a number of his classes.

Anthony described challenges on two different fronts: direct challenges to his religious beliefs and challenges resulting from him being the only person of color in some of these classes. The following quotes summarize his experience of challenge:

Yeah, you come in with those ideas, you know what I'm saying, things that you've been taught or things that you've heard that may be in there like, uh, the Noah's Ark and all the different story understandings about Noah and about Adam and Eve and then when you actually read and study it in depth, and dig down deep into it, and pull things out, the history of it, and why they were written and what were the actual mind-set of, even being actually being challenged to actually put yourself in the story and say, "what were they thinking? What were their, what were their conversations back then?" And it just put you in a totally different frame of mind of what the scripture and what the Bible were about.

...that's another thing of being put into, into an arena or a realm where I was uncomfortable. I was having to do study groups with, with what I looked like as – hey, "you are the only black guy in the class. (laugh) I really don't want to do those study groups. They might be able to relate to me". You know, that was my mindset...like I said, it was broadened because the more I conversated with these individuals, they were no different than I was. Nothing different. So I was put into a position where I had always talked to my other fellow brothers and sisters about uh they always see color – you know, when you get into those different conversations and stuff that I saw myself doing the same thing, due to

stereotypes...I felt a sense of, which some of them expressed to me, a sense of intimidation because of me being different. Cause, you know what I'm saying, it's a majority white, I'm a black guy. Plus I'm older...

Participant 2 - Barry

Barry is a 45 year old white male majoring in Liberal Studies. He transferred 111 hours of previous course work from two other universities, one a state institution and the other a conservative Christian university. He is married and works for the Postal Service and has a part-time retail business. He will graduate in August and plans to enter an MBA program. Barry's father was a Church of God minister, thus he grew up in a very religious home, one he describes as a "Fundamentalist Christian home". He stated, "If the church doors were open 15 times a week, that is how many times I was in church". His initial college experience ran straight into that fundamentalist upbringing with very painful results. He describes dropping out of college because of the questions he encountered in his religion and philosophy classes in college. He was a pre-med major, and the religious and scientific questions he encountered literally "distracted" him to the point of depression. He reentered college in an online program with a more Fundamentalist bent. Now he is in his third college experience.

Barry's challenges are mainly theological in nature. He describes a total bombardment of the core beliefs he brought to the undergraduate experience in his initial college experience at the state university:

"He [the professor], I think, did everything in the world to try to take you out of your element, out of believing in God, out of believing in the Bible completely. So, it kind of became destructive to me because I was so engrained in what I believe and then you get to college and then your everything, your core beliefs are all challenged to the point that you are not sure who you are anymore...it became a huge distraction for me. Because I started, instead of learning what I needed to

be learning about - you know I was enrolled in science classes at that time and instead of learning about the biology and the chemistry and, and learning the practical things that I came there to learn I found myself distracted about who I really was and why I was really here and if there really is a God, is the Bible really the word of God?...it became such a distraction that I had a hard time even doing well in my classes. It kind of undermined my education to be honest with you. It got very difficult for me to focus and concentrate because I became, while I'm trying to study this, I'm thinking about this other class and I'm trying to figure out – well you know, if there evil in the world, you know, why isn't God doing something? And all of these philosophical things. And to be honest with you, the Christian classes weren't much better. They were pretty much, they may have as well been philosophy class...And I really, I wish I had never even kind of taken the class because I've felt like it has distracted me so much that it ended up in my eventually forgetting school. And it wasn't just the religion classes but, you know, I went to school, I was in pre-med. I was taking all of these biology classes and things like that and everything there is based on evolution, which of course I didn't believe in. But they just almost assume that everything – it's evolution this – and we evolved this way and did this – and so it wasn't just the religion classes – it was the other classes supporting it.

The challenge returns after many years when he enrolled at Baptist University:

When I came back one of the first things I found out – I transferred 111 hours and I find out – guess what? I've got to take an understanding the Bible class....So I'm like – ok, here's all this stuff again. So, um I signed up for it and took it in the first semester and you know, a lot of those feelings came back from where it was before. But you know, I'm older now, I'm more mature, I'm more secure in what I believe in and I, and I really think that the process from the first time that I went to school gave me a lot of time to work things out and to understand why that I do believe that there is a God. Uh, I learned a lot from those classes – the philosophy classes and the theology classes.

Participant 3 – Cathy

Cathy is a 51 year old white female junior economics major at Baptist University.

She has been a student for four years and works full-time in a law firm. Cathy is very happy at her job and has worked with the law firm for 20 years. She has two grown children who have both “attended” college, but neither has finished – a reality that seems to concern her. Her husband has medical issues having undergone three different heart bypass surgeries. Cathy is a friendly, gregarious, and very positive individual with a very

upbeat attitude about life in general and her educational experience in particular. She grew up in a traditional Southern Baptist home. Cathy came to the interview with a list of things she wanted to talk about – clearly she had reflected on this experience and wanted to share some meaningful things she has learned at the university.

Cathy's challenges deal primarily with diversity. Her ideas about how classes would be taught at a Baptist university were directly challenged by the way the teacher approached the class, and also by the diversity of the people and experiences in the class.

I had not anticipated a religion class that would be kind, that would be, well, maybe not kind, but to be so caring about – I, I just did not expect any religion class that would be that open and I loved it.

I: What did you expect?

P: Um, being a Baptist affiliated school I thought we would be taught in the Baptist – I wouldn't know – taught in sort of a Baptist vein of things. But it's, it's not that way. I just don't think it is that way at all now.

Speaking about others in the classroom Cathy stated,

The thing about a Baptist college – I did not – I expected the guy behind me to be Baptist and over here to be... you know, and everyone – but that was not the case. That was just not the case and uh, even though this is a Baptist affiliated school, there are so many other students to learn from and the teacher said (makes knocking noise) “look here – here is an entire class full of people for you to learn from – you can learn from each other's experiences”. Um, and like I said – it is cut and dry – this is how it should be – this is how it must be. And I did not expect that. I did not expect that. My mind was too much economics and other things – other things, but it was just an eye-opening experience that I didn't expect. It just came at me. It came at me when I walked in the door. He was wonderful. He was absolutely wonderful.

Participant 4 – Elaine

Participant number four is a 55 year old white female majoring in liberal studies, scheduled to graduate in December, 2007. She is divorced with two children ages 28 and 20. Her 20 year old son is a student at the same university. She currently works full-time

as a receptionist. Elaine has a long-standing religious orientation. She describes herself as a non-Fundamentalist Baptist, coming from what she calls “the middle.” Her childhood religious experience was very conservative, what she describes as Fundamentalist. Her husband was a minister of music in Baptist churches for the first part of their 33 year marriage. He later left the ministry and went into business.

Elaine’s challenges came in the classroom as she struggled with her presuppositions about teachers and the teaching environment, and outside the classroom as she struggled with difficult life questions. Her presuppositions about how teachers would interact with her beliefs were challenged when she encountered something totally opposite to what she “had her guns up” to protect against. She went into the class “thinking that I was really going to have to keep my mouth shut and just write down what he said he thought was right and I didn’t”. She describes this when she says,

Professors who I have come into contact with have been much more willing to um, entertain thoughts outside of what they believe than what I expected. I expected to go into the classes and be told, you know “this is what truth is – we don’t care what your Mommy and Daddy said.” Because that was basically what I had been told in some more fundamental settings – that the professors will go in and tell them that no matter what their Mommy and Daddy said, this is what is really true. And I’ve not had a professor do that.

Participant 5 – Francis

Francis is a 41 year-old white female majoring in liberal studies. She is married and with one elementary school aged daughter. She is a senior who is taking a limited number of classes per semester while working full-time in administration at Baptist University. Francis is articulate and clearly thinks about what she says. Being familiar with the study through the administrative office at Baptist University, Francis approached me about possibly participating in the project and was very interested in sharing her experience.

Francis describes her childhood religious experience as very abnormal. Her family was nominally religious, not attending church. Her parents did not push a particular religion on the children with the hope that this would lead to the children making their “own decision” later in life. She talks about moving to the south from the northeast and discovering a different, and quite “scary” approach to religion. In her new rural southern community, her neighbors openly persecuted her and her family for not going to church, and for being “pagans” (her brother followed the Grateful Dead and kept his van in the front yard). Her family was openly harassed, and the neighbors went as far as to poison her dogs and put signs around the dogs’ necks warning the family that they would “go to hell, just like their dogs”.

The major challenge described by Francis engaged her understanding of how Christians in general, Baptists in particular, would act toward others who do not hold the same beliefs. She describes her encounters with professed Christians in the south as follows:

We moved to the south and I had a lot of, we were a little bit of a different family. Um, my brother followed the Grateful Dead and his van was outside and all that. And we, we were, my dogs were poisoned and some other things happened um, to our home – vandalized and everything was with a religious um statement to it. “You all are heathens. You are gonna die. You’re going to go to hell.” That kind of stuff. There was a lot of religious overtone to the threats that were made to us so I began over time to feel very persecuted for, you know just not knowing or understanding what the expectation was of living in the south... I got a little bit older in high school I started really noticing I missed something spiritually and wanted to be in a community. My friends were going to youth group and they had these great experiences so I started going to different churches and again feeling this pressure when I got there that um, “If you don’t do this one, then you are going to go to hell.” And so that still wasn’t for me. So over time, just to kind of fast forward, I’ve evolved into a very private religious person. I don’t attend a church on a regular basis or belong to a community. Um, I do consider myself to be Christian. I have really studied and prayed and tried to get to a point where I could evolve to that at least and say, “I can say that I’m this”

A significant challenge came when Francis enrolled in classes at a Baptist college and found that she had to take a religion class as part of the general education requirement. This led her to what she described as a “crisis of belief”.

Well then I get to taking classes and one of the things I had to do was finish up the religion requirement that I had started from before when I went to Southern University...so I signed up for New Testament and I was very, very afraid. I was, um, went in there thinking, “It’s just going to be like everything else. It’s going to be one way, one belief and I’m going to hear what I would call, what I’ve coming to call “God Speak”.” You know, that’s how it is going to be taught. I don’t even know all the stories you know, and these people have grown up with them. So I was very, very concerned and a little nervous about it. And I hadn’t been like that with other classes here. I went into it and from the very first class meeting um, and again not having taken a religion class in a long time, I wasn’t sure how it was going to be administered by the professor but it was made very clear, “You can talk about religion from your personal faith, how you have grown up, whatever your belief system is, you know, whatever gets you through the night basically.” I mean, yes you can have that conversation. “But here in this classroom we are going to do it on an academic level and look at the history, talk about the implications of how the Bible is relevant now. You know, and to um, how people say it is relevant now and differing opinions on it. So to have that said in the very first class caused me in a lot of ways, to have a crisis of belief because I had had this belief that Baptists were just going to be like this – and this is all they were about and they were in there to recruit me and you know, or, or look down upon me and tell me I was going to hell because I didn’t believe the way they did.”

Participant 6 – Gabriella

Gabriella is a 38 year old African American senior majoring in Ministry Studies. She works full-time in the business world as well as attending university courses in the evening. Her husband is a full-time pastor in the Primitive Baptist denomination. Having already completed a Masters in Organizational Management, she has returned to school for this degree solely for her “own benefit.” Gabriella is at the present time changing jobs and has brokered a deal with her previous employer to pay for her education for the next four years. She frequently uses spiritual terminology in

conversation and sees this current educational experience as getting her ready for ministry with her husband.

Gabriella's challenges are more theological in nature. One particular issue she highlights is homosexuality. Her own ideas have been challenged through disagreements with professors, and through encounters with others who live in ways that are in disagreement with her beliefs. While she speaks of how these challenges have not caused her to change her opinions, these encounters have helped her to become a person more accepting of alternative beliefs and of those who espouse lifestyles she does not agree with. One quote depicts her challenge well:

I actually, a couple of the classmates have said there are some classes that they are dreading taking because then it makes them have to look in the mirror and question themselves and particularly there is a young lady that is in our class that's gay and um, she's, she's wonderful and before she said that she was gay, of course I didn't know. This is a separate class that we addressed the homosexuality – but when I go to that class with her, I mean, I just have to say, “God bless her.” She is comfortable with the life-style that she has chosen. She, you know, she believes and she feels that she is a child of God. She attends church. She has her degree of spirituality and yet even she has battled with it or she has questioned. She said she knew she was a homosexual from the age of sixteen. I think she is 32 now and so if it's something that she still doesn't understand, then you know people, others would then feel that there is a need to want to know more about it. And I'm glad to even have that exposure to her being in one of my classes because I'm careful of what I say. Not to be offensive regardless of what my beliefs are. You know, um, I'm careful to give scripture references that say, “This is why you shouldn't do this.” But uh, I will say one of the scriptural references that I've always believed defended, if you will, why homosexuality was wrong, you know, that's one of those where you know, the instructor said, “That's not what he was talking about. They weren't saying... the Bible, you know, ...” And I'm like, “You've got to be kidding!” (laugh) “If you don't think that that's what that is saying, you know...” (laugh)

Participant 7 – Henry

Henry is a 31 year old white married male. He is a full-time student and is majoring in ministry studies. This is his second time as a student at Baptist University.

He was formerly a music student in the traditional program, but he did not complete his degree the first time. He clearly views himself as much more mature and purposeful this time around. Henry describes his family religious background as nominally religious. Over the past two years he has returned to school with deep commitment to Christianity and is actively seeking a career in ministry through Christian counseling.

Henry has a very then/now perspective on challenges. In his early university experience he was overwhelmed by professors offering dissonant theological ideas. This time around he sees himself as much more prepared, both by his experience and by warnings from friends. He sums up this dual experience in the following excerpt:

I was a little bewildered, because it...I mean, I didn't grow up in a church home but, you know, we celebrated Christmas and we celebrated the fact that Christmas was about Jesus and um, and you know, we sang Silent Night and all that stuff and we knew that Jesus was born to Mary and Mary was a virgin. And, and I uh, so I was shocked because something that I grew up with, you know, even though I wasn't, I didn't come from a Christian family, something that I grew up with believing and knowing and trusting was uh, was, was kind of, you know, blown out of, blown out of my thoughts with a shotgun really, you know. So it really kind of, it, it, like I said, it shocked me. I was at a loss for words really. I shared it with my wife and she was like, "Well, it's just a professor. You don't have to worry about it." And then, you know, coming on into the ministry program later, I knew that from that experience, coming back to school, I knew that, that I would be challenged and so I've kind of, with the challenges that I've faced since then, I've actually been able to be a little bit more open and realize that people are not going to believe the same things that I believe and no matter how challenging someone, you know, professors might challenge me, professors might disagree with the theology I bring to scripture. So that was the first instance where I was really kind of baffled.

