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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

COUNSELING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RELIGIOUS/  
SPIRITUAL TRANSITIONS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Lexi Gene Heringer Wimmer

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education  
Counselor Education and Supervision

May 2024

This Dissertation by: Lexi Gene Heringer Wimmer

Entitled: *Counseling Students' Experience of Religious/Spiritual Transitions: A Narrative Inquiry*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in the Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of Counselor Education and Supervision.

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

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## ABSTRACT

Wimmer, Lexi Gene Heringer. *Counseling students' experience of religious/spiritual transitions: A narrative inquiry*. Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2023

Religious and spiritual (R/S) identities are not stagnant constructs, as may often be believed (Strawn, 2019). The landscape of religion and spirituality is shifting rapidly, and these changes point to individual experiences of R/S transition. One place these kinds of individual changes are occurring is within counselor training. Counselor training can be a transformative experience, and these transformations can include religious and spiritual changes (Nogueiras et al., 2019). Little research explores a broad understanding of religious/spiritual transition, and this gap widens when considering counselors-in-training (CITs) specifically.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to more fully understand the narratives of counseling students who have experienced religious/spiritual transition during their counselor training. The study sought to understand the narrative arc of the process of R/S transition, including how it related to their personal experiences, overall training experiences, and their counselor identity development. Six participants completed the study through participating in an initial semi-structured interview and member-reflection interview. Five of the six participants also provided a visual artifact representing their religious and spiritual transition. Meta categories along temporal lines relating to religious/spiritual transition emerged. Before, During, After, and Overarching Contextual Factors outline the holistic-content analysis of the participant narratives. The Beginning category outlined the importance of formative experiences and how they

connected to motivations for pursuing counseling. During contained the most primary themes including Catalysts for Transition, Kinds of Changes During Counseling Program, Characteristics Needed for Change, Counselor Identity, and Counseling Program Experience which included facilitative and unhelpful responses. During experiences were comprised of a variety of experiences that are often disorienting and destabilizing. After explored outcomes of R/S transition as well as recommendations for programs. Finally, overarching contextual factors explored factors that moved across temporal bounds including Systemic Considerations, Religious/Spiritual Identity as a Journey. Themes from the visual artifacts were also explored using a modified version of visuo-textual analysis (N. Brown & Collins, 2021). Considerations from the visual artifacts alone, connected with text, and then woven together created overarching themes from the visual analysis. Overarching considerations included the nature of religious and spiritual change as ongoing as well as iterative, and the role that nature plays in spiritual understanding.

Limitations of the current study along with future directions for research were explored. The findings indicated a need for counselor educators to attend to religious/spiritual transitions in counselors-in-training. Several recommendations were provided both from the voices of participants as well as interpretation from the holistic narratives. The findings of this study pointed to the presence of R/S transitions in CITs, and moreover, the impacts of these experiences on personal experiences, counselor training, and professional counselor identity development. This study pointed to the importance of counselor educators attending to transformational changes to best support counseling student development as they process through religious/spiritual transitions in whatever way is best for their wellness.

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There are so many people that have supported me and this research over the years. There is simply no way to put into words the ways all these important figures, and those not even included here, have influenced this project. I am grateful to the University of Northern Colorado. The only doctoral program I applied to, became my second home (even virtually) for the past 4 years. I am grateful to all the faculty and students for all the learning you shared with me. There are so many conversations, classes, and interactions I've had with faculty and students alike that have shaped my growth during this process.

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I am so very grateful to the participants of this study who trusted me with their stories. I do not take lightly the gravity of what you all have shared with me. I hope to have done some amount of justice to your stories and that this work can spur on more stories being shared. I am so grateful for your vulnerability, your careful feedback, and your open-hearted reflections. You six will remain with me, and my own story has been changed by you.

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To my husband, Brent, where to begin? I'll begin by reminding you that this whole thing is your fault. It was you who pushed me to go back to school, even when I said the timing wasn't right. (It never would've been right to me.). And it was hard! Thank you for sticking with me through it. Anytime there was a childcare emergency, I had *something* that kept me from being



able to watch the kids. And you did it. You picked up my share in so many ways. Words can never express how thankful I am to you for pushing me, motivating me, and harassing me to finish this thing. You are my partner in all the depths of meaning that word holds. You believed in me when I didn't, you saw the end of this project when I didn't, and you encouraged my curiosity when I was overwhelmed. You won the hard earned degree of doctorate spouse.

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Thank you for reading books by the woo woo authors I was into at the time, making space for uncomfortable conversations, and for raising me to be the kind of person who asks the hard questions, even when it is of the beliefs my family raised me with. Without you, my own personal journey would have taken a very different shape, and ultimately this research might never have had its space to grow.

One of my favorite poems, and there are few as I'm not a poetry reader, is "God our Mother" by Allison Woodard. It ends saying:

To be a mother is to be the first voice listened to,

And the first disregarded;

To be a mender of broken creations

And comfort to the distraught children  
Whose hands wrought them.

To be a mother is to be a Touchstone  
and the Source,  
Bestower of names,  
Influencer of identities;  
Life giver,  
Life shaper,  
Empath,  
Healer,  
and  
Original Love.

Mom, thank you for being the kind of mother who opened me up to this expansive way of  
understanding God. I love you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		
I.	INTRODUCTION .....	1
	Statement of the Problem.....	4
	Purpose of the Study .....	5
	Research Question .....	6
	Significance of the Study .....	6
	Key Terms.....	7
	Religion.....	8
	Spirituality.....	9
	Spiritual Struggles.....	10
	Religious/Spiritual Transition.....	11
	List of Acronyms .....	11
	Summary .....	12
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW .....	14
	Setting the Stage .....	14
	Theoretical Underpinnings.....	18
	Religion and Spirituality Overview .....	22
	Impacts on Mental Health.....	23
	Spiritual Struggle .....	24
	Spiritual Development Theories .....	28
	Faith Development Theory .....	29
	Gilligan’s Ethics of Care.....	31
	Transpersonal Psychology .....	32
	Integral Psychology .....	32
	Common Themes in Spiritual Development Models.....	34
	Religion and Spirituality in Counseling.....	35
	Social and Cultural Diversity.....	36
	Professional Standards .....	37
	Religious/Spiritual Beliefs of Counselors.....	39

## CHAPTER

### II. continued

Religious and/or Spiritual Transitions .....	41
Terminology.....	42
Spiritual Change.....	44
Conversion .....	45
Spiritual Transformation.....	47
Religious/Spiritual Transition Triggers .....	48
Deconstruction .....	49
Impacts of Transition .....	50
Counselor Development.....	51
Counselor Development Theories.....	52
Development as Disorienting.....	53
Development of Skills and Dispositions.....	54
Development of Cognitive Complexity .....	55
Addressing Shame and Nondisclosure in Development.....	56
Values Conflicts in Development .....	57
Summary .....	57
Counselors-in-Training Undergoing Religious/ Spiritual Transitions.....	58
Summary .....	60
III. METHODOLOGY .....	62
Narrative Inquiry.....	63
Philosophical Assumptions of Narrative Inquiry.....	64
Narrative Inquiry in Practice.....	65
Purpose.....	67
Research Question .....	68
Researcher Stance .....	68
Procedures.....	73
Participants.....	73
Sample Size.....	74
Participant Recruitment .....	75
Delimitations.....	76
Semi-Structured Interview .....	77
Visual Artifact.....	78

## CHAPTER

### III. continued

Data Analysis .....	79
Ethical Considerations .....	81
Trustworthiness .....	83

Credibility .....	83
Transferability .....	84
Dependability .....	84
Confirmability .....	85
Authenticity .....	86

Conclusion .....	87
------------------	----

### IV. FINDINGS.....89

Participants.....	89
-------------------	----

Individual Narratives .....	90
-----------------------------	----

Melissa .....	90
---------------	----

Piper... ..	92
-------------	----

Rachel. ....	93
--------------	----

Jordan.....	95
-------------	----

Sydney.....	96
-------------	----

Tori.....	97
-----------	----

Meta Categories and Major Themes .....	98
--	----

Beginning.....	100
----------------	-----

Formative Religious Experiences .....	100
---------------------------------------	-----

Prior Transitions.....	102
------------------------	-----

Motivations for Being a Counselor.....	104
--	-----

Beliefs from the Beginning.....	106
---------------------------------	-----

During. ....	109
--------------	-----

Catalysts for Religious/Spiritual Transition.....	110
---	-----

Social Justice Issues.....	111
----------------------------	-----

Conflict Between Religious and Personal Beliefs .....	113
---	-----

Existential Questions .....	116
-----------------------------	-----

Clients as Catalysts .....	117
----------------------------	-----

Outside of Program .....	119
--------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER

### IV. continued

Kinds of Changes During Counselor Program .....	120
Definition of Religious/Spiritual Transition .....	120
Deconstruction .....	122
Changes in Beliefs and Spiritual Practices .....	125
Professional Change is Personal Change .....	128
Characteristics Needed During Religious/Spiritual Transition....	130
Courage to Face Doubts.....	130
Exploration.....	131
Risk-Taking.....	133
Counselor Identity.....	134
Counseling Program Experiences .....	136
Public University Counselor Education.....	136
Facilitative Responses.....	138
Unhelpful Responses .....	142
After.....	146
Outcomes of Religious/Spiritual Transition .....	146
Recommendations for Programs.....	150
Overarching Contextual Factors .....	152
Systemic Considerations .....	153
Religious/Spiritual Identity as a Journey .....	157
Visual Artifact.....	162
Melissa .....	162
Piper... ..	164
Rachel. ....	166
Jordan.....	166
Sydney.....	168
Tori.....	169
Common Elements Across Artifacts.....	171
Weaving Together Artifacts and Themes .....	172
Conclusion .....	173

CHAPTER		
V.	DISCUSSION .....	175
	Discussion .....	175
	Purpose of the Study .....	175
	Research Question .....	176
	Beginning .....	176
	During .....	178
	Catalysts for Religious/Spiritual Transition.....	179
	Kinds of Changes During Counselor Program .....	183
	Characteristics Needed and Counselor Development.....	186
	Counseling Program Experiences .....	187
	After... ..	189
	Outcomes of Religious/Spiritual Transition .....	189
	Overarching Contextual Factors .....	192
	Systemic Considerations .....	193
	Religious/Spiritual Identity as a Journey .....	195
	Limitations .....	198
	Implications.....	199
	Implications for Counselor Education Programs.....	200
	Transformational Learning in Counseling.....	201
	Links Between Religious/Spiritual Transition and Counselor Development .....	206
	Spirituality in Counseling Course.....	207
	Support Outside Counselor Education Programs .....	208
	Future Research .....	210
	Conclusion .....	211
	REFERENCES .....	213
APPENDIX		
A.	Demographic Questionnaire .....	241
B.	Informed Consent.....	243
C.	Recruitment Email .....	246

D.	Semi-Structured Interview Protocol .....	248
E.	Member Reflection Protocol.....	250
F.	Institutional Review Board Approval .....	252



## LIST OF TABLES

Table	
1.	Participant Demographics .....90

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		
1.	Melissa's Visual Artifact .....	163
2.	Piper's Visual Artifact .....	164
3.	Jordan's Visual Artifact .....	167
4.	Sydney's Visual Artifact.....	168
5.	Tori's Visual Artifact.....	170

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Religion and spirituality play an integral role in the experiences of many Americans. Even so, the landscape of religion is shifting dramatically in the United States. About 30% of Americans now identify as religiously unaffiliated, or commonly called “nones” (Pew Research Center, 2021a). At the same time, belief in God remains high, even as many religions are experiencing declining numbers (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). When focusing on young people, the picture becomes even more nuanced. Simply stated, being affiliated or unaffiliated does not capture the diversity of spirituality present in Generation Z. For example, 60% of unaffiliated young people are at least slightly spiritual, and 38% of unaffiliated respondents said they are in fact religious (Springtide Research Institute, 2020). Likewise, more than half (52%) of affiliated participants reported having little or no trust in organized religion (Springtide Research Institute, 2020). This research is supported by others that have sought to understand the nuances of unaffiliated individuals. Ammerman (2013) outlined four different kinds of religiously unaffiliated categories, while Lim et al. (2010) identified liminal “nones” as those occupying an in-between space, and are not necessarily heading in one direction or another.

Religious and spiritual (R/S) identity does not appear to be the stagnant demographic marker it once was. Instead of (or perhaps in addition to) simple categorical markers, deeper understanding of R/S beliefs and behaviors is necessary. Given the changes in R/S identity markers in nationwide aggregate shifts, individual shifts must also be occurring. Individuals

experiencing some kind of change in their religious/spiritual beliefs and practices is occurring, and more commonly than was previously expected (Jackson et al., 2021). Religious/spiritual identity encompasses several aspects of an individual including political affiliation, religious community, family ties, beliefs, values, practices and rituals, and other behaviors (Cashwell & Young, 2011; Hackett, 2014).

Counseling programs, like similar kinds of graduate programs, may be transformational for students, eliciting significant changes in beliefs and professional identities (Damianakis et al., 2020; Mauch, 2016). A study of social work students explored the transformational nature of graduate education, noting changes in knowledge and skills, but also in values, self-awareness, creating a new purpose, and having increased critical thinking on social issues (Damianakis et al., 2020). This study did not have a spiritual or religious focus; however, the changes noted can be understood as holding a R/S dimension for many, especially considering attitudes on social issues and changes in values. Another study explored religion and spirituality more explicitly, in a homogeneous sample of students at a conservative Christian university. The study explored counseling psychology students at a Christian affiliated institution, and their experienced transformations in their self-perceptions, views of human development, and understandings of suffering. Additionally, through this transformation process, the study found participants experienced spiritual struggles and existential disorientation (Mauch, 2016).

In counselor training programs, holistic development is encouraged and even expected, as professional identities become more integrated with personal identities (Gibson et al., 2010). An element of this identity development may include a sense of call, which may or may not have R/S undertones (S. F. Hall et al., 2014). The potential spiritual elements of counselor development are often implicit or even ignored (Gonzales-Wong & Harris, 2021). Focusing on

the supervision context, discussion of spiritual concerns can serve to deepen relationships, and enhance supervisee development (Wong, 2016). Counselor development has direct and implicit connections to other forms of adult development including ethical and intellectual development, such as outlined by Perry (1970), as well as various ways of understanding spiritual development. Several theories of spiritual development include a stage or experience of crisis, transition or deconstruction of previously held beliefs (Fowler, 1981; Wilber, 2003).

Utilizing an understanding of transformational learning theory, students may encounter disorienting dilemmas in their counselor training forcing them to reevaluate and create new meaning schemas in order to integrate new material (Mezirow, 1991). Meaning schemas are larger sets of beliefs about creating meaning, and these may commonly include R/S beliefs (Mezirow, 1994). Meaning perspectives shift developmentally, often becoming more inclusive, integrative and discriminating (Mezirow, 1991). This kind of shift can occur in counselors-in-training (CITs) along developmental lines that move through dualism, to multiplicity, relativism, and finally commitment (Perry, 1970). A similar trajectory can be seen as complexity increases and there is a greater openness to a variety of experiences in faith development theory (Fowler, 1981).

Knowing that CITs experience significant development, perhaps even transformational learning throughout their counselor training programs, it is also possible that religious/spiritual transition may occur for some of these students concurrently. Religious/spiritual transition may be triggered by the disorienting dilemmas encountered in counselor training curriculum and internship experiences. Given the dearth of research exploring this experience in counselors-in-training, the current research proposed a qualitative study, specifically using narrative inquiry to explore the stories of R/S transition in counselors-in-training.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There was evidence that counselors-in-training may experience religious/spiritual transitions, especially during their counselor training. The nature of graduate programs and specifically counselor training programs may elicit transformational experiences in students (Dall’Alba, 2009; Damianakis et al., 2020). Religious/spiritual transitions could have significant impacts on individuals, although impacts in counselors and CITs is largely unknown due to the gap in the literature. While there is research regarding the outcomes or impacts of various kinds of religious and spiritual change, there is very little understanding of the process of R/S transition generally (Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2017). There were no known studies of CITs experience of the process or impacts of R/S transition.

Given that so little was known about the general process of R/S transition in counseling students, it was also unknown if there were other impacts on expectations of counselor development and ultimately if there are impacts on clients. In developing multicultural competency, a part of which includes religion and spirituality, examination of personal cultural identities is encouraged to build self-awareness and enhance openness to other identities (Ratts et al., 2016). Additionally, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) has created spiritual competencies. These include self-awareness of the counselor relating to personal spiritual beliefs held by counselors (Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling [ASERVIC], 2009b). If personal identities are in a process of change or flux, it is exceedingly difficult to meaningfully engage in this self-reflective work (Mauch, 2016) particularly without attention to this process. If the foundation is unstable, it may be difficult for counselors-in-training undergoing R/S transition to develop multicultural competency and skills, among other counseling skills.

With the assumption that CITs, like the general population, are experiencing shifts in the way they identify and experience their religion or spirituality, it is essential to understand the experience and possible impacts on training and even client care. Changes in R/S identity can impact a variety of experiences. The process of shifting as well as the outcomes of changes are integral to understanding the entirety of R/S transition. Religious/spiritual transition is associated with religious/spiritual struggle, which is often associated with decreases in well-being and increases in mental health concerns (Ellison & Lee, 2010). Religious trauma can also impact an individual's experience of the sacred (Swindle, 2017). It is unknown how these and other considerations may impact the experiences of CITs who are undergoing R/S transition.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of counseling students who have experienced religious/spiritual transitions. The study sought to understand the narrative arc of the process of R/S transition, including how it related to their personal experiences, overall training experiences, and their counselor identity development. The ways in which counseling students understand their R/S transition was vital to the purpose of this research along with the specific nuances of being a counseling student. The study was interested in the stories of transition, including precipitants for change, the experience of transition, how they conceptualized the change at the time and retrospectively, and the stories of the impacts of R/S transition. The research was interested in several components of the experience including, familial, social, and even considering larger historical contexts relating to power, privilege and oppression. These elements all comprised the narratives of CITs who have experience R/S transition.

### **Research Question**

Building from the understanding of the current dearth of research related to experiences of counseling students undergoing religious/spiritual transition, the following research question guided the research process.

- Q1     What are the stories of counselors-in-training who have experienced religious/spiritual transition, in relation to their personal experience, counselor training, and professional identity development?

### **Significance of the Study**

There is a great deal of research interest in the components of interest in this study. Entire journals are dedicated to understanding the ways counselors develop (e.g., *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*), in addition to theories related to counselor development, and vast research on the process itself. In addition, religion and spirituality in counseling is a vast area of research, including several relevant elements of R/S transition in various populations including veterans (Wilt, Pargament, et al., 2019), college students (S. F. Hall et al., 2014), or individuals with substance use disorders (Nixon, 2012), to name a few. Very few studies have explored the personal beliefs of counselors (S. F. Hall et al., 2014), and none have explored shifts in personal spiritual beliefs. For example, a study of counseling students explores God-concepts, highlighting heterogeneous images of the Divine (Cashwell et al., 2016), but stops short of examining how these images have changed over time or how they impact the counselors-in-training. These processes are important to understand as they can impact counselor development and are specifically called for in the ASERVIC spiritual competency standards (Cashwell & Watts, 2011).

Spiritual struggles, a possible component of religious/spiritual transitions, have been asserted as one of the most complex topics in the field of psychology (Pargament & Exline,



2022). With this assertion, is evident that understanding R/S transitions may be even more complex. There is a clear need for greater understanding of this phenomenon, in its varied and nuanced forms, especially in CITs. This study seeks to add to the literature in understanding R/S transition generally, as well as provide needed information about counseling students' experience of change in this area.

Graduate school has been found to be a time generally of significant transformation and even suffering (Mauch, 2016). Counselor training programs may instigate transformation through a focus on counselor identity development. Findings from this study have the potential to provide foundational information on the topic of religious/spiritual transition in counselors-in-training to counselor educators, supervisors, and trainees themselves. Understanding the narratives of CITs who have undergone R/S transition will provide vital understandings of the lived-experiences of CITs that can help inform possible supports, special considerations for students experiencing this phenomenon, or possible interventions to address the unique experience of R/S transition during counselor training. Ultimately, gaining greater understanding of the narratives of R/S transition will enable counselor educators and supervisors to better serve students by attending to their unique needs. Counselor development and specifically multicultural and social justice competence development, are paramount responsibilities for counselor educators (Gibson et al., 2010; Ratts et al., 2016).

### **Key Terms**

It is important to discuss several important terms to more fully understand the complex ideas they represent. Religion and spirituality are common terms but are often used differently in various contexts. William James (1902), an integral figure in psychology and especially in the psychology of religion, warned against over-simplifying such complex terms like religion. Even

so, coming at the subject from a set of unified definitions is essential for enhancing understanding on the topic. A great deal of the terminology used in the study of religion and spirituality is based in the assumption that religious commitment is normative, and therefore non-religious beliefs are non-normative or even deviant (Cragun & Hammer, 2011). This kind of bias is revealed in terms like *apostate*, which is largely viewed through the lens of adhering to religion as normative and leaving it as the deviant choice. Further terms seeking to understand various R/S transitions will be explored in greater detail in reviewing the literature.

## **Religion**

Offering one simple definition of religion is both impossible and perhaps unhelpful. The varied use of both religion and spirituality point to the complex web of meanings the terms try to capture. Research has not settled on one meaning, even within the field of psychology or counseling, instead explicitly stating their preferred definition (Oman, 2013). It is also important for definitions, even of complex topics to be pragmatic, as in what people actually mean when they use language. Very often in defining religion there is a distinction relating to systems, institutions or communities, while spirituality is seen more individually (Oman, 2013).

Oman (2013) traced definitions of religion over time, beginning modern history with William James. James (1902) defined religion as, “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (p. 26). James advocated for an expansive view of religion, seeing individual experiences as paramount to any group definitions and seeing both universality and variety in these experiences. Since this early definition, religion definitions have included references to community, systems, and rituals that typically characterize definitions

(Oman, 2013). These systems or institutions are intended to facilitate spirituality including meaning-making, significance, or purpose (Pargament et al., 2013).

Pargament (1997) concisely defined religion as “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred.” (p. 32). He went on to discuss search as a process orientation toward religion, and significance as those ultimate concerns like death or inequity, but also what was important to an individual, institution or culture. Sacred, used in both religion and spirituality definitions, is broadly defined as anything with characteristics like transcendence, immanence, or ultimacy, thus imbuing many experiences, relationships, and so on, as sacred (Pargament, 2006).

Religion and spirituality are often defined against one another to draw out distinctions. For example, Miller and Thoresen (2003) explained religion as primarily a communal process, while spirituality is personal in nature. Spirituality is also primarily immaterial, concerned with questions of meaning and purpose, while due to ties to institutions is more material in nature. Finally, religion is characterized by systems of belief and practices, and spirituality may or may not include these (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Religion can be seen as a means to pursuing spirituality, while spirituality need not be facilitated by a religious structure. The distinctions may be reductionistic, as surely religion also contends with the immaterial, but may be helpful in delineating terms.