Participant 8 – Darla

Darla is a 41 year old white female graduate of Baptist University in Business Administration. She is divorced, has one child, and works for a tax accounting firm. Darla was raised in a Baptist home, attended Catholic school, and was very active in her local church.

Her inclusion in the study warrants discussion. She is a 1990 graduate of Baptist University's non-traditional learners' program. She learned of the study in a personal conversation and expressed a keen interest in sharing her story. Although not a current student, she was a non-traditional returning student in this same program, and shared a keen interest in participating in the study. After an initial discussion, I decided her information was applicable, powerful, and interesting enough to warrant an interview. I discussed this with my dissertation supervisor who advised me that the interview could possibly add to the study if fitting, or be used as corollary information for triangulation purposes. After the interview and subsequent analysis, I deemed her interview to be consistent with the overall gestalt of the experience as described by the other participants. Her data are included in the study alongside the current students.

Darla's challenge had a theological tone and occurred in reading the course textbook when the text stated that the "walls of Jericho, unlike in the songs, did not come tumbling down". She took this as an affront, "an attack" to her belief structure. She took action in response to her beliefs being challenged to the point of confronting the professor, and then the Dean when the professor did not respond.

When I was an undergrad I had to take the Old Testament course. It was in an Old Testament class and it was more with something that was in the book than what the professor said. But the book was talking about the Battle of Jericho and the event that I disagreed with is, it said, "contrary to the popular song, Joshua didn't fight the battle of Jericho and the walls didn't come tumbling down...And you know, that was contrary to what I believed because the Bible says that he did march around the walls and that the walls fell down... Because I felt like it was contrary to what the Bible says, you know, and I believe, I mean I know that the Bible teaches in parables and that things have different meanings, but I do believe that if the Bible says they marched around the walls and the walls fell down, that the walls did fall down. And like I said, the thing I disagreed with was when it clearly said "no it did not".

Darla was also challenged in her belief about how education should be carried out in a Baptist institution of higher education. Her expectation was that it would reinforce her previously held beliefs. To her surprise she encountered something very different:

I think the part that really offended me so much was I didn't expect that here. I expected it going to Catholic high-school. They are going to believe differently than I believe and I can explain why I believe what I do. I guess I wasn't prepared to do that in a religion class at this university that I expected to have the same beliefs that I did...I expected that what they taught in their religion class would be what I had been taught my whole life.

Reflection on the Participant Group

The participants in this study bring a variety of life experience and religious backgrounds to the university religion class. Considering that the university requires two religion courses as part of the general education requirements, the mix of Ministry Studies majors with other majors offers a good representation of an undergraduate religion class. The gender makeup of the participants (three male, five female) fits with the undergraduate population as a whole (41% male, 59% female). The racial diversity of the participants (six White, two African American) is similar to the racial breakdown of the undergraduate population (88% white, non-Hispanic) of Baptist University. The participant table below offers a basic outline of the member of the group.

The Ground of the Experience

Rubin's concept of figure/ground is essential to understand an experience from a phenomenological perspective (Pollio et al., 1997). In the overall gestalt of an experience, figure and ground exist in a reciprocal relationship with one another and one cannot be discussed without considering the other. In a phenomenological analysis of interview texts, themes stand out as figural against the ground of human experience.

Table 2. Participant Table

Participant Table					
Pseudonym	Age	Race	Major	Class	Courses Completed
Anthony	27	African American	Ministry Studies	Senior	Comparative Religions Understanding the Bible Christian Ethics Christian Theology
Barry	45	White	Liberal Studies	Senior	Contemporary Christian Thought Synoptic Gospels Understanding the Bible
Cathy	51	White	Economics & Business Administration	Junior	Comparative Religions Understanding the Bible
Elaine	55	White	Liberal Studies	Senior	Understanding the Bible Comparative Religions Introduction to Philosophy
Francis	41	White	Liberal Studies	Senior	Old Testament History New Testament History
Gabriella	38	African American	Ministry Studies	Freshman w/ MA	Christian Ethics Spiritual Formation
Henry	31	White	Ministry Studies	Junior	Old Testament History New Testament history Worship and preaching Vocation of Christian life Christian Doctrine Christian Ethics Spiritual Formation
Darla	41	White	Business Administration	Graduate of Program	Old Testament History New Testament History

Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) summarize this relationship well when they state that:

There are no figures by themselves: All figural aspects of (perceptual) experience always emerge against some ground that serves to delineate its specific experiential form...it is never experientially valid to talk of an isolated figure of experience, perceptual or otherwise; rather, we must always talk about the figure/ground structure of the experience (note the slash) to emphasize that human experience is a patterned event defined by focal and background aspects (p. 13).

In light of the importance of ground in interpreting figural themes, it is essential to identify and describe the ground of the participants' shared experiences of challenge.

Expectation – The Ground of the Experience

“I think the part that really offended me so much was I didn’t expect that here” (Darla)

Participants’ experiences of challenges to their beliefs stand out against a ground of expectation. Each participant entered the classroom with some level of expectation regarding being challenged in the religion class, as well as what types of challenges they might encounter. The most powerful experiences occurred with students who were surprised in their encounters with challenges. The language the expectant students used was noticeably different from those who were more blindsided by challenges.

Participants who did not expect the challenge they experienced used powerful and even violent language to describe their experience: “it was like having a rock thrown at you”, “being shot with a shotgun” “my mind got rattled a lot from it”, “it was an attack on God’s word”, and “this is where my belief system was jumped”. This does not mean that the expectation predicted whether a student would choose to engage a challenge, but that the level of expectation did appear to have an effect on the power afforded to challenges encountered in the classroom. Cathy offers a good example of this when she states “I had

not anticipated a religion class that would be kind, that would be, well, maybe not kind, but to be so caring...I just did not expect any religion class that would be that open, and I loved it". This was a powerful challenge to Cathy's preconception, and it did not cause her to avoid or negate the challenge; just the opposite occurred, she "loved it".

This ground of expectation is divided into two categories: Surprise and Anticipation

Surprise – "I Wasn't Expecting it"

Some participants encountered challenges to their beliefs that caught them by surprise. Anthony stated that "you see totally different things than you thought you'd ever see". Barry, who had returned to school after a devastating earlier experience with challenges to his beliefs in the existence of God, alluded to the difference that being more prepared for challenges made in his experience. In that earlier experience he was "dumbfounded, all the sudden everything that I held on to as true wasn't, or at least it was being told to me that it wasn't". Although he entered his earlier program with what he called "an open mind", it is clear that his understanding of openness to education did not include the type of challenges he encountered, because he states that his "mind got rattled a lot from it". The difference his level of expectation had on him is expressed in his description of how this powerful encounter prepared him for an experience 20 years later when he discovered he was required to take a religion class as a part of his degree program:

So, um I signed up for it and took it in the first semester and you know, a lot of those feelings came back from where it was before but you know, I'm older now, I'm more mature, I'm more secure in what I believe in and I, and I really think that the process from the first time that I went to school gave me a lot of time to work things out and to understand why that I do believe that there is a God.

Expectations were not only powerful for those who were challenged

theologically. Darla had a strong expectation that teachers who teach at a Baptist university would hold similar beliefs to her, considering that she too was Baptist. She expresses her expectations in the following passages:

I felt like I was going to, you know, a school that was supposed to believe the same way that I believed. I felt like it was the same denomination that I had always been, that we had supported that school, that you are in a religion class at a school that, you know, is your same denomination – you would expect – I’ve always been taught that, you know, what the Bible says is true – but then here is a book in that class saying the opposite of what the Bible says.

I went to Catholic high school...I was not Catholic...I really learned to explain what I believed and why I believed what I believed so I had grown up with people who believed differently... I think the part that really offended me so much was I didn’t expect that here. I expected it going to Catholic high-school. They are going to believe differently than I believe and I can explain why I believe what I do. I guess I wasn’t prepared to do that in a religion class at this university that I expected to have the same beliefs that I did.

You know, but I think this experience was different because I wasn’t expecting it. I think, you know, walking into a situation where you know everyone is going to be thinking a little bit differently, you are kind of prepared for that and you know what to expect. I think that is why this really bothered me so much because I had higher expectations going in. Um, that they were all going to agree with me I guess (laugh) you know? Like – that they are all going to think the way that I do.

Francis had a very interesting story regarding her expectations. In her childhood years her family had moved to the rural southeast and had experienced persecution from neighbors for being “pagans”. She had a working assumption that other Christian people would respond to her in a similar manner. When she entered religion classes, she was understandably “very, very afraid”, because she assumed “there’s going to be one belief...that’s how it’s going to be taught”. Francis used powerful words to describe her encounter with a type of teaching she did not expect:

You know, and to um, how people say it is relevant now and differing opinions on it. So to have that said in the very first class caused me in a lot of ways, to have a crisis of belief because I had had this belief that Baptists were just going to be like

this – and this is all they were about and they were in there to recruit me and you know, or, or look down upon me and tell me I was going to hell because I didn't believe the way they did. So I had come into it with a belief system that was defensive and you know, felt persecuted by Baptists. Not all Baptists but in the past and I got into there in a Baptist university and had a crisis of that faith – of that belief.

Another participant, 55 year old Elaine, shared a similar expectation about how the class would be taught. Her surprise came when she encountered an environment very different from the one she had been warned about.

Um, I had gone into it a little bit with my guns up anyway because I had been told that um the philosophy teachers would try and manipulate and I've heard this from pulpits for years. You know that philosophy majors, and they would quote philosophers, and it wasn't at all what I found it to be. It was much more of an open dialogue. There was very little, there was no – “This is right. This is wrong.”

Expectation proved to be a powerful underlying influence for the students walking into the religion class. While this at times led to devastating consequences like Barry completely abandoning his studies, other students had a different experience. Some participants described an expectation for challenges that colored their experience of challenges in the classroom.

Anticipation – “I Expected To Be Challenged”

Some students enter the learning environment with an expectation that they would be challenged in their beliefs, and this expectation functioned as a mollifying agent when they encountered challenges to their beliefs. In the analysis process, Gabriella's experience shed a great deal of light on this concept. She had the most profoundly non-chaotic experience of all of the participants when she encountered ideas contrary to her beliefs. Her interview reveals that she had a very high level of expectation entering the semester, and she openly expected to be challenged and welcomed the challenges: “I

knew this coming into class”, and “what if they didn’t challenge me... I would wonder”.

So when the anticipated challenges ensued, she was prepared and emerged unscathed.

I knew coming into this class just by having an opportunity to meet with the advisor and the dean that my thoughts would be challenged and that made it even that much more appealing to me to take the classes. Particularly for me, I’ve enrolled for personal reasons... I was aware that it would definitely happen. And if it did not be, I’d be afraid, I’d be concerned because one of the um, the advantages, is being in a class, being taught by someone that is knowledgeable in that area and then being in the classroom setting with others that are similar to you. You know, just thirsty for an understanding, you know? So, so I think I am, I kind of felt that I would be challenged by coming into this program.

Henry, another student on his second collegiate experience, used an earlier damaging experience and as ground for his entry into religious studies. He views this as a part of the process: “I think most professors are, um, realize that people are going to be challenged by some of the things they say. I think that is part of the university experience”. Henry is explicit when he describes the difference early challenges had on his current studies:

And then, you know, coming on into the ministry program later, I knew that from that experience, coming back to school, I knew that, that I would be challenged and so I’ve kind of, with the challenges that I’ve faced since then, I’ve actually been able to be a little bit more open and realize that people are not going to believe the same things that I believe and no matter how challenging someone, you know, professors might challenge me, professors might disagree with the theology I bring to scripture.

The Origin of Expectations

Expectation came from a variety of sources. Preachers and religious leaders can warn the student of the dangerous challenges that await them in the university religion class, as is evidenced in Elaine’s statement about how she had “heard this from pulpits for years”. She states that “Philosophy types of things frightened me. Part of that was because of what I had been preached to at the pulpit. I had been told that they were

Satanic basically.” She described this influence in the following passage:

When I was much younger I was from more of a fundamentalist background, when I first got married. And the pastor at my church didn’t even like seminary and that was back in the early seventies when it was much more [liberal] than it is now. He called it the “cemetery”. He said “you go in there believing one thing and you come out and all your belief systems are dead.” That brother-in-law that got into all the new age stuff had gone to one of the seminaries and when he came out he no longer believed in the Virgin Birth; he no longer believed in the miracles in the Bible and his father blamed the seminary for that. I don’t know whether the seminary did that to him or not but for a long time I was afraid to talk to people like that because my life was built on my faith.

Barry’s father, a Fundamentalist minister, had a definite impact on Barry’s self-proclaimed conservative theology. Barry’s struggle in his initial college experience over questions about the existence of God was grounded in his expectation that teachers would teach in a similar vein to the approach found in his father’s preaching. Later, when Barry took classes at a more fundamentalist oriented college, he stated that “they would make a conservative argument almost as if it was my Dad preaching while explaining the Bible.”

Cathy, who like Gabriella did not describe her challenges in difficult or violent terms, spoke of her expectations being colored by her minister. Her pastor set a rather sexist tone for her that fed over into her expecting a dogmatic attitude to persist in university religion classes.

I told you my husband had health problems. He’s had three different by-pass surgeries. That’s like one more than I would have ever thought possible. Um, but it is possible and there is hope out there. At the time though I did a lot of volunteer work for the church – but at that time I was told by the – well I told the preacher that I was thinking about going back to work and even though he may have thought about losing somebody – you know a volunteer lady in the church – he said “a woman’s place is in the home”. And that was something that – it hurt then – it hurt so much then – but in this class it just didn’t surface. It did not surface. So that was a belief – not my belief – but it was a belief that I thought was out there and it wasn’t.

Other members of participants’ religious communities also set a tone of

expectation. Henry spoke of friends who warned him of the dangers of a college religion course, warnings similar to those received by Elaine. Henry states:

I knew going into this program that not everybody is going to have the same theology that I have because of that statement [a previous experience with a college professor questioning the veracity of the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ]. I mean, and I had other friends who I attend church with that said, “You know. You are about to go back to school and there are a lot of people that aren’t going to have, they are not going to hold the same authority of scripture that you have. They are not going to believe the same things about Jesus and they are not going to believe the same things you believe about the canon as being sound.” You know, stuff like that. And so, with them telling me that and then me having this past memory from, you know, a required course where someone said, you know, the virgin birth was not true, then it allowed me to really be open to the possibility that, you know, from everywhere from my students to my professors, they are not going to have the same theology I have. But, you know, I have to take these courses, so I need to listen to the professor and then I have to judge it for myself, whether, you know, if I need to test it and see whether it to be true or not.