## **Spirituality**

Drawing again from Pargament’s (1997) concise definitions, he saw spirituality as the search for the sacred. Another definition of spirituality saw it as a “capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons. This spiritual tendency moved the individual toward knowledge, love, meaning, peace, hope, transcendence, connectedness, compassion, wellness, and wholeness.” (Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling

[ASERVIC], 2009a). Spirituality is often seen in more individualistic terms, as an existential search for ultimate meaning or personal growth (Oman, 2013). Spirituality may be encompassed within religion for some people, or it may be completely separated. For most, there is some overlap between religion and spirituality in larger understanding, if not in personal practice.

Throughout, religious/spiritual (R/S) will be referred to as an approach to capture a wider variety of experience. However, whenever religion or spirituality is being referred to specifically, the appropriate term will be used. There was a great deal of overlap in the terms, but the distinctions were important, this was especially relevant for participant's language. This process focused on the lived R/S experiences of participants, prizing their voices above institutional or academic understandings of the terms. Through the study process, understanding the meaning of important concepts was explored and discussed.

### **Spiritual Struggles**

Spiritual struggle was defined as “experiences of tension, conflict, or strain that center on whatever people view as sacred,” (Pargament & Exline, 2022, p. 6). These kinds of struggles can be interpersonal or intrapersonal in nature. There are six domains of spiritual struggle: divine, demonic, interpersonal, doubt, moral, and ultimate meaning (Exline, Pargament, et al., 2014). These struggles are not pathological in nature, although can be distressing and even lead to mental health concerns. Spiritual struggles can be initiated by a number of factors including critical life events, experiences that confront a person's orienting system, or set of beliefs, attitudes, and practices linked to the sacred, and conflicts of purpose (Pargament & Exline, 2022). Spiritual struggle may more commonly occur in emerging and young adulthood as this stage is developmentally primed for engaging in spiritual and other kinds of struggles. This stage of development, often characterized by differentiation and identity formation can be pivotal

times for spiritual struggle. Additionally, spiritual struggle may be a natural byproduct of an open, curious approach to spiritual journeys (Pargament & Exline, 2022). As such, spiritual struggles may be an integral aspect of R/S transition.

### **Religious/Spiritual Transition**

There are a variety of terms used to describe changes in individual religious/spiritual status including conversion, deconversion, religious switching, religious transformation, and more (Cragun & Hammer, 2011; Pargament, 2006). The terminology in this realm is often value-laden and rife with bias as it often indicates a pro-religious bias as discussed above.

Religious/spiritual transformation appears to indicate a positive transformation. While this may often be the experience of those undergoing transitions, it is not a universal experience. This study intended to explore the process of religious/spiritual transition, acknowledging this historical bias and endeavoring to engage any shift in R/S identity with openness. With this desire in mind, this study typically used the term R/S transition in discussing the concept generally, and the client's own language when sharing their narratives. This intentional choice contrasts somewhat with counseling and psychological literature which favors terms like conversion, transformation, or spiritual struggle (e.g., Exline & Rose, 2013; Sandage & Moe, 2013). The more neutral term of transition allows participants to construct the meaning that fits their experience ranging from positive to negative.

### **List of Acronyms**

Several key terms have been outlined above. Given their prominence throughout, the use of acronyms will be employed with the aim of enhancing readability. A list of acronyms is included for the reader to reference at their convenience:

- ACA indicates the American Counseling Association
- ASERVIC indicates the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling
- CACREP indicates the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs
- CITs indicates counselors-in-training
- COVID-19 indicates coronavirus disease 2019
- IFS indicates internal family system
- LDS indicates Latter-day Saints
- LGBTQIA+ indicates lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, queer, intersex, asexual, plus other sexual and gender identities
- R/S indicates religious/spiritual
- TLT indicates transformative learning theory

### **Summary**

Counseling students are undergoing a myriad of changes throughout their training, and one aspect may include religious/spiritual transition. Given the foundational nature of religion for many individuals, transitions of this nature may be experienced as seismic shifts and thus have possible impacts on personal identity, training experience, or professional identity. Large amounts of research have explored the content and nature of counselor development, as well as some understanding of the various components of religious/spiritual transition in counseling like spiritual struggle, integration of R/S topics, or even R/S changes. However, there was a gap in research that explored the process of religious/spiritual transition in CITs. There were no known studies relating to the experiences of R/S transition in CITs.

Following this brief introductory understanding of the topic, Chapter II provides an in-depth understanding of the state of the literature. Several foundational theories were explored including the sociological foundation of the changing nature of religion and spirituality in the US. Next, relevant theories were explored including developmental constructivism (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011) and transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991). Religion and spirituality were explored, with a focus on the interaction with counseling, spiritual struggles, and several theories of spiritual development including faith development theory (Fowler, 1991), ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982), transpersonal psychology, and integral psychology (Wilber, 2003). The chapter then describes the relevant standards in counseling and counselor education for addressing religious/spiritual transitions in CITs. The nature of R/S transition will be explored more fully including integrating several related terms in the literature to highlight a nuanced, yet value-neutral understanding of R/S transition. With this understanding, the chapter focuses specifically on the experiences of CITs including counselor development the role of shame, and cognitive complexity, and values conflicts. Finally, the need for the study will be highlighted due to the gap in the literature addressing R/S transition in CITs.

The third chapter outlines the methods the study used to explore the research question. The chapter outlines the use of narrative inquiry including philosophical and epistemological assumptions of narrative inquiry. Researcher assumptions and stance are outlined, including methods for attending to this stance. Procedures including participants, delimitations, and interview and artifact protocols are outlined. Data analysis procedures are outlined along with attention to ethical considerations. The chapter closes with strategies for attending to trustworthiness through tools like bridling and the use of an auditor.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of religious/spiritual (R/S) transition was not well understood in the current literature. There were large bodies of research on several related concepts that were explored in order to construct and understanding of R/S transition in counselors-in-training (CITs). This chapter explores the overarching landscape of R/S change generally before narrowing focus to counseling graduate students. This chapter also outlines the theoretical assumptions undergirding the concepts and processes outlined. In addition, the nature of religious/spiritual transition was explored through the lens of religious struggle, faith development, and theories of change. This specific kind of transition was then explored in the context of counselors-in-training focusing on cognitive complexity, the role of shame and nondisclosure, and the possibility for impairment.

#### **Setting the Stage**

Religious and spiritual identity is shifting in the U.S., and these demographic changes may be one way to understand R/S development on an individual level. These changes on a national level point to the prevalence of individual's experiencing religious and/or spiritual transitions. The proportion of Americans who identify as religious has continued to decrease, falling from 83% in 2007 to 69% in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021b). At the same time, belief in God or the Divine has remained relatively high, around 89%. So, while three in ten adults in the U.S. identify as religious "nones," nine in ten adults maintain a belief in God (Pew Research Center, 2021b; Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). There was some clear



overlap among these two categories pointing toward a broader trend of religious/spiritual transition that do not fit neatly into a purely secularization narrative.

It is important to note that the changes, in aggregate, appear to be primarily declines in White Protestant Christians presumably disaffiliating. While some there is some reduction in Black Protestant Christians, it is worth noting this phenomenon may be more common among White individuals. In addition, the trend appears to be greatest in young adults, millennials, and the oldest members of generation Z (Pew Research Center, 2021a). While this trend of apparent declining religiosity is generationally consistent (T. W. Smith, 2006), the lack of return marks a difference from prior generations (Strawn, 2019).

Research in the study of religion has long understood religious identity as a fluctuating characteristic, perhaps in contrast to popular commentary (Lim et al., 2010; Strawn, 2019). While overall trends indicate this is true, there is also evidence that changes, even multiple shifts, can occur individually (Lim et al., 2010). There are several concepts that attempt to understand these fluctuations over time; however, these terms may not realize the full nuance and complexity of the kinds of R/S transitions that may be occurring. We will examine several of these ideas in order to understand the concepts, how they might apply to counselors-in-training, and where gaps in research's understanding may be present.

The category of “nones” is of growing interest in popular and sociological discourse. Religiously unaffiliated, or “nones,” represents a category in many large-scale surveys attempting to capture religious identity (Pew Research Center, 2021a). Generally, unaffiliated refers to those who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” (Pew Research Center, 2021b). Clearly, this is a diverse category which could include a lifelong atheist and a lifelong Mormon who recently exited their religion. Defining a religious identity by

something it is not can be a fraught concept, and further refining is needed to understand what “nones” do believe in relation to their faith identity (Lim et al., 2010). Despite this need, no unified alternatives have been accepted for use by succinct pollsters (Ammerman, 2013; Cragun & Hammer, 2011).

Research most often divides religious and spiritual into binary categories- religious but not spiritual or religious and spiritual, for example. “Spiritual but not religious” is one such categorization and has often been the topic of these shifting demographic conversations (Packard & Hope, 2015). As outlined above, because declines are largely from Christianity and growth is largely in religiously unaffiliated, it is easy to conclude Americans are simply becoming more secular or growing in the identity of being spiritual but not religious. However, Ammerman (2013) outlined the many ways individuals do not fit neatly into binary categories. Religion, for example, is often overlayed as a political category, and not just a free-standing organization. In fact, there is some evidence that some growth in “nones” is due to a symbolic disassociation with the political intertwining with religion (Strawn, 2019). Similarly, spirituality can exist within institutions, individually, or both (Ammerman, 2013). Additionally liminal “nones” are conceptualized as between religion and secular, while not necessarily on a path toward one or the other (Lim et al., 2010). Another attempt to further divide religiously unaffiliated individuals, is the concept of “dones” (Packard & Ferguson, 2019). These individuals are characterized by the maintenance of their religious faith but disaffiliated from their religious institution. Packard and Hope (2015) further explained Christian dones as formerly active and engaged church members who were eager to impact change. They experienced a variety of critical incidents that led them away from their former church, but not their faiths. There is great variety within the experience and beliefs of “nones.”

There is some conception of religious transformation in the literature, which speaks to quick and intense intensification in religiosity (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). This concept of transformation was limited to drastic changes to religious identity, and therefore, found these kinds of changes to be rare. The authors found in their study, focused on adolescents, between four and six percent of participants reported large increase or decrease in measures of religiosity (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). Religious transformation is limited by the rate and intensity of change, as well as transformations that occur within the confines of religious structures.

Religious switching is another way of understanding changes in religious identity. Religious switching can include switching subgroups within the same religion (e.g., Baptist to Catholic), switching between religions (e.g., Evangelical to Buddhist), or leaving a religion without joining a different group (Cragun & Hammer, 2011). There are varying figures regarding the occurrence of religious switching but estimates state that 40-50% of adults in the U.S. will switch their religious affiliation in their lifetime (Ellison & McFarland, 2013). For many, religious identity is not stable over time and is subject to influence by several factors. Some predictors have previously included level of education and socio-economic status. However, some of the strongest predictors of switching include marriage and geographic mobility (Loveland, 2003).

Within the field of sociology, there has been a call for more qualitative research seeking to understand the nuances within the “nones.” It seems clear that it is not only religiously unaffiliated individuals who require more nuanced understanding, but rather religious and spiritual identity as a whole. This big picture understanding of religious/spiritual identity begins to show the gaps in understanding this nuanced and individual experience. In order to zoom in our view slightly, we will turn to theories that undergird these concepts before considering the

role of religion and spirituality in the lived experiences of individuals, including counselors-in-training.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

It is important to understand not only the sociological landscape framing religious/spiritual transitions, but also the theoretical assumptions underlying how we will conceptualize these phenomena. These theories would help to lay a foundation for further exploration of the concepts of religion and spirituality impacts generally and in counseling, and the nature of R/S transitions and how it relates to the counselor development process. With that in mind, theories from a developmental and constructivist standpoint were explored, with a focus on transformational learning theory.

Humans are meaning-making beings, and religion and spirituality are important concepts around which we frame the very search for that meaning. Drawing from Pargament's (2006) definition of spirituality as the search for the sacred, constructivism is an appropriate assumption. The act of communally creating knowledge and meaning are the foundations of constructivism (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Constructivism understands that objects are not imbued with meaning, but rather that meaning is created through discourse, deconstruction, and social interaction (Crotty, 1998). An element of constructivism includes deconstruction, an act of taking apart a previously constructed concept, examining and reforming a new or altered conception. This kind of deconstruction and reconstruction cycle can occur societally, in smaller communities, or individually. Given the rejection of absolute truth or knowledge to be discovered, constructivism sees reality as socially constructed. As such, it also must change over time, and this occurs through the process of deconstruction and reconstruction.

Developmental constructivism is also helpful for understanding these types of changes. A great many theorists have seen humans through a developmental lens, including Piaget (Piaget & Cook, 2001) and Perry (1970). Understanding that children actively engage with their social and material world in increasingly complex ways helped to set the stage for later theories of adult development. Perry expanded this work into looking at young adulthood development. His work with college students looked at the assumptions underlying how students learned. The stages he developed correspond with his idea that as epistemic assumptions change, how they experience the meaning making of their learning experience also changes, becoming more complex. Perry (1970) outlined that development occurs in stages, moving from dualism, to multiplicity, to relativism, and then to commitment. These theories have been expanded further to include theorists like Kegan (1982) which spoke similarly to an increased tolerance for ambiguity and becoming increasingly interested in the process of transformation rather than the product at the final stage of interindividual (Eriksen, 2006). In addition, Kegan (1982) spoke to growth from one stage to the next occurring through appropriate mismatch that borrows from the next developmental stage.

Finally transformative learning theory (TLT; Mezirow, 1990) flows from and aligns with both constructivism and developmental outlooks on change. Transformative learning theory offers an idealized understanding of how adults learn and ultimately develop. Deep learning takes place through experiencing a disorienting dilemma, deconstructing a formerly held schema to reconstruct a new meaning schema (Mezirow, 1978). This process represented deep transformation, beyond simply acquiring new cognitive knowledge, but can extend to the very identity of an individual. The nature of transformation can include many domains, including spiritual or existential ones (Palmer, 2017; Todd, 2014).

Mezirow (1990, 1994) outlined 10 and later 11 phases of transformational learning. These stages included: (a) a disorienting dilemma, (b) a self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, (c) a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions, (d) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change, (e) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, (f) planning a course of action, (g) acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan, (h) provisional trying of new roles, (i) building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, (j) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective, and (k) renegotiating relationships, negotiating new relationships. It is not necessary to progress through all steps. Most transformational learning does; however, begin with a disorienting dilemma. This can range from current events or media, to lived experiences individually or over time (Kitchenham, 2008). Typically, these dilemmas introduce new information or experiences that do not fit current meaning schemas.

Essential to TLT is critical discourse and critical self-reflection. These elements are imbedded throughout the phases outlined. Critical self-reflection involves active, careful, and ongoing consideration of not only one's thoughts or actions but the assumptions behind them. Critical self-reflection can include reflection-in-action, or while a situation is occurring, or reflection-on-action, after a situation has taken place (Nogueiras et al., 2019). It could also include "preflection," which relates to considering what is assumed or known prior to encountering a new situation (Fazio-Griffith & Ballard, 2016). Regardless of the timing or scope, this element of introspection is necessary to TLT. Critical discourse relates to dialogue and communication with others about learning or reflection. These conversations with others can take many forms including small groups in a classroom setting or an online community

discussion. This kind of back-and-forth engagement with material and one another is essential for deep learning (Mezirow, 1990).

Most research and theorizing regarding TLT has been done with higher education settings. However, a structured classroom setting is not necessary for transformative learning to occur. The principles of TLT can be present within a group of friends, a classroom, or to some extent, individually. There are three premises for transformational learning to occur. These include, possessing an ability to experience and engage with the world to make meaning of it, learning in a socially situated practice, and coming from aspirations to develop within community (Atkinson, 2018). Ultimately both solitude and community are necessary for this process (Palmer, 2017), but that community does not need to be as formal as a classroom setting. Community engaged learning, which intentionally takes students outside the classroom to facilitate learning, has been explored in connection with transformational learning (Kiely, 2005; Shor et al., 2017). In counseling specifically, the supervision relationship has been explored as a conduit for transformational learning (Carroll, 2010). These examples, among others, provided evidence that transformational learning could occur in a wide variety of settings.

It is important to note that behaviors alone do not indicate transformational learning or reflective action are occurring. Commonly used student learning outcomes, therefore, do not reflect transformative learning. Instead, critical self-reflection and critical discourse that informs behaviors does indicate transformational change (Mezirow, 1978). Additionally, it is open ended, and calls for further transformation and integration of new knowledge throughout a lifetime. As meaning schemas become more complex, they may require fewer fundamental shifts over time. Transformative learning is an iterative process and can take place again and again in a lifetime (Mezirow, 1990).

There is evidence that higher education is and should strive to be transformational (Chu, 2019). There is no shortage of potential disorienting dilemmas in higher education that can be the catalyst for transformational learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). In addition, research exploring the nature of professional education demonstrates the need for transformation into a practicing professional (Barnett, 2009; Dall’Alba, 2009). Beyond simply focusing on acquiring specific knowledge and skills, professional training also aims to develop ways of being a professional (Dall’Alba, 2009). Various professional training programs have been explored to further understand the transformational elements, including nursing (Agustini et al., 2023) and social work (Damianakis et al., 2020). Further exploration into the transformational aspects of counselor education will be explored in greater depth later in the chapter.

Constructivism, developmental models, and namely TLT are helpful theories for understanding religious/spiritual transitions, especially in counselors. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, the connections to TLT will become more evident. This conception of R/S transition is transformational in nature, in that it relates to shifting deeply held meaning schemas. In addition, counselor training itself is also transformational in nature, and therefore appropriate for consideration. The nature of both these processes, R/S transition and counselor education, combine to form fertile ground for transformational learning experiences to occur.

### **Religion and Spirituality Overview**

The study of religion and spirituality is a vast topic that spans centuries of study, goes across academic disciplines, and throughout cultures. This review focused on religious and spiritual considerations in psychology and counseling, with special attention to spiritual struggles as an aspect of normal R/S experience, and finally an overview of relevant spiritual development



theories. Taking these together will build an understanding of what it means to experience R/S transition.

To begin, we will briefly review the definitions of religion and spirituality discussed in the previous chapter. The definitions provided are meant to be pragmatic and based in lived-religious experiences (Johnson, 2013). Even so, these definitions are not intended to “un-fuzzy” the incredibly complex terms relating to understanding the transcendent (Stewart-Sicking et al., 2019). With this understanding, religion is typically understood as communal, institutionalized and therefore material, and connected to dogma. Conversely spirituality is understood as personal, immaterial in pursuit of meaning or purpose, and may or may not include practices or dogma (Miller & Thoresen, 2003).

### **Impacts on Mental Health**

The recent burgeoning interest in religious and spiritual considerations in mental health has led to vast research in the area. Various measures of religion and spirituality are generally considered protective factors in mental health and substance use issues. For example, religion and spirituality is associated with a decreased risk for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and alcohol use in a sample of military veterans (Sharma et al., 2017). In a review of the impact of religion and spirituality on substance use disorders, Grim and Grim (2019) found that 84% of studies examining this topic demonstrate faith as a positive factor in prevention or recovery in substance use disorders. Elements of R/S beliefs and practices may be beneficial regarding mental health considerations like providing positive community support, meaning-making structures, and positive coping skills (Johnson, 2013; Pargament, 1997). Higher levels of religiosity are associated with higher levels of wellness and purpose in life (Wilt, Grubbs, et al., 2016). There were also connections between R/S factors and physical health (Miller & Thoresen,

2003). There was certainly evidence that various measures of religion and spirituality were associated with overall mental health and are instrumental in recovery from mental illness. There was also a growing understanding that nuance within studying R/S beliefs may reveal a more complex picture, including looking at the role of religious and spiritual struggle.

### **Spiritual Struggle**

Spiritual struggle was defined as “experiences of tension, conflict, or strain that center on whatever people view as sacred” (Pargament & Exline, 2022, p. 6). What is defined as sacred is broadly and inclusively defined. Drawing from Pargament’s (2006) understanding of sacred, it refers to concepts of higher powers along with characteristics like transcendence, ultimacy, and immanence. Spiritual struggle is conceptualized as a natural outgrowth of the desire to hold on to those beliefs that are most significant to individuals. Recent scholarship has focused on six domains of spiritual struggle: divine, demonic, interpersonal, doubt, moral, and ultimate meaning (Exline, Pargament, et al., 2014). Spiritual struggles may encompass one or more domains that was often characterized by being pervasive, painful, and pivotal. Spiritual struggles have been documented across religious traditions, over time, and in a variety of people. In fact, 75% of adults experience most kinds of spiritual struggle in their life (Exline, Pargament, et al., 2014). Spiritual struggles are also frequently painful as they shift or shatter some of the most fundamental beliefs and individual holds. Encountering such struggles is not pathology; however, can be rooted in or cause distress. Finally, spiritual struggles can be pivotal moments for change, creating a crossroads in which transcendence and growth can occur (Pargament & Exline, 2022).

Spiritual struggle is a well-studied, although relatively young body of research in several populations. There are no known studies of spiritual struggle in counselors or

counselors-in-training. These struggles are associated with psychological distress and lower levels of well-being (Ellison & Lee, 2010). Even low levels of spiritual struggle are related positively to depression and anxiety symptoms, in a nationally representative sample of adults (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, et al., 2015). At the same time, spiritual struggle was negatively associated with life satisfaction and happiness. This general pattern of positive associations with depressive symptoms and negative relationships with happiness is found in other studies (Abu-Raiya, et al., 2016). The nationally representative study found that spiritual struggle uniquely impacted the variance found in both depression and anxiety as well as in life satisfaction and happiness, even when controlling for possible confounding variables like neuroticism and social isolation (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, et al., 2015). Other variables have been considered relating to their impact on the experience of spiritual struggle. One study found there are some weak correlations with the Big Five personality traits, such as higher neuroticism was associated with finding less meaning in their struggle, perceiving greater spiritual decline, and believing God had negative intent in the struggle (Wilt, Grubbs, et al., 2016). Although a combination of lower levels of neuroticism and higher religiousness was associated with spiritual growth as opposed to decline (Wilt, Grubbs, et al., 2016).

Spiritual struggles are not confined to only religious or even spiritual individuals. There is evidence that “nones” or religiously unaffiliated, and spiritual but not religious individuals experience spiritual struggles. A qualitative study of “nones” found that spiritual struggles centered around the self, the search for discovering the true self, and self-in relation, aligned with Exline, Pargament, et al. (2014) interpersonal domain relating to family, relationships, and even society at large. Spiritual struggles have been found specifically in a sample of atheists as well,

demonstrating similar levels of ultimate meaning and interpersonal struggles as theists (Sedlar et al., 2018).