The preceding passage also reveals another source of expectancy: the learner’s past personal experiences. Francis’ prior experiences with people who created havoc for her family set a tone of expectancy for her that did not prove true in her experience of the university religion class. Barry and Henry, both returning to the university after fairly traumatic negative experiences, each spoke of how their prior experience established a set of expectations that their beliefs would be challenged that helped them through their current experiences. Barry spoke of how he was not “so easily rattled” because he has “been through it” and knows what he believes in now. Elaine spoke of a personal bout with cancer and her husband subsequently leaving her that gave her strength to take on challenges:

People would say, “Well, God has given this to you to challenge you.” No, I don’t believe God ever makes somebody sick to challenge them. I believe I got cancer probably because I lived near nuclear testing when I was a kid. And my Dad, I believe that it had something to do with that because of the kind of cancer

– it is the result of chemical exposure a lot of times. And I believe that we were the ones who happened to get it out of the family. I don't believe God gave me cancer to get my attention. Some people would say "He got your attention. He gave you cancer because he knew this other was going to happen and He wanted to prepare you for it and make you stronger." I don't believe that. I believe that because I got cancer He used it to make me stronger for the next thing that was going to happen. And I think there is a big difference. And I've had people challenge me on that saying you know "God will do that to you." No, I don't think so. I don't think God caused Michael to leave me. I don't think it was ever God's will but Michael did, and so God used it to make me stronger. And I found, that's one thing that I found, that even though they scared me I thought, you know "I've had cancer, my Daddy's died and my husband's walked out on me, there's nothing you can do to make (laugh)... you may flunk me, but I can take it over again!"

Expectation as Ground

Using Rubin's concept of figure/ground as a guide, what stands out in an individual's perception of a phenomenon stands out against a particular ground of the experience. In the present study, the students' expectation for what a Christian college would be like and how religion would be taught served as ground for their experiences of having a belief challenged or questioned in a university religion course. Some students encountered challenges in the classroom that caught them unaware, and the surprise heavily influenced their reaction to the challenge. Others entered the classroom experience with a high level of expectation for challenges. In the following section I will outline the themes that stood out against this ground.

Thematic Structure

Three themes emerged from the interviews that stand out against a more general ground of expectation about what a Christian college would be like and how religion would be taught. These themes are: 1) the undergraduate religion class is an environment

where you are challenged, 2) the influential and powerful role of the teacher, and 3) choice: expanding/closing of my mindset.

Theme 1 – An Environment Where You Are Challenged

One powerful theme that emerged from the data was that for the participants the university religion classroom is an environment ripe with powerful and varied challenges to the students' previously held beliefs. In describing his own experience of challenge, Anthony describes this environment:

But once you are put in an environment where you are challenged, where you are educated, where you are, uh, in some, some way forced to have relationship with others, then it tends to put you in the position of either saying, "ok, I'm going to accept this and see what I can experience or see what I can learn from it, or am I going to reject it and, and not receive my money's worth, of this whole experience. Get what I'm here for" because I believe that's what you are here for. And that's what I learned over time, over these continuous years of studying the religion of the different classes that I've had – that that's the, that's the experience you have of coming to terms with being in an institution with other people – it's a relationship. Getting to know one another, getting to hear others' ideas, others' beliefs, and allowing that to challenge yours so that you can eventually get to a point of having a sound, a sound structured foundations of belief system that you can live your life with.

There are three major sub-themes that stand out regarding this environment of challenge: the challenges were diverse, these challenges were often powerful experiences, and the environment for challenges was established quickly.

Diverse Challenges.

As stated in the outset of this chapter, one of the things that surprised me the most about the experience of the participants was the diversity of the challenges they encountered in religion classes. I entered the study with a strong assumption that these challenges would be primarily theological in nature, but that has not been the case.

While five participants did discuss theological challenges, these were not the only challenges they faced, nor were they necessarily the most significant. Five participants discussed challenges to their beliefs about others. They discussed racial and religious perceptions of others; how others view them; and prejudices surrounding race, culture, and religious background. Four participants were challenged in the way they assumed academic instruction would occur in a religion course. These three different types of challenges will be outlined below.

Theological challenges. Challenges to one's theological ideas can be especially troublesome when they directly contradict the participant's previously held assumptions about the Bible (Burns, 2006; Nord, 2002). The Ministry Studies majors in the study (Anthony, Gabriella, and Henry) all described powerful encounters with interpretations of biblical texts that differed from those they previously held. Anthony discussed how his view of the biblical stories came into conflict with new information about the historical context of the stories:

I think one of my, uh, major challenges or uh, on my beliefs has been the, the uh, which I don't if it is common but it really hit me hard when I started my religion courses, is the, the Sunday School verses the institutionalized uh, beliefs of Christianity and religion. Uh, you know you grow up in, in, grow up in churches and deal with the Easter egg hunts and seeing Jesus coming in with angelic wings, uh, going, hanging on the cross smiling and all this different stuff. You just see angelic uh, angelic version of, of, of Jesus as being someone who is always happy go lucky and we saw him as just the healer, the savior which he didn't necessarily dig deep into a, dig deep into the stories of some, of some of the dilemmas and how painful the crucifixion was and, and uh, how religion was established and how the Pharisees, Sadducees and uh, other religious groups came against Jesus and how we kind of fit in that same scope of things of how set out our thinking is in regards to the Bible and things of that sort. And so it has kind of put me in the perspective of broadening my mindset, my overall ideal in theology of Christianity in religion. Where it's no longer that what I was taught in church is everything that I'm going, going to believe in my whole entire life.

Gabriella expressed dismay when a professor told her that what she viewed as an apparent biblical truth was not as she assumed. In discussing her views of homosexuality she stated:

You know, um, I'm careful to give scripture references that say, "This is why you shouldn't do this." But uh, I will say one of the scriptural references that I've always believed defended, if you will, why homosexuality was wrong, you know, that's one of those where the instructor said, "That's not what he was talking about".... And I'm like, "You've got to be kidding!" (laughter) "If you don't think that that's what that is saying..." (laughter)

Henry encountered a challenge to his basic assumptions of the nature of the Bible.

Recently there was a conversation brought up where it was talking about the historical Jesus and how this individual had never questioned the historical Jesus and never – had always relied on the Bible, but now that we have all of these voices coming up, like the gospel of Judas or the Gospel of Thomas that we should hold, you know, we should actually hold those up to light to be, you know, and to broaden minds with this – with what they discuss. And I um, I was troubled because, (pause) because I hold the word of God very dear. I, I believe that the canon, you know, of scripture has come to be because that's the way that God wanted it to be – what we have. And, and I'm troubled that I'm not, that someone in an authoritative position would say that the canon of scripture is not all there is. That's it's not the only word from God. Which, you know, I believe that that is the historical, it's, it's the word of God but also God can speak to us through a work today but scripture is scripture to me. And scripture is very, it's the living word of God and uh, it troubles me when, when uh, a professor or somebody doesn't have the, the same, when they are teaching from scripture but they don't have the same perspective on scripture. You know, when, when they don't hold the authority of scripture as high or value it as much. But they are teaching from scripture or telling us what scripture says or what this verse or passage means.

The ministry studies majors were not alone in describing significant encounters with ideas contrary to their views of the Bible. Darla, a business major, shared a powerful encounter with a statement in her Old Testament textbook: "Contrary to the popular song, Joshua didn't fight the battle of Jericho and the walls didn't come tumbling down". This encounter caused her to step well outside of her comfort zone and contact both the professor and the Dean to complain about the textbook. Barry, whose father was

a minister, also struggled with challenges to his view of the sanctity of the Bible.

Beliefs about how teaching/learning would occur. A second type of challenge encountered by participants surrounded issues of how the teaching/learning enterprise would take place. Cathy was surprised when she experienced openness to a diversity of religious ideas in her Comparative Religions class. She stated that she “expected less than she got...it was wonderful.” The following passage expresses her challenged expectation:

P: Um hum. Um, I had not anticipated a religion class that would be kind, that would be, well, maybe not kind, but to be so caring about – I, I just did not expect any religion class that would be that open and I loved it.

I: What did you expect?

P: Um, being a Baptist affiliated school I thought we would be taught in the Baptist – I wouldn’t know – taught in sort of a Baptist vein of things. But it’s, it’s not that way. I just don’t think it is that way at all now. So, I don’t know if that is a real answer or not, um...“I expected the guy behind me to be Baptist and over here to be... you know, and everyone – but that was not the case. That was just not the case and uh, even though this is a Baptist affiliated school, there are so many other students to learn from.

Darla expected that a religion class in a Baptist university would be more in line with what she saw as traditional Baptist beliefs. She expressed dismay that what she discovered in her class “was against what my expectations were for a religion class at this university”. Elaine entered the university with her “guns up, ready to do battle” with professors who she assumed would be hostile to her traditional beliefs. On contrary, she discovered teachers who were “completely open” to what she believed.

Professors who I have come into contact with have been much more willing to um, entertain thoughts outside of what they believe than what I expected. I expected to go into the classes and be told, you know “this is what truth is – we don’t care what your Mommy and Daddy said.” Because that was basically what I had been told in some more fundamental settings – that the professors will go in

and tell them that no matter what their Mommy and Daddy said, this is what is really true. And I've not had a professor do that.

Francis had an extremely dramatic experience of encountering what she didn't expect in the classroom. She expected teachers and students to be openly hostile to her, attempt to "recruit her" to their way of thinking, and tell her she was "going to hell." She was surprised to encounter teachers who openly reminded students that:

You can talk about religion from your personal faith, how you have grown up, whatever your belief system is, you know, whatever gets you through the night basically. I mean, yes you can have that conversation. But here in this classroom we are going to do it on an academic level and look at the history, talk about the implications of how the Bible is relevant now.

Attitudes/perspectives of others. In addition to theological and pedagogical challenges, participants also found challenges in the attitudes and perspectives of other students. Anthony describes being the only African American student in a number of his classes, and being somewhat older than some other students in the ministry studies program. He was surprised to discover that "they expressed to me, a sense of intimidation because of me being different". The following passage communicates Anthony's challenge, and its shock value:

We were dealing with ethics in the Bible. And we were discussing the dilemmas between Jews and Gentiles: how they viewed one another, the stereo-types that may have been present, may not have been present, uh, how they dealt with each other, how they didn't want to touch the Gentile and how there was unclean this and that. And that took us into a concept of uh, black and white and that's why she wanted, my teacher wanted to make sure I was there for that discussion because they wanted to see my side of it. They wanted to hear my ideas and my concepts of it. And my concept of the fear of being present with so many unlike me, it, it threw them off and, it basically put them in the position of challenging me and saying well, "you...I felt uncomfortable around you because of the simple fact of we feel that you feel that way." By me thinking of the numbers being a dominant force over me just because of my color, they looked at me and said "well, hold on now, the fact that we think that you feel that way, makes us feel inferior". It was like, whoa! I never thought of it that way. So just my whole

demeanor and just my whole personality or the way I may carry myself due to my environment influenced that whole mindset of how they may have dealt with me during that particular time.

I: What was that like for you?

P: It – it kind of, like I said, was like throwing rocks at me. It was like - you need to check yourself cause I always, uh, teach my kids, my youth to uh, evaluate themselves on a day to day basis. And I see that was something that I missed. I didn't evaluate that part of my life. (laugh)...That was one thing that I skipped over. Is all this that I've been teaching others, all these examples and ideas that I've been throwing at others about not coming in and personifying yourself that way, that tends to cause people to basically reject ideas or want to uh, basically get away from you, that's the same thing I was projecting from myself. So, it was an eye-opening experience.

Gabriella, whose major theological challenge dealt with her attitudes toward homosexuality, was further challenged regarding this issue by her interactions with a gay student she encountered in class. This relationship took her outside of her comfort zone and pressed her to evaluate and then reaffirm her own beliefs. The passage below also appears earlier in the chapter (pg. 98).

There is a young lady that is in our class that's gay and um, she's, she's wonderful and before she said that she was gay, of course I didn't know. This is a separate class that we addressed the homosexuality – but when I go to that class with her, I mean, I just have to say, "God bless her." She is comfortable with the life-style that she has chosen. She, you know, she believes and she feels that she is a child of God. She attends church. She has her degree of spirituality and yet even she has battled with it or she has questioned. She said she knew she was a homosexual from the age of sixteen. I think she is 32 now and so if it's something that she still doesn't understand...And I'm glad to even have that exposure to her being in one of my classes because I'm careful of what I say. Not to be offensive regardless of what my beliefs are. You know, um, I'm careful to give scripture references that say, "This is why you shouldn't do this." But uh, I will say one of the scriptural references that I've always believed defended, if you will, why homosexuality was wrong, you know, that's one of those where you know, the instructor said, "That's not what he was talking about. They weren't saying... the Bible, you know ..." And I'm like, "You've got to be kidding!" (laughs) "If you don't think that that's what that is saying, you know..." (laughs)

The diversity of challenges experienced by participants is noteworthy. While I assumed that most students would share powerful encounters with divergent theological beliefs, I was surprised to find much more than I was looking for. It is a major adage in the adult learning literature that learners bring a unique set of life experiences to the learning environment (Brookfield, 1991; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Merriam et al., 2007). For the participants in this study, each one's unique set of experiences led them to a different arena of challenge. This diversity speaks to the unique nature of learning in adulthood.

Powerful Challenges

The second sub-theme under the environment of challenge is the powerful impact these challenges had on the participants. These eight individuals employ strong metaphors in describing these experiences, and the challenges have the potential to rock the person to the core. Some of the terminology is even violent, with participants using expressions like "attack", "hits you in the face", "blown out with a shotgun", "jumped", and "my beliefs were pulled out from under me". It is a bumpy ride on a roller coaster, fast and furious for Anthony. Henry spoke of a strong emotional experience that sounds like a fight or flight response with pumping adrenaline. The experience was also expressed in less violent terminology that still communicated the powerful effect on the participant. Cathy provided an example when she described "stepping in the shower" and being refreshed.

The emotional power of the challenges can be seen in Barry's experience of being distracted by challenges to the point that he eventually abandoned his studies all together:

I know that it shook up my life enough to where I feel like that was the main

number one reason that I never finished the first time around. I got so upset, I mean if you are brought up one way, and then you go and you just can't change yourself overnight and become somebody and ignore everything that you believe in. I felt like it distracted me so badly that I, it really affected me because I could no longer do what I was there to do. You know, it changed my perspective so much that, that I just couldn't even complete what I set out to complete. And it took me years later to get over it and then I come back and I see, you know, you know, another group of young people, some of them were older but another group of young people coming through and the same thing going on and this time it's at a Christian school...