Spiritual struggles also occur across religious affiliation, although has largely been focused on Christians. An exploratory study with Palestinian-Muslims explored the unique considerations in address spiritual struggles in Muslims (Abu-Raiya, Exline, et al., 2015). In addition, other identity factors, like race, have been studied to illuminate distinctive themes in spiritual struggles. Black adolescents can experience spiritual struggles in addition to or even because of aspects of their social identities including race. A meta-synthesis of studies related to Black youth shared an example of a youth leaving a predominantly black church because they did not accept his sexuality, only to later leave an affirming predominantly white church because they did not accept his race (J. S. Parker et al., 2022). This finding aligns with one of the primary themes found in the meta-synthesis of feeling rejected and unloved based on certain identities like race, gender, and sexuality. The other two primary themes were feeling abandoned and dismissed and doubt, disengagement, and reconciliation. There are clearly some unique intersectional experiences of Black youth, that may not be experienced by those with dominant identities. These themes do correlate with the domains in the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (Exline, Pargament, et al., 2014); however, the meta-synthesis found several domains may be bound together based on the contexts of these Black youth (J. S. Parker et al., 2022).

Doubt is one kind of religious struggle that is characterized by inability to resolve questioning, resulting in feelings of uncertainty toward previously held beliefs (Fisher, 2017). This period of uncertainty can cause distress as having a strong belief system of any kind, religious or atheist, is associated with positive coping (Wilkinson & Coleman, 2010). Doubts can result in a crisis of faith which is characterized by a collapse of identity, worldview, or beliefs

(Webb, 2001). The sudden or extreme nature of a faith crisis can result in increased distress and a frantic effort to resolve the crisis through finding the “truth” (Fisher, 2017).

Spiritual struggle often represents a crossroads that can lead to spiritual transformation or decline. One study found a group of variables including measures like belief salience, God-concept, and positive religious coping were associated with positive spiritual struggle outcomes, including measures of religious transformation in veterans (Wilt, Pargament, et al., 2019). Whereas numerous studies previously outlined demonstrate negative impacts on well-being. Spiritual struggle appears to be a very complicated phenomenon. The struggle can lead to various impacts on psychological health as well as differing outcomes relating to R/S identity. This multifaceted relationship is demonstrated in one study examining potential buffers against the impacts of spiritual struggle. Religious commitment, religious support, life sanctification, and hope did serve to dampen the impacts of spiritual struggle as the negative effects became weaker as these variables increased (Abu-Raiya, et al., 2016). However, the authors note that paradoxically, religion serves as a possible solution to problems that are part of religious life (Abu-Raiya, et al., 2016).

A variety of life events, shifts in purpose, and orienting systems can serve as sources of spiritual struggle (Pargament & Exline, 2022). Spiritual struggle was found in response to the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections in the US. Greater levels of struggle were associated with which party won the election by participant affiliation. Similar levels of spiritual struggle were found in Democrats and Republicans in the study (Exline, Stauner, et al., 2021). Other sources of spiritual struggle could include trauma, stressful life events, God concepts that are negative or punitive, and other maladaptive patterns in religious orienting systems (Pargament & Exline, 2022)

Notably, Pargament and Exline (2022), the foremost researchers in the area of spiritual struggle, note that this concept cannot be fully captured through science, and recommend it is best studied through story. Considering spiritual struggle as an element of religious/spiritual transition, the complexity of both points to the need for robust narratives to understand the lived experiences of those encountering spiritual struggle or R/S transition.

### **Spiritual Development Theories**

Spiritual struggles may result from a variety of triggers and be experienced in several domains, but they are also a relatively common experience. Through exploring spiritual development theories, spiritual struggle is inherent to many of these conceptualizations of how spiritual journeys progress. There are many ways to conceptualize religious/spiritual journeys, and very often it is conceived of as developmental in nature. Spiritual development can be conceived of as an active process; one which individuals develop in areas like connectedness to the world, purpose, and awareness of their potential for impact (Benson et al., 2012). The volitional nature of this process is integral to development, and often compliments personal ideas of inner work (Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2017).

In addition to these overarching ideas that undergird spiritual development, several theories have been presented to understand the process more concretely. Several notable theorists have created models to outline this kind of development in its attempts to understand this aspect of development. To understand this concept more fully, we will review several notable theories including Fowler, Gilligan, and transpersonal models with a focus on Wilbur's integral psychology model (Fowler, 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Wilber, 2000).

### ***Faith Development Theory***

Perhaps, most well-known among theories of religious/spiritual development is the work of James Fowler (1981). Faith development theory is stage-based and largely cognitively focused. This theory notes that faith is a dynamic process, based in commitment, dedication to master stories, and links us to others with shared values, and a transcendent framework (Fowler, 1991). With this definition in mind, faith is deeper than belief, and separate from religion on its own. This dynamic process is outlined by seven stages.

The first stage, really the foundational pre-stage zero, is undifferentiated faith found in infancy. Trust is the primary development in this stage, focusing on early learning regarding the safety of the environment including especially caregivers. This stage is preverbal and largely emotionally oriented (Fowler, 1981). Following this, Stage 1, Intuitive-Projective faith emerges in childhood and is characterized by fantasy and symbols, but not yet driven by logical thinking. This stage is imaginative and develops powerful images of the Divine, that will likely stay with the child throughout their life. As the child develops concrete operational thinking, they will progress to Stage 2 Mythic-Literal stage of faith. Fantasies of the previous stage are developed into narrative stories and become central to belonging in community. With more concrete thinking patterns, they become more aware of right and wrong and take literally the directives gleaned from important stories. As children progress into adolescence and develop formal operational thinking, they become aware of conflicts in literal interpretations of authoritative stories (Fowler, 1991). Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional faith begins to emerge in adolescence and may be the stage maintained throughout adulthood. During this stage, mutual interpersonal perspective taking arises for the first time. This creates a strong need for relationships, including with God. Due to this emphasis on relationships, conforming to the community becomes

paramount. Conflict can arise when valued authorities are in conflict. This often comes as children are launching from their families of origin into jobs, education, or other hallmarks of adulthood; however, may occur at any point in adulthood, or may not occur at all (Fowler, 1991; S. Parker, 2009).

Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective faith is often characterized by tension and conflict. With more advanced critical thinking skills, individuals can wrestle at a deeper level with both personal identity and outlook on the world. These tensions can arise in many areas including the subjective power of feelings verses the objective power of critical thought; self-actualization versus service for others; or individuality versus group membership. These conflicts necessitate an increased tolerance for ambiguity and challenge individuals toward dialectical thinking (S. Parker, 2009). Stage 5, Conjunctive faith represents a time of integration following the strife experienced in the previous stage. Typically emerging in midlife, this stage is characterized by embrace and integration of polarities. With this experiential understanding of integration, symbol and myths can take on a new depth of meaning in a second naivete. Individuals at a Conjunctive stage of faith, have clarity relating to the deep divisions in humanity, although still remain themselves divided in some ways (Fowler, 1981). In the final, rare Stage 6, Universalizing faith, these divisions are resolved through an understanding of oneness with the Divine. These individuals are devoted to overcoming oppression, injustice, and violence, often pitting them against existing power structures. They live as if the sense of love and justice they have experienced were already the reality, which results in a contagious effect on others (Fowler, 1991).

Notably, over the course of these stages of development, there is a gradual widening of perspective taking beginning in childhood and progressing to Universalizing (Fowler, 1991).



This experience appears consistent across other developmental theories, including ideas relating to counselor development, as will be outlined later in this chapter. Another consideration of faith development theory is the primarily linear nature of development outlined, requiring progression through an Individuative-Reflective stage of conflict before Conjunctive integration, for example. Other models of spiritual development present development less linearly and without concrete stages.

### ***Gilligan's Ethics of Care***

In response to theorists like Fowler, Carol Gilligan developed stages of the ethics of care, specifically speaking to the experiences of girls and women (L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1993). Gilligan was critical of other models of moral development that were male-centered and hierarchical in nature. Gilligan (1982) developed a theory of moral development with three stages: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional morality. Preconventional morality is characterized by moral judgements that are focused on the self and the need to survive, typically in childhood. As a woman transitions to conventional morality, she realizes this way of making decisions could be considered selfish. Conventional morality emerges when a woman shifts her focus to being focused on others and characterized by self-sacrifice, often neglecting her own needs. This results in the final transition to postconventional morality which is characterized by a universal ethic of care that considers both the self and others in making decisions.

Gilligan's critiques raise questions regarding imposing any universal theory, especially when linear and progressive, may be fraught with limitations based on cultural, gender, and any number of other considerations. Transpersonal and integral psychology seek to address the

hierarchical nature of development with a more iterative and “flowing” understanding of development.

### ***Transpersonal Psychology***

Transpersonal psychology is a wide field that attempts to integrate psychological understandings with spiritual insights, especially those from Eastern spiritual traditions. Transpersonal psychology includes exploring the impacts of peak experiences and near death experiences, in addition to other altered states of consciousness such as through the use of psychedelics or meditation. Development is conceptualized as taking place along several lines including representational, dealing with logic and reasoning, and presentational, dealing with expanded sense of consciousness (Hunt, 1995). In addition to development taking place along several characteristics, it also takes place cladogenically (Dale, 2011). This refers to an evolutionary biology concept noting that change takes place along several pathways in parallel, as opposed to one single developmental line. A cladogenic model allows for early emergence of transpersonal development along with later emergence.

### ***Integral Psychology***

Integral theory is comprised of several components addressing historical and individual human development. Two notable areas are structure-stages and state-stages. He colloquially terms these growing up and waking up, respectively. Individual structure-stages are derived from a historical-cultural approach of human consciousness development. This evolution takes place over four eras, beginning with a sense of self identified with the physical being and forces of nature. The second era denotes a separation of physical from consciousness, but only in the form of magical and mythical thinking. The third era is characterized by the ability to understand and manipulate the physical world through symbols, namely language. And finally, using these skills

for understanding, self-reflection can be developed (Friedman et al., 2010). These stages are applied historically as well as seen in individual personality development.

Stage-states, then refer to experiences that are more transient in nature, but still require passing through each stage in order. These waking up stages are: gross, subtle, causal, and nondual (Wilber, 2000). These states of consciousness are available at any developmental level, but will be informed by the structure-stage of an individual (Wilber, 2003). As progression through stage-states occurs, they become less transient, and individuals are able to access these altered states more easily. The final stage of development, nondual or integral, appears to correlate to Fowler's Universalizing stage.

Wilber did endorse a vertical developmental progression in noting that people cannot skip steps in development. Wilber (2003) noted that in order to be integral, the previous stage must be experienced and included in the next levels of development. However, integral psychology is also clear in noting that development is not linear, relating more to an analogy of waves or streams of water in the ways development is experienced on an individual level (Wilber, 2003).

In addition to these spiritual development theories, there are several theories related to transformation. There are several ways to conceptualize transformation, and these differ from developmental models. One such theory is quantum change, which is characterized by sudden, dramatic, and enduring change that goes beyond merely behavioral, but also includes the level of emotion, cognition, and even personality shifts (Miller, 2004). This kind of change can be precipitated by a number of phenomena including a sense of aimless wandering, hopelessness, a "rock bottom" experience or being entirely unexpected. This kind of change is typically understood as happening to an individual as opposed to being cultivated or intentionally chosen (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Conversion is another common understanding of transformation.