Cathy used another interesting metaphor in describing the power of the experience:

It was like taking a hard drive and stripping it. We just start all over. And I don't think you can strip a hard drive all the way (whispered) but (laugh) I think that was the main thing that we experienced – everyone experienced that in this class. We all had to throw away our old beliefs – and these are not 19 – 22 year-olds.

When Henry was reflecting on his initial college experience he described the emotional power that questions can possess. In this passage he describes his reaction to a professor who questioned the veracity of the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ:

Um, I was a little bewildered, because it...I mean, I didn't grow up in a church home but, you know, we celebrated Christmas and we celebrated the fact that Christmas was about Jesus and um, and you know, we sang Silent Night and all that stuff and we knew that Jesus was born to Mary and Mary was a virgin. And, and I uh, so I was shocked because something that I grew up with. You know, even though I wasn't, I didn't come from a Christian family, something that I grew up with believing and knowing and trusting was uh, was, was kind of, you know, blown out of, blown out of my thoughts with a shotgun really, you know. So it really kind of, it, it, like I said, it shocked me. I was at a loss for words really. I shared it with my wife and she was like, "Well, it's just a professor. You don't have to worry about it."

For Henry, the experience of challenge had a strong emotional effect. He described other experiences that have occurred since he returned to Baptist University as a student that sound like "fight or flight":

So, like I said, sometimes, you know, I'll hear something and my adrenaline will just start pumping and my heart races and uh, now I'm seriously thinking, "Okay, do I – what do I?" You know, I get nervous because I'm like, "Do I need to say

something here or do I need to let it go?" You know? A lot of the time I let it go, you know, just because it's – sometimes I reflect on it and it's really not worth it because – and you know, and that statement really almost affirms my position in a way.

Challenges not only strike a very personal chord, they also can be interpreted as an attack on the Deity. For Darla, a question about the historical accuracy of the Old Testament was more than a question, it was an "attack" on her beliefs. More importantly, it was an attack on the "author of the Bible". She shared her amazement,

That someone had, had in black and white said, "The Bible is not true." That's the way I interpreted it when they made that statement. No – like I said, even in my experiences with you know, different religions denominations it wasn't, you know, it wasn't like that. Not an attack on God's Word. It was more this, you know, "I believe this, I believe that." Interpretation of God's Word but to see this in black and white saying what God said wasn't true...

I: To attack – you are using the word attack.

P: To attack – yeah, you know, because I do – my firm belief is that God's Word is true and it did, I guess it did feel like an attack. And that's the author of you know, this text book contradicting, you know, the author of the Bible.

The power these challenges possessed for participants is also evident in the concern some of the participants expressed for other younger students who might encounter similar challenges. Concerned for younger students in his classes who heard divergent views of the Bible, Barry says he is "sure their faith was probably challenged" and that "they were probably shaken up a little bit about finding some of the things". He spoke repeatedly about a young student who had committed suicide, and was very concerned that this occurred not long after he perceived her as encountering theological challenges in the classroom. Darla and Elaine both spoke of concern for younger students who may not have enough life experience to be able to handle views that challenge their beliefs. This concern was directly related to their own struggle to handle the challenges set before them.

The Environment of Challenge Was Established Quickly

The final sub-theme under the environment of challenge deals with time and how this environment was established quickly. For the students who encountered challenges in the classroom, this environment was established early in the evolution of the class process. Participants described this as something that occurred “quickly”, “up front”, “when I walked in the door” and “right now”. The following passages demonstrate the immediacy of these encounters:

The thing about a Baptist college...I expected the guy behind me to be Baptist...but that was not the case. That was just not the case and uh, even though this is a Baptist affiliated school, there are so many other students to learn from and the teacher said (makes knocking noise) “look here – here is an entire class full of people for you to learn from – you can learn from each other’s experiences”. Um, and like I said – it is cut and dry – this is how it should be – this is how it must be. And I did not expect that. I did not expect that. My mind was too much economics and other things, but it was just an eye-opening experience that I didn’t expect. It just came at me. It came at me when I walked in the door. He [the professor] was wonderful. He was absolutely wonderful...It happened probably in the first 15 minutes of class (Cathy)

And that was basically his first question in the class. (laugh). Was how do we see Christianity and religion as of right now? And he challenged us to see it differently. And I remember thinking, you are not going, you’re not gonna change my mind. (laugh) I remember saying, ‘you are not going to change my mind. You are not going to mess my mind up.’ (Anthony)

“And he said up front, he said, ‘my job is to get you to think about what you believe. It is not to change what you believe but it is to get you to think about what you believe and why you believe it and to be able to discuss intelligently why you believe what you believe.’” (Elaine one of her challenges is a difference in educational philosophy)

I went into it and from the very first class meeting, and again not having taken a religion class in a long time, I wasn’t sure how it was going to be administered by the professor but it was made very clear: “You can talk about religion from your personal faith, how you have grown up, whatever your belief system is, you know, whatever gets you through the night basically.” I mean, yes you can have that conversation. “But here in this classroom we are going to do it on an academic level and look at the history, talk about the implications of how the Bible is relevant now.” You know, and to um, how people say it is relevant now

and differing opinions on it. So to have that said in the very first class caused me in a lot of ways, to have a crisis of belief. (Francis)

That the environment was established quickly had a substantial impact on the participants in the study. The tone set by some of the professors enabled the students to engage questions in a safe atmosphere conducive to asking questions and open to diverse people and ideas. On the other hand, Darla spoke of how a rather negative tone was set for her class “early on”. She spoke of how the professor expressed attitudes toward southern people that made her feel “very uncomfortable about speaking up” when she did not agree with what was presented in class.

It is clear from the texts that the participants experienced an environment of challenge, filled with a diversity of challenges that had powerful effects on the participants. These challenges can hit the learner quickly from various and unexpected directions. A vital figure in this environment was the teacher, whose influence will be explored in the next section.

Theme 2 – The Influential Role of the Teacher

The second theme that emerges from the interviews is the powerful role of the teacher in this experience of having a belief challenged in an undergraduate religion course. The participants’ experience has been heavily influenced by the professors who taught their classes. This influence is described in both positive and negative terms, ranging from Cathy’s statement that “he loves every student he has been with” to Barry’s comment that “I think that some of them want to believe they are God”. Professors are perceived as setting the tone for the course that enabled students to openly engage their

beliefs, both by their words and their behaviors. They also modeled this by being open to students, and encouraged the same openness from the students.

The professor “Set the tone”

The preceding section highlighted the immediacy of challenges encountered in the classroom. This was perceived by the participants as a purposeful act on the part of some of the religion faculty at Baptist University. Teachers intentionally set a tone that allowed for the open engagement of beliefs. Francis, whose presuppositions about how Christians would treat her were greatly challenged, stated:

I mean the professor definitely set the tone that you know, “this wasn’t going to be allowed, this is the purpose of this class. This is what we are going to be doing”. He pretty much set that the first night. But the students followed that and I’ve been in class this year when the professor set the rules – no lap tops – no this... and people abuse it terribly...it’s not enforced. Or, or the professor is not...like a respected person, so they just talk all the way through the lecture. It wasn’t like that in this class. I mean this person was highly respected and then I think the way that things were placed before us, which was intentional by the professor...everybody has a commonality in there...whatever their background to be able to talk about it. It was like we were talking about you know, um, Christ’s crucifixion for the very first time – like none of us had ever talked about it before... that was the first time we were all hearing that story from this academic perspective. And so I felt sort of on even ground with everybody.

Elaine discussed how her professor was “up front” in his manner:

I disagreed with a lot of what was taught there but his, the way he presented it...he said up front, “my job is to get you to think about what you believe. It is not to change what you believe but it is to get you to think about what you believe and why you believe it and to be able to discuss intelligently why you believe what you believe.”

Gabriella described being led into forms of worship in her Christian Spirituality class that were foreign to her religious experience. Her instructor was a welcoming guide in this journey into unfamiliar territory:

I would say it was a challenge in a way because when we discussed them, there

were areas of these practices being uncomfortable. You know, “Well, I don’t want to pray to an icon!” Or, you know, “I don’t understand that.” Or praying the rosary. You know, I’m not Catholic. I’ve never understood that. So that was a challenge, however, I will tell you that the instructor, the professor did a wonderful job saying, “You will be challenged. If you are not comfortable, don’t do it. But this is what we are going to do... she [the professor] made it clear that if there is a practice that you were not comfortable with, if they are - even writing our spiritual autobiography or our journals, if there are parts of it that you don’t feel comfortable with sharing, it’s okay. And that’s what I liked about it.

Participants perceived that an open and challenging tone was intentionally set by professors, clearly as a desired component of the learning environment.

The Professor Modeled Openness

Professors not only set a tone for questioning and openness in their classrooms with their words, they also modeled openness in the manner in which they addressed students and questions. Cathy had expected a very “Baptist” approach to religion in her comparative religions class, and she encountered a course where they “experienced different religions”, even visiting a Buddhist temple. She stated that there was “always tolerance by the instructors”. This openness was “instilled” into the students:

We just all pretty much walked in there with an open mind. Um, and if we didn’t have an open mind when we walked in, the teacher had - the professor instilled that in us just by his actions, by his gentleness, by his openness. Um, I loved the professor that I had. I had him for both courses...I learned more, well, studied more about the Bible and it was a study Bible and all of that – interesting other than sitting in church and flipping pages. I little bit more involved there.

Elaine, who had entered the classroom with her “guns up” in preparation for teachers who would try to manipulate her, also discovered models of openness in her classes:

I found him [the professor] very open and willing to the fact that I didn’t buy into a lot of the philosophy stuff. But I did think there were black and white issues. He didn’t, while he challenged what I believed, he didn’t put down what I believed. I think there is a big difference in challenging what somebody believes

and saying “tell me why you believe it.”

So I think that one of the things that I learned in the religion class was – while I don’t agree with them – to not be condescending or judgmental. It is hard not to be judgmental with somebody when you think that what they believe is wrong. But I found that the professor was able to do that because he obviously in his belief structure would not have believed some of the stuff that was said in class. So I think I learned a little bit of open-mindedness about it. It didn’t change my belief structure at all but it made me a little more accepting of other people who had different belief structures.

Modeling has long been recognized as a strong component of a productive learning environment (Bandura, 1986), especially an environment rich in religious concepts (Parks, 2000). The participants in this study reveal that modeling openness to questions can have a positive effect on the openness of the learners in the classroom.

Negative Impressions of Professors

Professors had a very pivotal role in the questioning of student beliefs. The two preceding sections communicate a very positive tone regarding professors, but this was not the case with all of the participants. The professors’ “openness” was sometimes perceived in a very negative manner, interpreted as conniving, devious, even possessing manipulative intent. Barry, who dropped out of college for 20+ years after his destructive initial foray into challenges, describes his first philosophy teacher as purposefully undermining the students’ beliefs.

He [the professor] of course wasn’t a Christian at all and he, I think, did everything in the world to try to take you out of your element, out of believing in God, out of believing in the Bible completely...And to be honest with you, the Christian classes weren’t much better. They were pretty much, they may have as well been philosophy class. I felt that the professors that I had were Christian people but they were at the same time, their beliefs were so much different to what my beliefs were...even that was radical. Even their beliefs were very difficult. And, and I really, I wish I had never even, you know, kind of taken the class because I’ve felt like it has distracted me so much that it, it ended up in my eventually forgetting school.

...but a lot of times they have agendas of their own that they are working from. They are not always as speaking honestly the truth as they claim. Especially, and especially in the state run schools. I think a lot of times they are hotbeds for liberal thinking you know. And a lot of times they have their own agenda and I think they work from that. And honestly I think that some of them want to believe they are God. 'We are the people – we know everything. I mean, who's the superior all-knowing God? That's me. I'm the one with the Doctorate – you can look on my wall.'" So I think they almost resent somebody saying this, the authority I put above you. There are some egos in some of those, in those kinds of schools.

Henry's initial experience with challenges caused a change in his attitude toward professors, greatly reducing their status as authority figures:

I've actually been able to be a little bit more open and realize that people are not going to believe the same things that I believe and no matter how challenging someone, you know, professors might challenge me, professors might disagree with the theology I bring to scripture.... I stored it away thinking, you know, because then it gave me a little um, (pause) I guess it put the authority of a professor – it kind of gave me a new opinion of the authority of a professor and to not solely trust what a professor would say.

Darla added another negative dimension to the role of the teacher when she reflected on a religion professor she perceived as demeaning to her culture. This perception of the professor added to her frustration:

Well, he, the professor, had just moved to the southeast from somewhere up north and so from the very beginning of class he made comments about, you know, just the culture shock of being in the south and he was telling us a story about you know, seeing this outdoorsman show on TV and about the rednecks and I think just from the very beginning being, you know, lived here all of my life – native, very southern accent – I just felt very uncomfortable with speaking up... So being that I was already a little bit shy and timid, I think that made it even a little more so – that I'm not going to open my mouth. I'm not going to give him any reason to make fun of my accent. Um, so I didn't feel comfortable, and I'm not the confrontational type either so I didn't feel comfortable raising my hand saying "I disagree with this." So I did it in writing. I didn't really get much of a response from him – I didn't think that he acknowledged what I was saying so I then wrote a letter to the dean. Again the same thing – took a copy of that page out of the book, high-lighted the part that I felt contrary to what the Bible says – contrary to what I believe. I didn't feel – I felt like, you know, I was a supporter

of this school. You know, that it was the same denomination that I am, um, that they should be teaching the same (laugh) you know, doctrine that I believed. So, I did write to the dean but I don't think that I ever heard any response from back from him at all.

The theme of the influential role of the professor demonstrates that a university professor is in a unique position to influence the students in their openness to challenges in the classroom. Their words and actions can set a tone for the course that can have long-term ramifications for the learners. While some learn from, and even model this openness, others may perceive it as undermining the learning process. These reactions are heavily influenced by the learners' experience and their expectation for challenges in the classroom.

Theme 3 – Choice: Expand My Belief/Corrode What I Believe

The third theme to stand out against the ground of expectation is choice. The challenges encountered by participants led them as learners to a point of decision, a crossroads of choice. Would they choose to engage the challenges set before them, or would they hold to their previously held beliefs without engaging the new ideas?