This typically denotes a sudden shift in both the destination, how God is understood, and pathways, practices and beliefs, to the sacred (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004). Consciousness transformation is a final model for understanding transformation. This model does not necessarily integrate R/S considerations into the kinds of changes described. General models include a construction, deconstruction, reconstruction framework, typical in other change models (Vincent et al., 2015). Consciousness transformation is generally seen as an expansion, becoming increasingly aware of the perspectives and needs of others, increasing nondual thinking and altruism (Vieten et al., 2006).

### ***Common Themes in Spiritual Development Models***

These models offer a brief overview of some primary ways religious/spiritual development is understood. There are several discrepancies among the models; however, there are also several points of overlap. Several models of spiritual development share a common characteristic of a deconstruction phase. Individuative-Reflective faith in faith development theory encompasses this time of questioning and change (Fowler, 1981), while self and other reflection can trigger this kind of undoing in Wilber's (2003). Consciousness transformation can be understood as including a deconstruction followed by expanded reconstruction as well (Vieten et al., 2006). Expanding an individual's perspective appears a common element of many models including faith development theory (Fowler, 1981), ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982), transpersonal and integral psychology (Friedman et al., 2010). Several stage-models also include a progression that necessitates lower levels prior to advancing through higher levels of development, transcending previous understandings while also including them (Wilber, 2000).

Spiritual development is also compared with adult learning, including transformational learning theory. These processes are iterative in nature and occur from evaluating current beliefs

and considering their continued function currently (Welch & Koth, 2013). There is clear overlap between TLT and this understanding of spiritual development (Tisdell, 2003). TLT can also be understood along a developmental continuum, including integration previous transformational learning experiences across the lifespan (Erickson, 2007). Transformative learning theory and a developmental understand of R/S change are theoretically consistent with one another. There also appears to be space for several overlapping and intertwined applications of TLT with R/S development models.

In reviewing these various understandings of development and transformation, it is important to emphasize the immense variety in ways researchers have attempted to understand this complex phenomenon. The models presented can provide a helpful framework for understanding religious/spiritual development and transition; however, these models do not provide the final say on R/S experiences. Seeing some commonalities across various models may prove helpful in understanding the nature of R/S transition. The next section will turn to understanding the ways in which R/S development and change have been integrated into counseling practice, then will turn to attempting to understand the concept of R/S transition.

### **Religion and Spirituality in Counseling**

A great deal of research exists within the counseling literature regarding counseling and spirituality (C. R. Hall et al., 2004; Young et al., 2007). The areas of focus within this general field are many but include areas like practice implications (Hilert & Gutierrez, 2020), spiritual competence (Lu & Woo, 2017), and counselor training (Cashwell & Young, 2004). Of particular interest to this study were the areas of spirituality as an aspect of social and cultural diversity, the ethical and professional organizational standards, and the consideration of personal religious/spiritual beliefs and practices relating to spiritual competencies.

## **Social and Cultural Diversity**

Spiritual competence is an aspect of multicultural competence. The Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies in Counseling (Ratts et al., 2016) was another guiding document that speak to the importance of spiritual and considerations in counseling. The Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies in Counseling addressed the complicated nature of privilege and oppression, especially as it occurs intersectionally and uniquely within the counseling relationship. Religious and spiritual affiliation is one multicultural consideration among many including racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. Recommendations developing spiritual competency, discussed more fully below, are aligned with ways of developing multicultural competencies generally (Berkel et al., 2007). Guidelines for developing multicultural competence and spiritual competence include increasing self-understanding one's own R/S beliefs, utilizing community resources, and exposure to varieties of religious traditions and beliefs. In addition broaching, or initialing conversations in training, supervision, and with clients helps develop multicultural competency (Berkel et al., 2007; Day-Vines et al., 2021).

While religious and spiritual considerations are included in multicultural frameworks, this area is often overlooked as an aspect of cultural diversity in counselor education (Magaldi-Dopman, 2014). Counselor educators and supervisors are often reluctant to integrate attending to religious considerations (Hull et al., 2016). However, students are eager to learn about religion and spirituality in counseling (Henriksen et al., 2015). Attending to multicultural and social justice competencies in counseling requires self-reflection and self-critique to grow in awareness (Hook et al., 2013). This process of examining one's own cultural identities, like R/S identity, may be made more complicated if the counselor's own identities are also shifting (Mauch, 2016).

## Professional Standards

There are several relevant professional codes and standards that speak to the role of religion and spirituality in counseling. The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) Code of Ethics speaks to the importance of integrating spirituality both for the counselor as well as the client. The Code of Ethics notes the importance of cultural sensitivity in the counseling relationship, practicing within the boundaries of competence, as well as counselors practicing self-care that includes their R/S well-being (ACA, 2014). Within Section C, on professional responsibility, the code indicates the importance of counselor self-care to “maintain and promote their own emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being to best meet their professional responsibilities” (ACA, 2014, p. 8). This focus on the counselors’ or counseling students’ experiences of their own religion and spirituality is of particular interest to this study. A final consideration within this document speaks to the counselor’s self-awareness of active work against imposing personal values onto clients. It is an ethical mandate to avoid imposing personal values, even in the case of a values conflict, and be intentionally integrative of the client’s own values. Whether explicit or implicit, the consideration of religion and spirituality and counseling is imbedded throughout the document.

In addition to the ACA, the standards for training counselors are especially relevant to this focus on counselors-in-training. The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) standards note social and cultural diversity as one of the eight core areas of instruction in the counseling curriculum. Within this core area, Standard 2.F.2.g indicates programs will include “the impact of spiritual beliefs on clients’ and counselors’ worldviews” (CACREP, 2016, p. 10) within their curriculum. The specific mention

of spirituality among other aspects of diversity considerations is notable and speaks to the recognition of the importance of these topic areas.

The field is continuing to navigate the role and priority placed on the integration of religious/spiritual concerns into counseling. In the course of the drafting procedures, the 2024 CACREP Standards, Draft 2 (CACREP, 2022a) excluded any specific mention of religion or spirituality from every section except the addiction specialty area. However, due to feedback from organizations like the Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC, personal communication, May 4, 2022) and others within the counseling community, the most recently released draft (Draft 4) has reintroduced the consideration of both client and counselor's spirituality within social and cultural diversity (CACREP, 2022b). These changes may indicate continued hesitancy regarding counselor educators' broaching R/S topics (Wong, 2016).

As mentioned above, ASERVIC is an important counseling organization for insights into the area of religion and spirituality in counseling. The vision of ASERVIC (2023) is to, "empower[s] and enable[s] the exploration, development, and expression of spiritual, ethical, and religious values relating to the person, society, and counseling professional," (para. 2). This organization, a division of the ACA, provides clear priority on the impact of religion and spirituality for the client and the counselor. ASERVIC (2009b) has created Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling, as their guiding document in tandem with the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics. The competencies cover six primary categories including culture and worldview, counselor self-awareness, human and spiritual development, communication, assessment, and diagnosis and treatment (ASERVIC, 2009b). Based on these competencies, it is essential for counselors to understand their own spirituality and the role it is



playing in the counseling process. Additionally, spiritual development is considered an inherent part of human development applicable to both the client and the counselor. As we consider the nature and impact of spiritual transitions, these considerations will be important in guiding the application to counselors-in-training.

It is clear from the ACA Code of Ethics, the current and draft CACREP standards, the ASERVIC competencies, and the attention in research to this area, that the consideration of religious and spiritual topics in counseling is necessary. Even so, the counseling field continues to grapple with the role religion and spirituality might play in counseling, it is aligned in viewing R/S concerns as relevant client issues to be addressed. There appears to be a gap between these guidelines and practices of counselors, counselor educators, and counselors-in-training (Johns, 2017).

### **Religious/Spiritual Beliefs of Counselors**

Most of the research has, quite appropriately, focused on client's experiences with various components of religion or spirituality. A growing number of studies are exploring religion and spirituality of counselors and how they impact the counseling process in various ways. The R/S beliefs of counselors have been studied in relation to R/S integration in counseling, spiritual competencies, and relationship with purpose. A meta-analysis studying how therapists integrate R/S considerations into counseling found that therapists, including a variety of mental health professionals, were less religious, and less active in organized religion than the average American (Walker et al., 2004). Also of interest, when therapists did integrate religion or spirituality, it was primarily through intrapersonal integration, or the use of their own spiritual experiences, to bring into client sessions. This kind of integration could become problematic if counselors impose their values onto clients. This concern is amplified when considering the

variety of ways individuals can conceptualize religious concepts, like God. In a study of counseling students' concepts of god, heterogeneous understandings were found with an initial 758 words or phrases, that could ultimately be collapsed to 134 statements (Cashwell et al., 2016). Concepts of the Divine are complex, personal, and nuanced, and without exploring this counselors are prone to projecting their own god concepts onto clients (Cashwell et al., 2016). Therefore, intrapersonal integration is also at risk of these projections, without training and self-reflection on intentional integration.

Often, personal religious/spiritual beliefs are associated with spiritual competency. A narrative inquiry explored counselor educator's understandings of their own spiritual competency (Johns, 2017). The findings indicated that, while there were clear standards for R/S competency, a gap remained in addressing R/S concerns in students and clients. Furthermore, the study explored personal R/S beliefs, conceptualized as a journey. These individual journeys impacted how the counselor educators addressed R/S topics, but not uniformly. Notably, religious/spiritual development did not presuppose competency, but instead nuanced points of avoidance, confidence, and hesitation occurred (Johns, 2017). Interestingly, contradictory findings were reported in a study of counselors, which found that variables measuring spirituality contributed significantly to the variance of self-perceived competencies (van Asselt & Senstock, 2009). The study goes on to extrapolate that as a counselor is more spiritually aware, their ability to recognize client spiritual concerns also increases, and also their perceived competency also increases (van Asselt & Senstock, 2009). These studies differ in many ways including studying counselor educators versus counselors and using qualitative versus quantitative methods; however, there is conflicting evidence regarding if and how the personal spiritualities of

counselors, CITs and counselor educators impact spiritual competency (Johns, 2017; van Asselt & Senstock, 2009).

Zooming out from practice applications, understanding what brings counselors-in-training to the profession can be related to personal religious/spiritual beliefs. S. F. Hall et al. (2014) found that CITs experience a sense of calling to their work as counselors, and that this sense of calling is in part predicted by religious and existential well-being. In addition, concepts like relational depth, wisdom, attunement, and others all have a spiritual dimension beyond simply knowledge or behavior (Stewart-Sicking et al., 2019). With an understanding that the counselor is the tool and prizing a focus on the ways of being a counselor, the work of counseling easily overlaps into a spiritual endeavor for many.

The research exploring counselor's religious/spiritual beliefs has largely been based in identity measures. Recalling the sociological framework that argues for a more complex understanding of religion and spirituality that moves beyond binaries and stagnant identities (Ammerman, 2013), counseling can also embrace this ambiguity in its approach to working with clients (e.g., Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2017). Religion and spirituality are complex terms that evoke a multiplicity of meanings and stories in every individual. Stewart-Sicking et al. (2019) recognized this truth and argue against an oversimplification of the terms as a prerequisite for integrating R/S concerns in counseling. Instead, this breadth of understanding can be fully embraced and meaningfully integrated in the counseling process. The same can be said for fully embracing the complexity of R/S for CITs, especially those navigating R/S transitions.