Anthony stated that the environment of challenge put him in a position “where I had to make a choice” between what he was “comfortable with” and that which challenged his comfort. The choice set before them, in the words of Elaine, was to respond by either expanding their beliefs or refusing to allow this new material to corrode what they already believe:

What happens to me personally is that it reinforces my faith. Because they were not able, not that they tried to, but their belief system did not alter my basic belief. It sometimes expanded it into some areas but it didn't – it never corroded what I believed. It never corroded what I believed therefore it made it stronger. Because

I felt like then, ok, I have been confirmed with everything. There was a part of me, particularly when I was younger that didn't want to know those things because I was afraid they would tear down what I believed and then what would I believe? There was a fear-factor there that if that's true then mine can't be true and if mine's not true then I've lived a whole life... And it didn't corrode anything that I believed... it expanded my belief system in that I could talk to them about that and give them intelligent, thoughtful reasons for why I believed what I believed. Opposed to just running from it and saying you know "I don't want to be exposed to that."

This theme of choice is divided into two options: expanding my mindset or corroding my beliefs.

Expanding/Broadening My Mindset

One option the participants in the study chose for dealing with the challenges set before them was to engage the challenges, knowing that the engagement could lead to changes in their own belief structure. Gabriella talked about how her challenge caused her to "broaden my perception" so it was "no longer one-track thinking. It broadened her "whole picture". Elaine said that it "expanded what I believed to be able to incorporate the challenges that came at me". Cathy described how the challenge she encountered to the way class would be taught caused her to have a complete transformation of her previously held assumption about tolerance that ties over beyond religion into her understanding how to function in the business world.

It is just fascinating. I understand the economics, I understand the, well yeah, the economics, and I understand, now, the tolerance we should all have toward other religions. I think those things, they really go hand in hand – but then, on top of that, applying the hard on sin, easy on people principle, the first rule is the golden rule and - surround yourself with people who think highly of you. Those were just three things that I had not tied together... I don't know when I would have ever really made the connection. Economics is here – religion is here – social interaction is somewhere else – but I had not tied them together. But the professor who told us that – you could almost hear the – "well" It was being digested by so many people.

Anthony describes having his mind “opened up” and being released from a “box” that constrained his thinking. This happened when he was led to “dig deep” in his studies of the Bible, putting himself “into those particular stories” in his New Testament course. This type of study was done in a “gritty and hands-on” way that “captivated” him. His previous beliefs, his “box of familiarity” with his previously learned interpretations of the bible, or his box of racial assumptions, had become comfortable. He describes this process when approaching the Bible:

I was so used to being in that box, that box of comfort, that box of familiarity that broadening was just digging down into the scripture. Like for instance like having a concordance where I can dig in instead of the Greek, the Greek terminology, and the biblical definitions for the different words that I’ve been studying, knowing that each word could have five to ten different understandings for one, for that one word and knowing that tying those, those different words and scriptures together meant so much more than just what it was, was saying to me on that paper, me reading it. So it wasn’t just me putting myself in the scripture, I was also stepping away and reading the scripture for what it was and what it was meant for those people during their time.

He describes this as a “fight”:

P: You have to open yourself up to the challenge so that in the end you can come out victorious because unless there is a challenge, there is no fight.

I: There has to be a fight?

P: Yeah, there has to be a fight, there has to be a struggle if you are going to get where you are going. You have to be in a race to be looked at as 1, 2, or 3 or even finishing. You have to be a part of it. Or else you are just standing at the starting gate (laughs) just standing there... Still in the same place they’ve been all along. Still thinking the same way, still believing the same thing, because they never opened themselves up to allow, to seeing what others have experienced or been a part of. I wouldn’t know who is faster than me if I didn’t run the race – who’s slower than I am? Who, who has a different technique than I have. I wouldn’t know anything. I wouldn’t even know how far the finish line would be. (laugh)

Francis described her challenge of meeting Baptists who were accepting of others as opening a new path for her that has transformed the way she relates to religious

people. Her previous negative experiences had caused her to retreat from religious groups. Classroom challenges opened for her a “new path”:

Opened a new path, yeah. Definitely opened a new path. I mean I’m much more open – I mean I’ve five new friends I can count on my hand that probably four or five years ago when I first met them “I know exactly where they are coming from and they are going to be trying to do that again” and it’s been a very self-destructive path of closing myself off because I am in the south now and that’s where I’ve chosen to live and I think religion is much more prominent here than some of the places, other places I’ve lived. And so it is something I have to deal with. It’s something my child has to deal with and I certainly don’t want her growing up in the same path that I did. So, yeah. I don’t know if this makes sense.

It is clear from the words of these participants that this choice is far beyond just a cognitive choice between two sets of intellectual propositions. The choices they are making are life-altering choices with vast ramifications. Anthony communicates this existential reality states when he says,

It opened me up and I became more of a man. More of a husband. More of a pastor to my kids at church. More of a spiritual leader because I was, I was brought here, my thinking I was to isolate. Just learn what I wanted to learn. But I end up learning more than I wanted to. It put me into the position to where I was just opened up and saw things in a different light.

Choice: “Not Going to Change What I Already Knew”

While Anthony, Francis, and Cathy had noteworthy and evocative experiences of altering their beliefs after they were challenged, other students chose another path. Rather than opening the mindset, the decision was: “I am not going to change what I already knew”. Darla reflected on how her Old Testament textbook challenged her belief about the nature of biblical history. Darla strongly responded:

I pretty much already knew what I believed and why I believed it and I think probably from that point on, you know, “nothing I read in this book is going to change my belief. Nothing this professor says is going to change my belief.” And I think that probably from that point on when I realized that the book was

contrary to what I believed, I discounted it and, and, was just like – “I’m just going to get through this class.” (laugh) I didn’t expect to get much out of the class. It was a requirement. Uh, I think that from that point on I realized, you know, I’m not expecting much.

I don’t know that I learned anything in that class (laugh). And it may just be that it was a very basic beginning class. It was just – I was a business major and you had to take Old Testament and New Testament. And, and I feel like I had a very strong background going in of, you know, the Old Testament information as far as, you know, basic information but nothing basically was going to change what I already knew and what I believed.

Gabriella came to the educational environment with a strong expectation for being challenged. She describes how the professor, while offering an idea inconsistent with her beliefs, would “put up a very good argument” by referring to various scripture passages, ideas of other scholars, and relevant research. As she expected, Gabriella was directly challenged by these pieces of evidence. After listening to the presentations, she reflected that “he did what he was supposed to do, but it didn’t change my thoughts on that particular issue”. Another time she said, “Even when the professor has said something that I thought was just kind of off base. You know, I said, “Well that’s okay.” Because that’s not what I believe [laughs].” The following passage depicts her reaction:

But I believe that everyone has their way of interpreting things. And so when they say something I look at it as just man’s interpretation. And so if I say, “off base,” it may be off base from what I feel that was revealed to me and so I say, “Well okay, I can see why he said that, but I don’t believe that.” (laugh) And of course that has challenged me even more to either go ask, you know my husband, or someone else in the ministry to say, “Okay, what did this scripture mean?” You know, “What do you think Jesus was saying when he said this?” “Let me tell you what my instructor said...” (laugh)

Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory posits that one option to dealing with a dissonant idea is to increase the value of a consonant idea, thereby reducing the significance of the dissonant idea that is creating the dissonance. One interesting

manifestation of this phenomenon is evident in Henry's conclusion that the challenges posed to his beliefs actually affirm his position rather than deny it:

So, like I said, sometimes, you know, I'll hear something and my adrenaline will just start pumping and my heart races and uh, now I'm seriously thinking, "Okay, do I – what do I?" You know, I get nervous because I'm like, "Do I need to say something here or do I need to let it go?" You know? A lot of the time I let it go, you know, just because it's – sometimes I reflect on it and it's really not worth it because – and you know, and that statement really almost affirms my position in a way.

But I think that that affirmation that I get comes from, comes from me saying, "This is really what scripture says to me no matter what a professor says. I still hold that this is the truth." And I've prayed about it and I believe that this is what the word is saying to me for my life. Because it might be saying something different for somebody else, you know. The cow eats grass, you know, for somebody might say – the cow really likes grass and it likes standing in the field. But the cattle like to eat grass, you know?

Testing and Filtering

A number of participants discussed the actual process of choosing to expand or not change their ideas. This was not in merely a categorical dismissal of new ideas, but involved "testing" and "filtering" based on the learners' prior experiences and knowledge. Henry stated that he "tests everything he hears." He related that he knows he has to take these classes, "so I need to listen to the professor and then I have to judge it for myself...if I need to test it and see whether it be true or not." described this process of testing for him:

I look for discernment from the Holy Spirit. I wait – I pray about it. If it is something that is very troubling I'll pray about it and really just give it to God and trust that – you know, I may not get the answer I want. I may get a "No" that I'm wrong. But I put a lot of faith and trust into the fact that I've got that witness of the spirit to affirm something or to deny something, so. So, I will hold a lot of things up to test because, you know, I have a tendency, like many people to immediately say, "Oh, that's not true." And then like, drop it. But I think that with that past experience and then, you know, who I am now, I hold all things up for testing rather than immediately writing something off because I don't agree with it.

Anthony in particular spoke of the positive outcomes of his experiences of being challenged in the classroom. He offered an interesting description of testing new ideas:

I had some choices to make – it was either believe it or study it a little bit more and see if it was true, or just accept it. Most of the time I studied it a little bit more. See how it had some truth to it, figured out some source to it, and then accept it. To understand it – what I was taught or what I heard – I may not have heard right or may not have been taught right. Maybe that person that taught me then is changed now. Or maybe it wasn't the full truth. Maybe they didn't study it like they should have, to give me the complete...understanding of what it was.

The most predominant tool described in these interviews for making these choices was the Bible. Elaine identified the Bible as a “filter” through which she tests new faith ideas. In the following passage she discusses her encounter with alternative faith concepts in her comparative religions course:

And I believe the word of God to be the inspired of God...And I use that as a filter and I run it through that filter and I say “OK – what does the scripture say about that?” The scripture says there is but one God. The scripture says that the only way to God is through Jesus – so those things can't be true. Why do I believe the Bible to be true...and they will look at me and say “well how do you know the Bible to be true? It is just written by men?” That's the part of my faith. And so I use that as a filter and, and it works for me. But I've only been able to do that since I've come to understand the scriptures better. And the *How to Understand the Bible* helped me enormously to have even more confidence in how the Bible was put together.

The Ride (Dealing with Challenges) Gets Easier with Time

While experience with challenges can be daunting and even frightening, a number of participants discussed how the process gets easier with experience. Barry and Henry, who had both returned to university studies after negative experiences with challenges, were unified in sharing how the prior experience had made challenges easier to deal with. Anthony, who paints a picture of “the ride” of dealing with challenges, describes how the ride got a little easier with experience:

It was a roller coaster, but it eventually got to the point where it mellowed out and I was able to enjoy what I was riding. Kind of like riding – it's the difference between...the steel beamed roller-coaster and the wooden one. The wooden one is rocky and bumpy (laugh) you feel like you are going to fall out of it. But the steel beam one, it coasts, it is faster, and you tend not to feel as many bumps.

Elaine dealt with challenges in the classroom as well as in personal life that caused her to evaluate her beliefs. She reports that she has developed a confidence that overshadows the power of challenges. "I tend to take it on now instead of running because...some of these classes have developed that confidence." She describes the strength developed from challenges:

They've helped develop that confidence even further because when I went in there, when I was challenged, I was able to stand up. And every time, you know it's like every time you lift that weight, your arm gets stronger. Every time you stand up to a challenge, um, whether you are successful or not successful in standing up to it, you can use it to make yourself stronger. Because even when you are not successful you can use it "ok, this is what I did. I don't have to do that next time." And you can use that to work from.

As evidenced by the data, this experience of choice was not a simple decision to either say yes or no to a set of propositions. This conclusion would be an unfair oversimplification of the participants' pathway through choices. Some chose to sit on the material, testing it against the Bible. Others took their questions home to discuss them with spouses or pastors. Still others interpreted the challenge as a growth opportunity with dividends that surpass the resolution of the crisis. Like a muscle growing in strength through use, the ability to successfully navigate the world of choice became stronger as the participants found resolution to their questions.

The Overall Structure

The above data analysis can be interpreted to express three themes that stood out against the ground of the participants' expectations. Each theme must be understood in relation to the ground, and as interconnected with other themes. This relationship represented in Figure 2. In the illustration, each theme is inter-related with the remaining themes, as represented by the triangle. The teacher helped to create the challenging environment. The individual's opportunity for choice was encouraged by both the environment and the teacher. Conversely, if the teacher was perceived as being "out to destroy the faith" of the learner, this in turn directly influenced the choices of the participant. All of these themes stand out against the ground of expectation. At the center of the triangle is the participant as an individual: "Me and My Beliefs". He/she is located at the center of the triangle because each theme that stands out both affects the learner, and is also affected by the learner.

Participant Response to the Overall Structure

In the final step of my analysis, I emailed the participants an outline of the thematic structure (see appendix E). Theoretically, if the thematic structure is depictive of the experience of the participants, it should ring true to them. Three participants responded via email, all agreeing with the overall structure. The following comment received from Henry illustrates his response to the findings:

I feel you were right on track with the summary. The college environment is extremely challenging. The insight you have discovered into the area of "expectation" is interesting to me...and makes sense. For I have been witness to

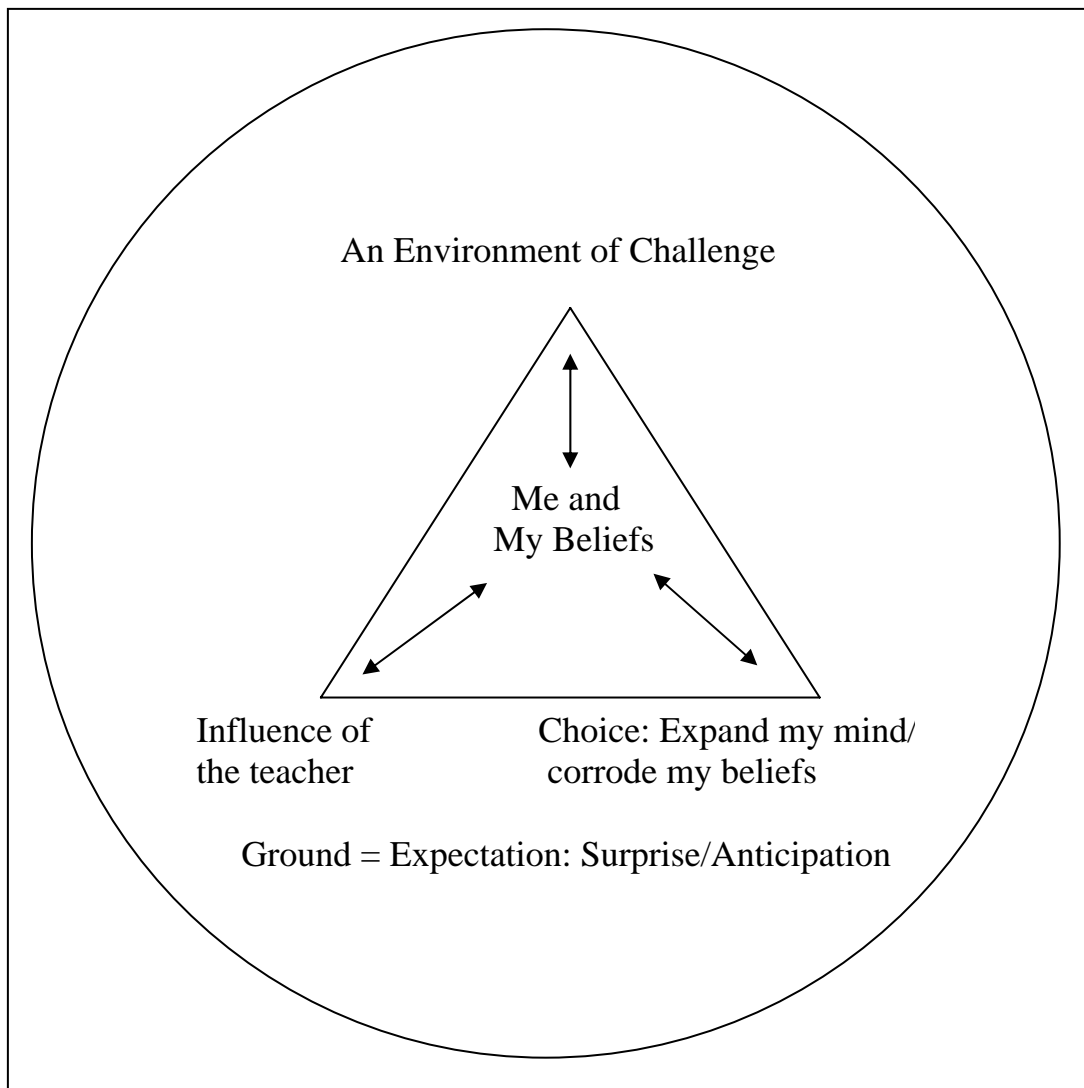


Figure 2 – Final Thematic Structure

many of my peers who I am certain did not expect to be challenged but believed that Religion professors had the same stance on theological issues as they did, only to be deeply mistaken which seemed in some instances to cause much confusion and despair, and yet in others gratitude over a newfound insight.

Barry also resonated with the words of the thematic summary. In the opening of his response he stated,

Your summarization rings very true to me, in particular the challenges to previous held views about the history, and nature of the Bible. Also, giving students the task of proving the existence of God, when that was a given throughout their life, was frustrating. I also believe that the more firmly a person believes in his religious beliefs, the more powerful, more memorable, and more potentially upsetting that an open challenge can be.

Thomas and Pollio (2002) state, phenomenological research is “validated by its readers” (p. 42). As can be seen from the words of at least two participants, they concur that this structure is an accurate description of the essence of the experience.

Participants in this study experienced an atmosphere ripe with challenges that engaged their beliefs, their influences, their backgrounds, even their identities. For many, this was a powerful experience, described in often rather violent terms. These challenges occurred quickly in the learning environment with a tone being set that offered either safety for the engagement of ideas, or danger to one’s existing belief structure.

Professors stood out in the classroom environment as challengers and guides. For some they set a tone that created a safe space for the participants, while for others they were perceived as the source of danger, challenging the participants’ beliefs and identity.

These challenges led the participants to a crossroads of choice. Would they engage these newly discovered challenges, or retreat into their comfort zones, avoiding the dangerous waters of challenge and change?

Another Way to Look at the Thematic Structure

Phenomenology is a study of the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by participants. The previous analysis outlined the experience as it stood out for them. A further question now needs to be asked of the description: what does this experience mean to the participants? To gain a deeper description of the experience of having one's beliefs challenged in a religion class, I am writing a description of the experience in the first person as a composite of the different participant descriptions, with an emphasis on the abundance of rich metaphors expressed in the participants' words.

The experience of challenges is a powerful one that is sometimes frightening because it seeks to change my identity and my way of understanding something by corroding my religious traditions. Depending on how I deal with the new idea, I feel frightened or safe about the change, which I evaluate in terms of whether it is either known/new and or true/false. If I perceive the challenge as true, I feel comfortable, open and engaged; if I perceive the challenge as false, I feel the instructor has tried to manipulate me and I close up for the rest of the class. The experience takes place within a context of expectation and anticipation about how the class will be run and how the material will be discussed.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined a thematic structure based on the words of the participants in the study. Each experienced a challenge to one of their beliefs in an undergraduate religion class. Their experience was grounded by their level of expectation for their beliefs to be challenged. Those who were surprised by the challenges they encountered spoke of the challenges in very powerful, and sometimes even violent, words. A higher level of expectation seemed to mollify the impact of particular challenges.

Three themes stood out against the ground of expectation: 1) the religion

classroom is an environment where you are challenged, 2) the influential role of the teacher; and 3) choice: expand my mindset/not let it corrode my beliefs. This structure is illustrated in Figure 2. The three themes are interconnected to signify how each one directly influences the others. For example, the influential role of the teacher sets the tone for an environment of challenge. The environment then serves as a catalyst for decisions made by participants to deal with challenges. All of this occurs against the ground of students' expectations of being challenged. The individual is placed at the center of the triangle because who they are and what they believe is in constant interaction with the environment, the teacher, and student choices. They influence the process and the process influences them.

In this chapter, I have used the words of the participants to illustrate their perceptions of what it is like to have a belief challenged in an undergraduate religion class. In Chapter Six, I will further discuss this thematic structure, make connections to concepts in the literature, offer recommendations for applications to practice, and will present options for further research.

Chapter 6

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Van Manen (1990) states that phenomenological research is best described as a quest, a search for understanding. My quest began as a professor teaching undergraduate religion classes – Introduction to the Old Testament and Introduction to the New Testament – in a private college. Each semester I observed students struggling with questions raised regarding the origin and nature of the Bible, the interpretation of biblical and historical events, and challenges to their traditional religious beliefs. Some chose to actively engage the challenging questions and seemed to flourish under the experience. Others sat passively, interested only in completing a requirement for graduation. Others seemed to openly struggle with asking questions that forced them to call their personal beliefs into question. After six years of teaching these courses, I entered the Ph.D. program in Adult Education at the University of Tennessee and began a deeper study of adult learning. This led me to reflect on the experience I had witnessed repeatedly over the years, further informed by the literature on adult learning, epistemological development, and spiritual development. This reflection culminated in the following question that drives this study: what is the experience of adult students who experience having a belief challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion course?

Study in Review

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand the lived experiences of students who have experienced having a belief challenged or questioned in an

undergraduate religion class. The phenomenological research method developed at the University of Tennessee was utilized to gain deeper insight into this experience (Pollio et al., 1997; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Eight adult students were interviewed about their experience, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. The interviews began with the following opening query: “tell me about a time when you had a belief questioned or challenged in your undergraduate religion class.” The interviews were open-ended, with follow-up questions being driven by the words of the participants rather than a pre-set list of questions. This is keeping with the adage “what I am aware of reveals what is meaningful to me” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 14).

Participants in this study experienced challenges to their beliefs in a number of areas. Some described challenges to their previously held theological beliefs. Questions were raised about the nature of the Bible, the historical accuracy of events described in the Bible, and the existence of God. Others encountered very different challenges: encounters with diversity in the classroom, unexpected teaching approaches, personal prejudices, and an unexpected openness by others that participants assumed would have a more closed or judgmental attitude.

Three major themes emerged from the interview data. The participants described having experienced an **environment where they were challenged** and that challenge produced very diverse and powerful challenges to their beliefs. This environment of challenge was established quickly in the evolution of the class process. A second theme was that **professors played an influential role** by modeling openness and setting a tone that encouraged openness. Their role was perceived positively by some participants, while others had more negative experiences with professors, each affecting the

participants' openness to challenges. This environment produced questions that caused them to **make significant choices** about what they would do with the newly encountered information. Would they choose to "expand their mindset", or choose to not allow the challenges to "corrode what they already believe?" Participants tested, or "filtered" the new learning through existing knowledge and beliefs, the most noticeable of these being the Bible.

These experiences, which were often very powerful, took place in the context of the students' expectations for being challenged. The more surprise they encountered, the more powerful the experience. Expectation was in some cases the product of influential words of others like pastors, leaders, and friends; however others were influenced by previous educational and life experiences. While expectations had a powerful effect on the participants, how they dealt with the challenge was not necessarily driven by the existence or non-existence of expectancy.

Discussion of Findings

In the following section I will discuss the findings of the study and make connections with the literature. The ground and themes one and two both contain findings that focus on the role of professors in regard to expectations and setting a tone for the learning environment. I did not address this in the literature review, so some new literature will be introduced in the discussion. The ground of the experience, and each theme, will be discussed in the order described in Chapter Five.

The Ground of the Experience

One of the more surprising revelations from this study for me as the researcher was the discovery of the ground of their experiences: expectation. While I was struggling to ascertain what was underlying the participants' varied experiences, Gabriella's interview shed light on the phenomenon that also further illuminated the experience of other participants. Gabriella did not appear to struggle like some other participants when being challenged with new ideas; she simply expected to be challenged. She encountered the challenges, accepted some, rejected others, and walked away feeling good about all of her decisions. Two other participants, who both returned to the university experience after strong negative encounters with dissonant ideas, also spoke of how their expectation of challenges the second time around offered them a solid footing upon which to stand as they encountered challenges. Others did not have this expectation and were surprised by the challenges. This led in some cases to a powerful experience of anxiety or dread for the participants. While I first saw this as a strong theme, further discussion with the phenomenological research group raised the question of whether this was the ground of the experience for the participants. Another reading of all of the transcripts revealed that when participants were experiencing challenges to their beliefs, they experienced this against the backdrop of their expectations.

Expectation is a strong influence on adult students as they enter a learning environment. Pratt (1984) has stated that:

adults come to a first session with expectations of the instructor and expected ways of participating in the course of the workshop (roles). These expectations and roles stem from past experiences and are a means of defining, predicting, and to some extent, controlling a new situation. If there are severe differences between expectations and what actually happens, people will either drop out or

resist the instructional process...If expectations and roles are made clear at the beginning, there is less chance of this happening (p. 8).

Expectation is also appears in Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, Mezirow (1997) states that "adults have acquired a coherent body of experience – assumptions, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses – frames of reference that define their world" (p. 7). When new learning is encountered, this occurs in the context of this body of experience that forms a network of expectancy created by the learner in response to his/her life experiences. This concept of frames of reference is consistent with phenomenology's conceptualization of ground, for the ground of an experience does serve to "define the world" of experience.

Surprise was evident in a number of the participants' experiences of challenges to their beliefs. When they did not anticipate a challenge, it had a powerful effect on the learner. Anthony, Cathy, Darla, Barry, and Francis all spoke of surprise causing them to experience powerful affective reactions when they encountered these challenges. In her discussion of spirituality in adult education, Tisdell (2003) claims that "for the most part, spiritual experiences seem to happen by surprise. These moments of catching a glimpse of the wholeness of Life, the interconnectedness of all things, and one's more authentic self generally cannot be planned" (p. 34-35).

Theme 1 – An Environment Where You Are Challenged

Participants in the study encountered "an environment where you are challenged" in the university religion class (Anthony). Challenges were not ancillary to the classroom process; they were intrinsic components of the undergraduate religion class experience

(Burns, 2006; Burris et al., 1997). Three sub-themes emerged from the data: the diversity of the challenges, the fact that the environment was established quickly, and the power of the challenges.

Diversity of the Challenges

The challenges described by the participants far exceeded my expectations that most participants would discuss challenges to previously held theological beliefs. While theological challenges were discussed at length, participants also described an array of other beliefs that were challenged: the nature of a learning environment, how teaching/learning would occur, how others would relate to them in the classroom, and their prejudices toward others. This is consistent with Wollert's (2003) study of theological students which found that transformative learning "can come from any direction" in an academic setting where religion is the topic of study (p. 87).

Challenging Tone Set Quickly

Participants discussed how a tone for challenge or openness was established quickly in the classroom process. They used words like "quickly", "up front", "when I walked in the door" and "right now" to describe this immediacy. The initial moments of a teaching encounter have been a topic of discussion in adult learning literature (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Brookfield, 1991; Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Knowles, 1980; Pratt, 1984, 2002; Rogers, 2001; Sisco, 1991; Wlodkowski, 1990). Hiemstra and Sisco (1990) write about the importance of the initial session of any teaching/learning environment involving adult learners: "It is particularly important for the instructor to set the correct tone during the first session – this is where learners form personal attitudes about the subject, instructor, and the instructional process" (p. 82). This was truly the case for a

number of participants in this study. The initial session(s) of the class set a tone that interfaced with the expectations the students brought to the learning environment either to reinforce presupposed expectations or to challenge these expectations openly. Adult and university educators would be well served to consider the opening moments of the classes they lead.

Powerful Challenges

The challenges encountered by participants were perceived as being powerful enough to cause the learner emotional distress. Brookfield (1987) describes the process of leaving behind assumptions as a “wrenching experience” with the usual tendency to hang on to the assumptions or to modify them to fit the situation (p. 27). He contends that the process requires a “trigger event” to push the individual to the point of assessing assumptions. Brookfield (1991) states that “Learning is not a rational, bloodless, ascetic phenomenon...[it is] an activity invested with such significance by students, and one in which their fragile egos face such potential threats, that it would be unnatural for them not to experience it emotionally” (p. 58-59). Mezirow (2000) describes the powerful nature of learning as affecting the entire person: “Cognition has strong affective and conative dimensions; all the sensitivity and responsiveness of the person participates in the invention, discovery, interpretation, and transformation of meaning” (p. 6). He then goes on to state that transformative learning, “is often an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions under-girding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change” (p. 6-7). Adult learning in a context where assumptions are called into question has the potential to be laden with emotions that may affect the learner’s engagement of the experience and

the subsequent outcomes of the experience (Illeris, 2002; Jarvis, 2006).

When learning occurs in a setting that so closely touches on issues of spirituality, the potential for powerful emotional responses is heightened due to the existential nature of the spiritual experience (Streib, 2001; Tisdell, 2003). Wollert's (2003) assertion that biblical studies classes possess a power to cause discomfort and confusion also was evident in the experiences of participants in this study. Nord (2002) states that the university religion course has the task of encountering the "existential dimensions of life – about ultimate concerns and religious truth claims" (p. 24). According to Streib (2001), this has been too often overlooked in more cognitive driven approaches to faith development.