### **Religious and/or Spiritual Transitions**

Building on the understanding of religious/spiritual development and change models presented above, in combination with the imperative to integrate R/S considerations into

counseling, we now turn to understanding the concept of R/S transitions. We will first seek to understand this concept broadly before turning toward how religious/spiritual transitions may uniquely impact CITs. There is a wide range of popular literature outlining various experiences of religious/spiritual transition (e.g., Escobar, 2014; Stroop & O’Neal, 2019; van Nieuwkerk, 2018; Winell, 2007). The gap found in professional literature points to an area of need, as there is wide interest and little in-depth understanding of the experiences of R/S transition. Several concepts understood together aim to represent the broad nature of R/S transition being proposed in this study. Zinnbauer et al. (1997) sought to clarify how individuals used the terms religion and spirituality, contending the meaning may be obscured by the lack of consistency in research. However, drawing from Stewart-Sicking et al.’s (2019) desire to accept a multiplicity of meanings for religion and spirituality, a narrowing, concrete answer is not being sought. Instead, multiple facets and possible experiences will be explored in attempting to articulate the inherently “fuzzy” concepts relating to religious/spiritual transition.

### **Terminology**

Offering a definition of religious and/or spiritual transition attempts to place language on a process, which my definition, defies confinement to language alone (Dourley, 2014). Yet, there are several relevant terms that have been explored relating to religious/spiritual transition. Some terms for understanding changes in R/S identity include conversion, religious or spiritual transformation, switching, deconversion, and more. Some of these concepts will be defined but first some difficulties in the use of these terms generally will be explored.

One difficulty in exploring this complex phenomenon was finding unified terminology or even coherent understanding of what was occurring. For example, McGlasson and Rubel (2015) explored spirituality as the “coming-out” process in a study with gay men. The findings aligned

with hallmark understandings of spiritual struggle (Exline & Rose, 2013), spiritual transformation (Pargament, 2006), and spiritual development (e.g., Fowler, 1981; Wilber, 2000) although none of these terms were used in the study. The findings outlined encountering a spiritual dilemma, confronting pain and struggle, and restructuring their own beliefs which appear to be qualitative expressions of these terms, and moreover, an understanding of R/S transition proposed in this study. This example outlines a challenge in understanding the process of R/S transition through a research lens, and in a pragmatic experience-based lens.

Seeking to understand religion and spirituality as an identity, especially one that remains constant over time, may be challenging for further understanding of this phenomenon. Typical sociological measures ask individuals to identify themselves as one religion, just as they would for ethnicity or gender. And there is much to be said about the limitations of understanding these categories as stagnant and unchanging. Similar limitations exist in simplistically categorizing how individuals conceptualize their understanding of transcendent reality. Religious and spiritual identity not only contends with meaning and purpose, but also has familial, political, and ideological components. For example, individuals may publicly disaffiliate from their religious institution as a means of separating themselves politically from the institution, while maintaining many elements of institutional dogmas and beliefs (Strawn, 2019).

Several terms are used to denote religious changes. Some of these will be explored briefly, and others of interest to religious/spiritual transition within counseling will be explored at greater depth in the next section. One such term is disaffiliating, this typically refers to formally requesting to leave a religion, for example requesting from a bishop to be removed from church records as a Latter-day Saint. Exiting is a similar term for leaving a religion, while apostate has a similar meaning with additional negative connotations of opposition to the religion

(Cragun & Hammer, 2011). Religious switching refers to leaving one religion and joining another religion (Loveland, 2003). Deconverter can be considered a pejorative term for a person who leaves a religion (Cragun & Hammer, 2011). Dones is another term form individuals who leave organized religion but retain their religious beliefs (Packard & Ferguson, 2019).

There was also a lack of clarity around the language associated with these kinds of transitions. Many of the widely used terms to understand this experience reveal religious hegemony and identify the non-religious as deviant in some way. Terms like apostate, unchurched, or even deconverter, reveal bias and imply that the expected norm is religious (Cragun & Hammer, 2011). Most research regarding spiritual transformation, spiritual change, or conversion focused on positive transformation, as in higher levels of religious or spiritual practice. This kind of change may simply not be the only kind of changes that happen, or certainly not the only kinds of changes that are beneficial or enhance well-being. The term religious/spiritual transition is used to gain a wide variety of experiences without placing value judgment on any of them. Exploring several connected terms will enhance the picture of R/S transition, offering a multifaceted understanding of the experience.

### **Spiritual Change**

A primary use of spiritual change is within posttraumatic growth literature. Spiritual change is one of the five factors of changes because of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). In this context, spiritual change, as measured by the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory--expanded (Tedeschi et al., 2017) refers to and is measured as positive change. This is consistent with the premise of posttraumatic growth but does not encompass a wide variety of types of changes, including doubt, distress, or shifts in beliefs. Instead, it measures having a

“stronger religious faith” and having “greater clarity about life’s meaning.” (Tedeschi et al., 2017).

Spiritual change is also used more broadly by researchers to indicate changes other than a strengthening of existing R/S beliefs. For example, Paloutzian (2005) defined spiritual change as “a change in the meaning system that a person holds as a basis for self-definition, the interpretation of life, and overarching purposes and ultimate concerns” (p. 334). Russo-Netzer conversely explored spiritual change, especially outside of institutional religion, focusing on an effortful and non-linear change process (Russo-Netzer, 2016, 2018; Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2017).

### **Conversion**

Conversion experiences have classically been understood as a sudden, enacted by an outside force, and resolving an inner conflict (Sandage & Moe, 2013). Very often individuals were seen as passive, being acted upon by an outside force, like God. The conversion experience of the Apostle Paul in the Christian tradition is a classic example of this type of conversion experience. This narrow view of conversion experiences appears to occur very rarely; however, a wider conception of conversion is also found in research and literature. Conversion can be simply defined as a change in religious identity (Cragun & Hammer, 2011). The nature of this change is not specified and can include any number of pathways to change. Even atheism, which is understood as a formed identity in the context of American theistic underpinnings, can be understood as a conversion experiencing. Although most typically, is termed deconversion (J. M. Smith, 2011).

When discussing conversion, the contrasting deconversion is often used. There may be similar processes at play in both conversion and deconversion. Religious change can take place

along three phases of questioning, doubting, and reconfiguring (Fisher, 2017). The reconfiguration can take the form of conversion, deconversion, or some other transition. It is more likely for individuals to experience multiple conversions, and by extension deconversions in religiously pluralistic societies (Paloutzian et al., 2013).

It is important to separate the process of conversion from the outcome or impacts of the process. For example, in a study of young adults who had left the Latter-day Saints, impacts of leaving included both a sense of identity achievement and also friction with family members (Jindra & Lee, 2021). Changes in religious status may be impacted by several factors, including culture. In a study of both German and American deconverts, findings indicated that those in the United States associated deconversion with personal gains and enhancement to well-being, while German deconverts reported losses and even some indications of crisis (Paloutzian et al., 2013). In exploring conversion experiences, a study in college students at a Christian college distinguished gradual increase in faith from more dramatic conversion experiences. The study found those who experienced conversions reported greater life transformation than those with higher religiosity (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). Additionally, conversions experienced by incarcerated individuals were associated with narratives characterized by purpose and meaning, empowerment as an agent of God, and creating a new social identity aligned with the conversion experience (Maruna et al., 2006)

Conversion has been used interchangeably with spiritual transformation (e.g., Mahoney & Pargament, 2004; Sandage & Moe, 2013). Further discussion of the nature of spiritual transformation will follow. This conflation is an additional example of a lack of unified terminology in the field relating to religious/spiritual changes.



## Spiritual Transformation

Spiritual transformation may elicit famous transformations like Buddha or Paul. Typically these are viewed as sudden, identity transformations that impact not just behavioral but personality level change (Johnson, 2013). Notably, Paloutzian et al. (2013) conceptualized spiritual transformation as an umbrella term that encompasses both conversion and deconversion. The primary component of spiritual transformation is change in meaning systems. This change can occur gradually or quickly and can impact parts of the whole of meaning systems (Park, 2010).

Pargament's (2006) understanding of spiritual transformation also notes that transformation is not always positive; however, goes on to note that changes can be destructive in nature and cause lasting damage. In this model, there are two types of spiritual transformation- primary and secondary. This model saw spirituality as the search for the sacred. Drawing from this understanding, primary spiritual transformation involves changes in the place or character of the sacred. This indicates fundamental changes in how Higher Power is conceived, like changes in religion or significant changes in characteristics of God. In short, changes in goals or destinations of the sacred are primary spiritual transformations (Pargament, 2006). Secondary spiritual transformation involves changes in pathways individuals take in their search for the sacred. This is characterized by religious switching (Pargament, 2006).

Spiritual transformation is likely the most common term used to describe this kind of transition. However, very few counseling journals contain articles with "spiritual transformation" as a topic, including scant articles included in *Counseling and Values*, the ASERVIC journal dedicated to the integration of spirituality in counseling. Even "spiritual struggle" was rarely observed in counseling literature, and the focus was appropriately on working with clients. No

known articles were found to be published relating to spiritual struggle, spiritual transformation, or R/S transitions in counselors-in-training.

### **Religious/Spiritual Transition Triggers**

There are a variety of factors that may serve as triggers for religious/spiritual transition. We are careful to separate these triggers from the process of the experience itself. Very few studies have explored the how R/S transitions are experienced (Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2017). There is some understanding of precipitants that may lead to R/S transitions to occur. Demographic factors have previously been a point of focus for leaving religion. Some factors like higher levels of education, political affiliation, or place of residence have reduced or no impact on current disaffiliation. Instead, none are an increasingly diverse group, and difficult to predict based on demographic factors (Fisher, 2017). Instead, several other considerations may point to precipitants of R/S transition.

Religious trauma could be a trigger for R/S transition. Religious trauma could include emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse. Similar to complex trauma, religious trauma is a form of betrayal trauma (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018). Religious trauma is characterized by a connection with religious beliefs or views of God, and therefore, can significantly impact experiences of religion (Swindle, 2017). Individuals who have survived religious trauma may experience a spiritual crisis (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018). Religious trauma can have pervasive impacts on individuals as it often impacts social connections, family relationships, personal values, and images of God (Stone, 2013).

From the perspective of quantum change, precipitants for change include a “rock bottom” experience, a sense of aimless wandering, or lacking purpose (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001). Being surprised by change, or a sense of change being outside the control of an individual can also

occur in seeing no particular cause for change to occur (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001). Similarly, a study exploring spiritual transformation in individuals with substance use disorders found personal crisis as a result of their addiction as the doorway to transformation (Williamson & Hood, 2013). Incarcerated individuals experiencing conversions are understood as resulting from a crisis of self-understandings (Maruna et al., 2006). These studies support the antecedents proposed by quantum change.

### **Deconstruction**

There is popular level interest in “deconstruction.” This trending term has been brought to consciousness through a variety of channels including books, podcasts, and spiritual communities. A simple internet search will reveal millions of videos, articles, podcasts, and even a Wikipedia page (“Faith Deconstruction,” 2022) to understand this phenomenon. There was nowhere near this volume of interest in academic fields, including counseling in “deconstruction” as such. Researchers utilize other terms attempting to capture similar experiences, like conversion/deconversion, spiritual transformation, spiritual struggle, or spiritual change. The wide interest in the concept of deconstruction points to a gap in wide experiences and the research being conducted by the academy.

Deconstruction appears to draw from postmodern philosophical understanding of deconstruction as advocated by Derrida, Kierkegaard, and other postmodern philosophers (Derrida & Caputo, 1997). Deconstruction refers to a complex set of critical processes for analyzing text and language, based in postmodernism stating that there is no fixed, true meaning. Popular ideas of faith deconstruction appear to focus on pulling apart inherited religious beliefs that may be loosely related to philosophical deconstruction but is generally a different

experience. Faith deconstruction refers to the process of examining, rethinking, and dissecting the faith an individual inherited.