The literature review in Chapter Two outlined terms commonly used by learning theorists to describe this encounter with challenges: disequilibrium (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), disorienting dilemma (Mezirow & Associates, 2000), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), disjuncture (Jarvis, 2006). All of these terms are steeped with uncertainty and a level of emotion. This experience is identified as the "beginning of learning" (Jarvis, 1993). Jarvis (2006) defines "disjuncture" as that moment in our experience of the world "when time stops"... "when our biological repertoire is no longer sufficient to cope automatically with our situation, so that our unthinking harmony with the world is disturbed and we feel unease" (p. 16). This unease moves the learner to discover a resolution, and this process of discovery is the essence of learning that creates change in the learner.

Central to Mezirow's concept of transformative learning are what he terms "disorienting dilemmas". These trigger events lead to self examination accompanied by

subsequent “feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). The challenges encountered in this study did trigger self-examination for many of the participants, in keeping with Mezirow’s conceptualization. This recent description of the feelings that can accompany the disorienting dilemma is noticeably different than Mezirow’s (1991) earlier discussion where he identified the feelings of “guilt or shame” that often accompany disorienting dilemmas (p. 168). I did not note any feelings of guilt or shame accompanying these dilemmas, although anger was evident in a number of protocols (Barry, Darla, and to some extent Henry and Elaine). This evidence seems consistent with Taylor’s (2000) contention that “the journey of transformation is more individualistic, fluid, and recursive than originally thought” (p. 292).

Theme 2 – The Influential Role of the Professor

Professors held a key position for many of the participants in this study. They set a tone of openness and challenge, and modeled these values in the classroom. This affected both the learning environment and the attitudes of the participants. While some perceived this in a positive light, others described negative reactions that affected their level of engagement in the class.

The Professor Set a Tone of Openness and Challenge

Merriam and Brockett (1997) describe the potential influence of the “psychological environment” of the learning setting. For teachers, creating a climate open to genuine exchange means attending to the fears and doubts the students bring with them to the classroom. It involves:

Helping learners feel welcome and at ease in the opening minutes of the activity.

It also involves attending to the fears and doubts that adults may be experiencing. And it recognizes that learners do not come to the learning situation with a 'blank slate;' rather, they come with a range of life experiences – some of which can serve as possible learning resources...and others... that can detract from learning (p. 150).

In his presentation of his theory of andragogy, Knowles (1980) discussed the tenor of the classroom as vital to a “superior condition for learning”. He described the learning environment as “characterized by physical comfort, mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences” (p. 57). Schrader’s (2004) study of epistemic beliefs in the classroom found that students are more likely to successfully engage challenges in a safe environment. The environmental tone perceived by some of the participants in this study included respect, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences. These are depictive of a safe environment for the engagement of ideas and challenging of assumptions. Francis describes looking at the roots of Christianity in a “safe environment”.

Parker Palmer (1998) speaks of the power of “giving voice” to the thought patterns of students in class. He views this role as significant, powerful enough that “the group does not have a voice until the teacher gives it one” (p. 80). Participants in this study described teachers who set tones of challenge, openness, acceptance, and questioning ideas. They did this by openly stating that there would be no place for judgmental attitudes in the classroom and that their classrooms were environments in which questions were not only welcomed, but expected. These professors stood out in their context and created an environment that allowed for the challenges the students encountered. The “received voice” afforded to students allowed participants like Cathy, Francis, Elaine, and Anthony to engage their questions in a safe environment.

Part of setting this tone was actively engaging students in questions that led to challenges. In his discussion of educators as mentors, Daloz (1999) colorfully recommends that adult educators “toss little bits of disturbing information in their students’ paths, little facts and observations, insights, perceptions, theories and interpretations – cow plops on the road to truth”. These allow learners to question their worldviews and to entertain alternatives that cause them “to *think* afresh” (p. 217, italics in original). Instructors described in this study set such a tone with instructive words and their active engagement of issues. Participants not only emphasized the words of their professors setting a tone for openness, they also described the professors as models.

Teachers Modeled Questions and Openness

The actions and decisions teachers portray in the classroom have powerful ramifications for what happens in their classroom. In his discussion of the skillful teacher, Brookfield (1991) comments that teachers of adults are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge the significance of their own actions when interacting with students. In an effort to respect the student as the center of the learning endeavor, he states that:

They believe that regarding their own actions as particularly significant within a learning group indicates an unpleasant egoism. They like to think that they are at one with students and that their own actions have no more significance than those of any other member of the learning group. This is patently not the case. (p. 172)

Brookfield contends that what the teacher does in the classroom is “invested with enormous symbolic significance by students” (p. 172). A number of participants picked up on this symbolic significance. This is evident in the interview data when Cathy spoke of how the teacher “instilled that in us just by his actions, by his gentleness, by his openness”, and when Elaine described how the teacher modeled openness by not putting

down her beliefs. Openness was perceived as authentic by the students, and thus aided in creating an environment of trust and openness to questions.

Although some participants had positive reactions, professors' attitudes and openness to challenging existing ideas was perceived in a negative light by a number of participants. Brookfield (1987) states that professors often function as "psychological demolition experts", working in carefully laid out environments that require training and sensitivity (p. 30). Barry viewed teachers as purposefully undermining the faith of students in religion classes. Darla perceived her instructor as condescending toward southern students and uncaring about her concerns. Henry and Gabriella both spoke of teachers being "just professors" whose opinions could be heeded or rejected. These negative perceptions, coupled with an already skeptical attitude toward the professor, can lead to a student attitude that is diametrically opposed to what the professor intends to create and nurture.

Theme 3 – Choosing: Expanding My Mindset/Corroding what I Believe

One noticeable aspect of the participants' experience was that they perceived an ability to choose when confronted with ideas that challenged their beliefs. This is a figural part of the experiences of Barry and Henry when they encountered challenges after returning to the university experience. What earlier had been a difficult and even debilitating experience had become something that could be dealt with in a reflective manner. Perry (1970), in his seminal work on college student development, proposed that the ability to question ideas presented by authority figures is an important component of the college learning experience, as the learner moves from dualistic, to multiplicity,

toward more relativistic thinking. Development of the ability to question those in authority (i.e. teachers/professors) is a central event in the developmental theories outlined in Chapter Two (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky et al., 1986; Kegan, 1994; Kitchener & King, 1981). Fowler's (1981, 1984) Faith Development Theory presents questioning as a hallmark of adult faith, as the individual moves from appealing to authority in Synthetic-Conventional Faith to questioning authority in Individuative-Reflective Faith. A more developed faith must allow for active reflection and engagement of ideas.

Participants encountered an environment of challenge that brought them to a position of choice: do they allow the challenges to "expand" their mindset, or do they not allow the challenges to "corrode their beliefs"? These choices were not necessarily immediate, cataclysmic transformations, but were worked out in the lives of the participants. This is in agreement with Daloz's comment that "transformations rarely, if ever, come about abruptly" (p. 59). One participant repeatedly discussed "holding on" to ideas he encountered in challenges to his beliefs, taking time to process them before acting on them.

Not Allow the Challenges to Corrode what I Believe

Some participants in the study chose not to allow newly presented dissonant ideas to alter their current belief structure, or as Elaine stated, "corrode what they already believed". One interesting way that a couple of the participants dealt with this choice was by appealing to higher authorities that superseded or "trumped" the alternative views they were encountering. Ableson (1957) introduced the term "transcendence" to the cognitive dissonance literature to describe this phenomenon: "the dilemma is transcended

by imbedding the conflicting parts in a new concept instrumental to some higher purpose” (p. 346). When core religious beliefs are disconfirmed, this might be sufficient to evoke dissonance-reduction attempts via transcendence” (Burriss et al., 1997, p. 20). Burriss, Harmon-Jones and Tarpley tested this concept when they presented undergraduate psychology students, who held strong religious beliefs, tragic outcomes to life situations that appeared inconsistent with their beliefs about the nature of God. When given the opportunity to explain these inconsistencies with transcendent ideas (God might allow a person to die in order to protect them; God works in mysterious ways), their affective reactions to the inconsistencies were mollified. The more important the beliefs, the more likely they were to appeal to transcendent ideas. The concept of transcendence is evident in the interviews of two participants. Henry and Elaine both referred to the providence of God when discussing the difficult challenges they experienced. They claimed that the challenges they encountered were God’s will for them to bring them growth in their own belief system. Rather than making changes to their beliefs in response to new information, the appeal to transcendence allowed them to keep the ideas from “corroding their beliefs” while they engaged the challenges and rejected the alternative ideas.

Batson (1975) studied young women who had their beliefs about the divinity of Christ directly challenged by offering information that refuted their faith claims. Those who believed in the divinity of Christ, and also accepted the disconfirming evidence as authentic, actually intensified their original beliefs. Rather than discrediting the new information, or altering their presuppositions, they resolved their dilemma by reinforcing their own belief. Therefore in some instances, “cognitive dissonance can actually intensify original attitudes” (Burns, 2006, p. 4).

Me and My Beliefs

I have situated the statement “me and my beliefs” at the center of the triangle in the thematic diagram to demonstrate how the learner’s identity and beliefs interact with all of the themes. The learner cannot be separated from his or her learning because adult learning is a highly personalized endeavor that involves the entire person – intellect, emotions, experiences, relationships, and personal identity (Illeris, 2002; Jarvis, 2006; Kegan, 1994; Knowles, 1980). Mezirow (2000) clearly situates his adult learning theory as a developmental theory. For the participants in this study, learning involved challenges to their beliefs, and this affected their entire being: their intellect, history, even their identity. Henry illustrates this when he uses the phrase “thinking about who you are” in relation to one of his challenges. Elaine described her own struggle to talk with a family member who had become more liberal in his theology: “I was afraid to talk to people like that because my life was built on my faith”. Her faith conception is integrated with her identity. Barry stated that “your core beliefs are all challenged to the point that you are not sure who you are anymore”. He further stated “you just can’t change yourself overnight and become somebody and ignore everything that you believe in”. One’s identity being implicit in one’s faith or spirituality is consistent with the faith development and spirituality literature outlined in Chapter Two.

Implications for Practice

The experiences of students who have had a belief challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion course shed light on the learning experience. More generally these experiences are informative for practice, both for higher education professors and

for other adult educators.

1. Understand that adult learners are bringing with them a level of expectation to the classroom that may stem from any number of different influences. Religious educators need to be especially aware of this because the questions they may wish to raise have the potential to arrive in the midst of strong warnings from religious leaders and community members about the potential dangers of the classroom that can exacerbate the situation for the learner.
2. The bracketing process made me aware of a strong assumption I was bringing to the classroom: that students in religion classes were dealing with challenges to strong theological beliefs. Theological beliefs were among the various beliefs that were described, but they do not by any means make up the majority of these experiences. For professors of theology, it is important to be aware of the professor's own assumptions about the challenges students are encountering in the classroom experience. It is clear from this study that this limited number of students experienced challenges from a diverse array of sources, not necessarily theological in nature.
3. This study reinforces the adage that adult students bring an array of life experiences to the learning environment that effect the learner's experience of the learning environment (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). First, recognizing the potential influence of prior learning, it would be beneficial for educators of adults, in higher education or less formal environments, to conduct an assessment of previous learning. These assessments could range from formal tests administered in the opening session of a class, to less formal open discussions of the learners'

experiences with materials to be covered in the class. The presuppositions that emerge from prior learning experiences have enormous potential influence on the teaching/learning environment, enough so that the task is worthy of the time investment.

4. Although adult students may be chronologically older than traditional students, it must be considered that they may not be developmentally prepared to engage challenges to their beliefs or assumptions in the classroom. It is important to note that prominent adult development theorists do not attach ages to their stages of development (Belenky et al., 1986; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). This is also true for spiritual development theorists (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 1986), and epistemological development theorists (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1970). In essence, many of these different theorists are discussing a similar phenomenon: how does the learner move from dualistic to relativistic thinking? This lack of age specificity is in recognition that it is experience, rather than chronology, that allows for growth through various stages. This is evident in this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study has shed light on the experience of adult students encountering challenges to their beliefs in an undergraduate religion class. After reflecting on results of this study, I recommend the following research possibilities that could offer further insight into the phenomenon of dealing with challenges (or questions) to previously held beliefs.

1. The participants in this study were all students in a denominationally affiliated

- university that required students to complete two religion courses. Is this experience any different for students studying religion in a state university?
2. It would be beneficial to conduct a similar study with students in courses other than religion courses. While the undergraduate religion class offers a near caricature of the experience, other college courses present powerful challenges to beliefs as well. Biology courses engage questions of evolution that can challenge students' religious worldviews. Sociology, psychology, and philosophy courses often present questions that address the basic world-view of students through questions surrounding the nature of the individual, human interaction, the nature of the mind/body/soul, existence of evil, knowledge construction, the nature of truth, and the existence nature of the Divine.
 3. Participants in this study self-reported that they had encountered challenges to their beliefs in an undergraduate religion course, and all of them continued on in the collegiate experience after these challenges. Other voices that would be interesting to consider would be those of the students who never returned to the educational endeavor after such a challenge. These students would be much more difficult to identify because there is no community of ex-college students. Is the experience of challenge different for these students? How does expectation affect their experience?
 4. The current study sought to take a deeper look into experience, without the goal of developing a theory of the experience. A grounded theory approach to the same experience could offer a better look at how the students navigate the challenges and come to a final resolution to the challenges.

Final Thoughts

One particular benefit of this study for me as the researcher was to see the Thomas and Pollio approach to phenomenology at work. As Pollio has often stated, the approach works for getting to the experience, even when the researcher/interviewer asks an inappropriate question! On a couple of occasions I followed a comment with a prompt that was clearly not in the direction the participant intended to go with the discussion. They would pause, think for a second, and then continue on with their train of thought. When I interjected a yes/no question, they went on with their description of experience. As the interviews continued it was clear that the participants wanted to talk about their stories and what was important to them. As Thomas and Pollio say, if you want to understand someone's experience, ask them!

There was also some initial concern whether the study would get both positive and negative experiences based on the wording of the appeal for participants. This was quickly set aside on the first day when I interviewed two participants in successive interview sessions: the first spoke of a wonderful experience and the second described dropping out of college for years. I depart from this study with a deeper appreciation for the method as a tool to understand lived experience.

I began this experience with a desire to better understand this experience with the intent to improve first my own practice as an educator. The words of the participants have shed great light on what is happening with students in the classroom. My own presuppositions have been brought to light regarding what I think the students are engaging. I have learned that I am definitely not always correct! Discovering ways of assessing previous knowledge, and the kinds of warnings students bring with them to the

classroom will be a worthy endeavor.

The words of Anthony ring in my mind: “I learned more than I wanted to”. I have gained more than I expected from this study. This has been an environment of challenge for me as the researcher, grounded by my own expectations for being challenged by the words of the participants. As is only appropriate in researching lived experience, the quest continues – the quest to more fully understand how learners deal with challenges to their beliefs in the learning experience.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Demographic Data Form

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Race: _____

Undergraduate Major: _____

Current status: Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior

Religion Courses enrolled in/completed:

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of adult students who have encountered questions or challenges to their previously held beliefs in an undergraduate religion course.

INFORMATION

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to share your experience of having a personal belief questioned or challenged in an undergraduate religion course. This interview will be audio taped and last for approximately 1 – 1½ hours. Audiotapes will be transcribed by an outside transcriber who will sign a confidentiality statement. Tapes will be destroyed after transcription. There will be no additional time requirements.

BENEFITS

Participants may benefit from their participation because you will have the opportunity to reflect on your experience as a student when responding to the interview question. Responses may help illuminate aspects of your experience that you had not considered before. Although the findings cannot be generalized, a description of your experiences may benefit other students who have similar demographic characteristics and also professors or programs staff that work with college/university students.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information you provide will be confidential you will be assigned a pseudonym in all transcriptions or reports. The transcriber will sign a statement of confidentiality. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could personally link you to the study. Interview tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's home until after transcription, after which they will be destroyed. Transcripts will be maintained indefinitely without identifiers. Only the researcher and research group will have access to the transcripts. Members of the research group will sign a statement of confidentiality.

_____ Participants initials, page one

COMPENSATION

Baptist University students will receive convocation credit from the University for participating in an interview. If you choose to withdraw from the study after the interview, this credit will not be removed.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study you may contact Steven Frye, at the University of Tennessee Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling at (865) 974-8145. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Research Compliance Services section of the Office of Research at the University of Tennessee at (865) 974-3466, or the Institutional Review Board at Baptist University at (555) 555-5555.

PARTICIPATION

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

CONSENT

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's name (print) _____

Participant's signature _____

Researcher's name (print) _____

Researcher's signature _____

Date _____

Appendix C

Email Listserv Message

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of adult students who have encountered challenges to their previously held beliefs in an undergraduate religion class.

I am interested in talking to students who have had this experience in an undergraduate religion class. All replies will be held in strict confidentiality. Participants will not be identified individually on any reports that are generated from this study.

If you are interested in taking part in this study, please email me at sfrye1@utk.edu.

Appendix D

Participant Response Request Email

Participant,

I appreciate your participation in my dissertation study of students who have experienced challenges to a belief in an undergraduate religion course. When we met in _____, I mentioned that I would be sending a summary of the findings from the study to participants for their feedback. I have attached a copy of that summary for your consideration. Please read the cover letter and the summary and email me with any comments you might have.

Thank you,

Steve Frye

Sent June 8, 2007

Appendix E

Letter to participants

Dear _____,

Last _____ you were interviewed for a study of students who experienced having a belief challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion class. As I shared with you in that initial meeting, your interaction is important in this process. Your initial interview was extremely helpful, and now I am asking for further input from you. I have been analyzing the data from these interviews and have discovered a number of themes common to all those who were interviewed. While each participant's experience was truly unique, I have attempted to describe the underlying essence of this phenomenon as experienced by the whole group. I am now interested in your reactions. The following page contains a short description of those findings: the types of challenges encountered and the themes that stood out for the participants. Please read this description to see how well it rings true to your experience. Please email me any reactions or feedback you have to this description.

I appreciate your continued participation in this study. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Steve Frye

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of adult students who have experienced having a belief challenged or questioned in an undergraduate religion course. The following is a summary of the essence of this experience for all of the participants.

Participants encountered challenges to a number of different personal beliefs. Some described challenges to their previously held theological beliefs. Questions were raised about the nature of the Bible, the historical accuracy of events described in the Bible, and the existence of God. Others encountered very different challenges: encounters with diversity in the classroom, unexpected teaching approaches, personal prejudices, and an unexpected openness by others that participants assumed would have a more closed or judgmental attitude.

Three major themes were uncovered from the interview data. The participants have experienced an **environment where they were challenged** that produced very diverse and powerful challenges to their beliefs. This environment of challenge was established quickly in the evolution of the class. **Professors played an influential role in the process** by modeling openness and setting a tone that encouraged openness. Their role was perceived positively by some participants, while others had more negative experiences with professors, each affecting the participants' openness to challenges. This environment yielded questions that caused them to **make significant choices** about what they would do with this newly encountered information. Would they choose to "expand their mindset", or choose to not allow the challenges to "corrode what they already believe?"

These experiences, which were often very powerful, took place in the context of the students' expectations for being challenged. The more surprise they encountered, the more powerful the experience. Expectation was in some cases the product of influential words of others like pastors, leaders, and friends. Others were influenced by previous educational and life experiences. While expectations had a powerful effect on the participants, how they dealt with the challenge was not necessarily driven by the existence or non-existence of expectancy.

Appendix F

Follow-up email to participants

Participant,

10 days ago I sent you an email with a summary of results from my study of students who have experienced a challenge to one of their beliefs in an undergraduate religion class. I hope you have had a chance to look over the attached document that summarizes the basic themes of what people shared about their experiences. I am interested in what you have to say about the summary. Please email me and let me know how you think this summary compares with your own experience. I am trying to finish the written report of the study by the end of June, so please send your responses as soon as possible.

I appreciate you taking part in this project.

Steve Frye
Assistant Professor
Counseling and Psychology
Tennessee Technological University
Cookeville, TN 38501
(931) 372-3475

Sent June 19, 2007

Appendix G

Research Team Member's Pledge of Confidentiality

As a member of this project's research team, I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews. The information in these transcripts has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information in these transcriptions with anyone except the primary researcher of this project, his/her doctoral chair, or other members of this research team. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Research Team Member

Date

Appendix H

Transcriber's Pledge of Confidentiality

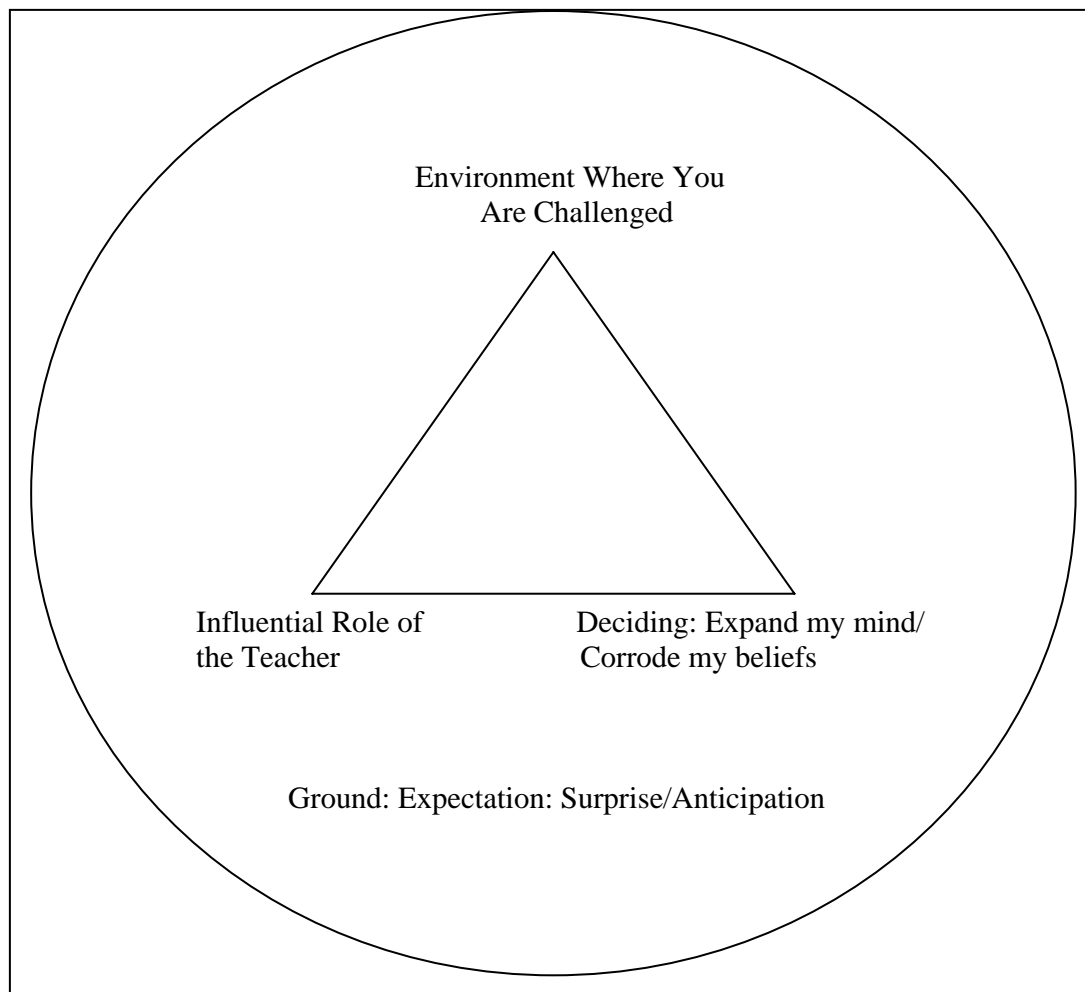
As a transcribing typist of this research project, I understand that I will be hearing tapes of confidential interviews. The information on these tapes has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information on these tapes with anyone except the primary researcher of this project. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Transcribing Typist

Date

Appendix I

*How Adult Students Experience Having Their Beliefs
Challenged in an Undergraduate Religion Class:
A Phenomenological Analysis*



**An environment
where you are
challenged:**

- Diversity of the challenges
- Tone of challenge/openness set quickly
- Powerful challenges

**Influential role of the
teacher:**

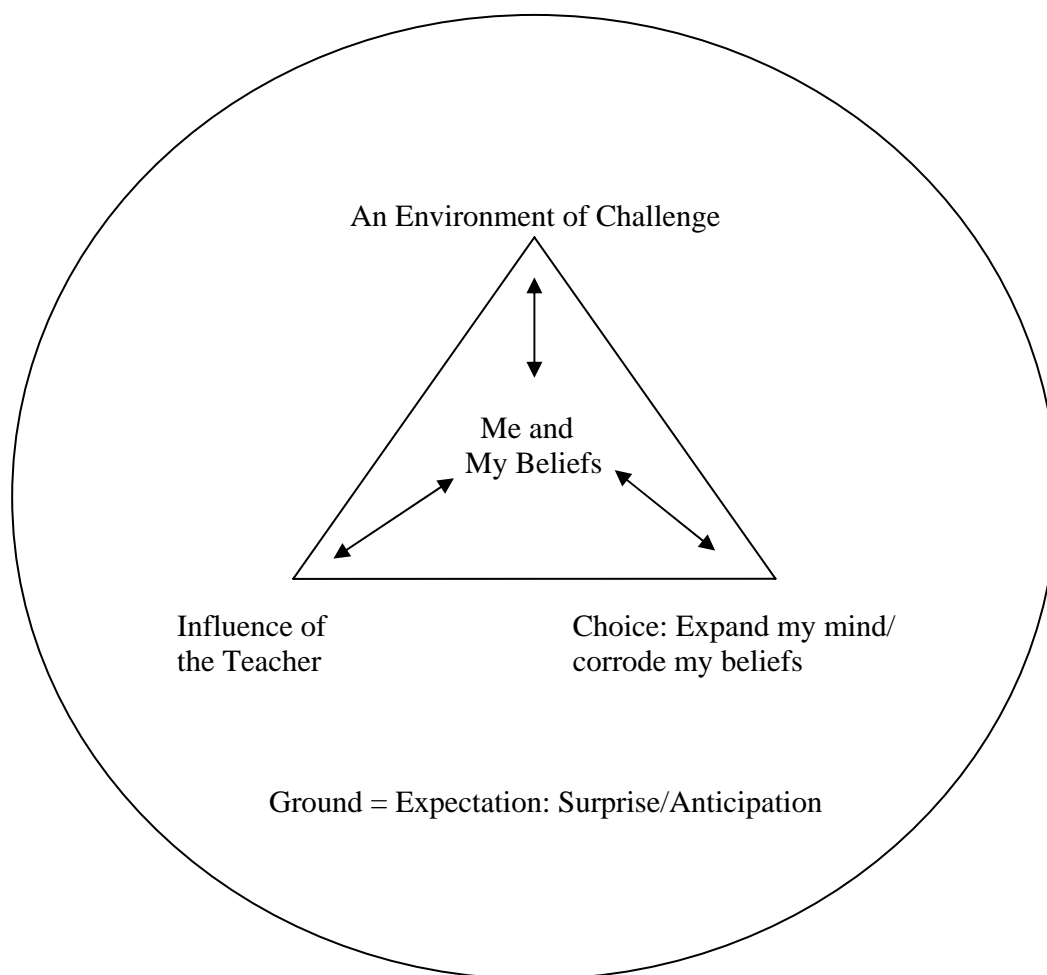
- Set a tone of openness/challenge
- Modeled openness/challenge
- Perceived both positively and negatively

**Deciding: expanding
or corroding**

- Expand/broaden my mindset
- Not going to change what I already believed
- Testing/filtering the experience
- The “ride” gets easier with time

Appendix J

*How Adult Students Experience Having Their Beliefs
Challenged in an Undergraduate Religion Class:
A Phenomenological Analysis*



VITA

Steven Blake Frye was born in Altoona, PA on July 3, 1963. He graduated from Altoona Area High School in June 1981. He completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religion at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, TN 1986; a Master of Divinity degree from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo in 1988; and a Masters in Theology degree in Biblical Studies from Duke University in 1998.

Steven has served as a pastor and staff member of churches in Missouri, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Tennessee. He has also worked in social ministries and social services as Director of Appalachian Outreach and Samaritan House in Jefferson City, TN, and as a supervisor with the State of Tennessee's Caring for Children Program.

In 1992 Steven began teaching as an adjunct in the Religion Department at Carson-Newman College, and continued until 2006. In 2003, he enrolled the University of Tennessee to pursue doctoral studies in Adult Education. During three years of full-time studies he worked as a graduate assistant in the Adult Education program, and taught courses in Applied Educational Psychology and Career and Personal Development at the University. He is currently an assistant professor in the department of Counseling and Psychology at Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville, TN.