The popular deconstruction movement is overwhelmingly founded in deconstruction from Christianity; however, the process may parallel other kinds of faith transitions. For example, an anthropological perspective demonstrates religious transformations of young Muslim women in Côte d'Ivoire (LeBlac, 2007). In another example considers the experiences of individuals who have experienced spiritual change outside religious institutions in Israel (Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2017). These examples demonstrate the presence of this kind of transition being present in other religions and contexts. Given the sociological landscape of religion in the U.S., it is unsurprising deconstruction has become synonymous with Christian deconstruction. Considering the shifts away from Christianity and growth in “nones” discussed above, the current popular understanding correlates (Pew Research Center, 2021b).

### **Impacts of Transition**

Religious/spiritual transitions can be understood through research-based concepts like spiritual transformation and religious change along with popular level understandings of faith deconstruction. Many varieties of changes in R/S beliefs are captured with R/S transition. Transition offers a more value-neutral term seeking to understand a highly charged topic of R/S beliefs. Religious/spiritual transition can include increases or decreases in religiosity, changes in affiliation, deconversion, changes in spirituality, and many more experiences.

Religious/spiritual transition can result in a period of significant distress (Exline & Rose, 2013; Krause et al., 2017). This can be experienced in many ways including impacts on physical health (Krause & Ellison, 2009), depression (Pargament & Exline, 2022), and well-being (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, et al., 2015). Additionally, positive outcomes can result from engaging in this

deconstruction and reconstruction process. Possible impacts related specifically to CITs will be explored in the discussion of counselor's development.

### **Counselor Development**

An essential element of counseling programs is an emphasis on both personal and professional development (Lumadue & Duffey, 1999). To this end, spiritual development is an essential element for many counselors-in-training. There are several elements of counselor development that may overlap with spirituality, especially in terms of spiritual transition. To begin, we will review counselor professional identity development models, as well as their explicit and implicit integration of spiritual considerations. Then, several aspects of counselor identity development will be considered with special attention to religious/spiritual dimensions. This understanding will be considered in light of the nature of R/S transition.

Historically, the field has taken great pains to separate spiritual from psychological domains. However, more nuanced understanding sees the interconnectedness of these ways of understanding the self (Wilber, 2003). In part, it is because of this overlap that R/S transitions may be likely to occur in counseling and other related mental health programs. Counseling programs ask, and even require students to grow professionally. Professional development is a false silo, as all development is holistic development, including personal and spiritual development. This kind of development also includes those who are nonreligious or nonspiritual (Sahker, 2016). Due to Christian hegemony in the United States, J. M. Smith (2011) posited that atheism was an achieved identity; one in which active engagement was often necessary to make a claim of atheism. Similar to Benson et al.'s (2012) conception of a volitional spiritual development process, a similar active process was necessary for the nonreligious as well.

## **Counselor Development Theories**

Considering professional identity development as also personal in nature is consistent with many professional development paradigms (Damianakis et al., 2020; De Weerd et al., 2006). Professional training emphasizes not only the skills needed for the profession, but also dispositional ways of being nurse, lawyer, or counselor. Higher education, and specifically professional programs aim to transform the entire self. Drawing on prior knowledge and lived experience, students embark on the ambiguous process of becoming their chosen profession (Dall'Alba, 2009). Learning to become a professional includes the integration of knowledge and skills, embodied into practices of the professional. Seeing this process of changing identity is conceptualized as an existential reconstruction process of multiple facets of identity (McCaw, 2021). Spiritual and religious reconfiguration may be elements of this existential process for many emerging professionals, including counselors-in-training. This kind of holistic development process appears to exist across professional programs, and in particular, counselors-in-training undergo similar changes in developing their professional identities as counselors.

Counseling professional identity development has been conceived of as both professional training skills and knowledge along with personal characteristics. It is the unique combination of an individual's personal attributes along with their professional training that form an individual counselor's professional identity. In addition, it is the cohesive integration of these professional and personal selves that speaks to successful identity development (Moss et al., 2014). Transformational tasks define the process of counseling identity development including an understanding of the definition of counseling, the locus of responsibility for the professional growth, and transformation to integration of identity (Gibson et al., 2010). Looking at this movement across the three tasks along the process of seeking external validation and moving

toward self-validation. This aspect of the professional identity development process aligns with Fowler's (1981) stages that depict movement from reliance on religious authority toward personal responsibility for shaping one's own beliefs.

In addition to transformational tasks model of counselor development, Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) proposed a stage model of development including six stages: lay helper, beginning student, advanced student, novice professional, experienced professional, and senior professional. This model sees progression through generally linear stages of development; however, shares a holistic transformation process. While individuals begin as lay helpers, trying on their understandings of the helping profession, to later more fully integrated personal and professional sense of self (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). This integration encompasses several domains including cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and more. Generally, models of counselor development address skills and knowledge, but also include personal and dispositional characteristics as well (Coll et al., 2013).

### **Development as Disorienting**

The process of transformation is often disorienting. Change is a result of wrestling with existing models no longer working in the present. Confronting this mismatch can lead to change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). The precipitating conditions that lead to change can include hitting "rock bottom," feeling trapped by current circumstances, or feeling aimless or wandering without purpose (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001). For Mezirow (1978), the women's movement was a sociological example of this kind of transformational change. Individuals and groups were confronted by being trapped in their circumstances of rigid gender roles, or aimlessly wandering as women were becoming aware of further opportunities for purpose through pursuing higher education and careers.

Similar experiences can be observed in counselor training programs. Disorienting dilemmas may take the form of values conflicts, confronting personal mental health struggles, or forming a personal counselor identity. These kinds of disruptions can lead individuals toward transformation. This wrestling with disorientation is common among counseling students and is captured in some counselor development models. Considering transformational tasks, the work of moving through the task is often precipitated by a disorienting dilemma like aimless wandering or feeling trapped by current schemas (Gibson et al., 2010; Miller & C'de Baca, 2001). For example, counselors grappling with the transformational task of having energy for the work of counseling move from burnout, the dilemma, to rejuvenation, the transformation (Mezirow, 1990; Moss et al., 2014). Throughout counselor training, a great many opportunities exist to experience challenges to existing frames of reference, resulting in the confusion and anxiety associated with the disorientation that can serve as the catalyst for transformation (Nogueiras et al., 2019).

### **Development of Skills and Dispositions**

When considering counselor development, several characteristics are considered. Evaluation of student learning often includes skills, dispositions and behaviors (Barrio Minton & Gibson, 2012). These are important considerations to assessing counselor development as students progress through counseling programs. As outlined above, there are specific religious and spiritual competencies for the counseling profession. The ASERVIC competencies dedicate one of the six content areas to counselor self-awareness. The focus of these competencies is on personal exploration of personal “attitudes, beliefs, and values about spirituality and/or religion,” (ASERVIC, 2009b, p. 1). If these beliefs are in flux or being actively deconstructed, development of these competencies may be impacted.



Similarly, development of other counseling skills and dispositions may be impacted by shifts in religious/spiritual belief structures. One potential area of impact may include flexibility or adaptability. A study examining existential and spiritual change in students in a Christian psychology program, found that through the deconstruction process, the participants perceived themselves to be less judgmental and more interpersonally flexible. They reported finding it easier to accept lifestyles with which they were unfamiliar (Mauch, 2016). This increasing relativism and humanistic stance aligns with Perry's (1970) model of adult development, and could have a direct impact on foundational counseling skills of nonjudgmental stance and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951). Such foundational shifts that occur in religious/spiritual transitions may have an impact on counselor skill development; however, the specific direction, scope, and depth of this impact is unknown in the current literature.

### **Development of Cognitive Complexity**

An additional consideration in counselor development is enhancing cognitive complexity in counseling students. This process occurs through shifting dichotomous thinking of absolutes or right and wrong and adopting beliefs in nuanced, contradictory, or dialectical knowing (Granello, 2000; Hanna et al., 1996). Increasing cognitive complexity is a process that aligns with developmental constructivist model outlined above (Eriksen, 2006; Perry, 1970). Developmental models often share a paradigm of movement through more rigid dualistic thinking and toward more flexible and responsive relativistic understandings. This is also seen in the R/S development models outlined above, especially in Fowler's (1981) faith development model. This shared characteristic indicates that as counseling students grapple with increasing cognitive complexity in their educational setting, R/S concerns may also arise. Addressing the complex concerns of working with clients in the counseling field will almost invariably

intertwine with R/S considerations. Given that increased cognitive complexity is often a goal in counselor education, and that this moral development is correlated with R/S developmental models, it appears necessary for counselor education to consider the development of cognitive complexity alongside the process of R/S changes in CITs.

### **Addressing Shame and Nondisclosure in Development**

The change process can be unsettling and result in a variety of struggles. One element of this struggle may be the experience of shame, which is often accompanied by secrecy. One central element of the emotion of shame is the isolation resulting from secrecy and silence (B. Brown, 2006). Whatever triggered the experience of shame, the typical response is to keep others from knowing about the shame. In counselor education, this kind of recoiling inward could result in CITs avoiding or even concealing their shame and the trigger for shame. Shame can lead to nondisclosure in supervision settings. This can impact counselor development or even compromise client care (Yourman, 2003).

W. M. Parker and Schwartz (2002) noted commonly observing shame reactions in CITs who are learning multicultural competencies, especially in white CITs who are gaining awareness around privilege and oppression dynamics present in race in western contexts. These authors also note the ways shame can impede development of the multicultural competencies they are seeking to grow, as shame can lead to self-preoccupation, withdrawal, and distress. There was also an inverse relationship between shame and empathy, both toward self and others (B. Brown, 2006). This lack of empathy would clearly impact counselor development, not only of multicultural competencies, but other counseling skills as well. It is possible to see connections in religious/spiritual transition as well as it relates to the impacts of shame. Attitudes toward gender and sexual minorities is a common dilemma experienced in this kind of transition,

and correlations between racial identity development and changes in gender and sexual minority attitudes are possible. Further research is needed to explore this possible connection.

### **Values Conflicts in Development**

A great deal of research and thought has gone into the area of values conflicts in counselor education. Considering values conflicts as a part of overall counselor development will only consider a broad overview of the topic, for this purpose. The ACA Code of Ethics provides the collective norms and expectations for the counseling profession. One element of the ACA Code of Ethics is for counselors to avoid imposing their values onto clients (ACA, 2014). As counselors-in-training are exposed to a variety of ideas and client narratives, they may be confronted with conflicts between their personal values and those held collectively by the profession. One notable example of such a conflict has been conflicts between CIT's (or counselor's) religious values and counseling LGBTQIA+ individuals (Francis & Dugger, 2014). Confrontation of this conflict between personal religious values and the overarching professional values may have several results including litigation or perhaps transformation.

Values based conflicts are often connected with religious/spiritual beliefs, and therefore the consideration of R/S transition is crucial in these cases. Counselor training is likely to bring to light conflicting values held by an individual and the ethical standards of counseling. Counselor training requires CITs to address these conflicts and may use a variety of pedagogical tools to resolve such issues. Values conflicts may cause or be caused by R/S transitions the counseling student is already experiencing.

### **Summary**

Through considering several elements of counselor development and how they interact with R/S development, it was clear that CITs spiritual frameworks could be impacted during the

course of their training. Drawing several connections between various aspects of counselor development, a holistic understanding must include R/S considerations. However, it was still unclear how or if these associated changes have an impact on CITs. The potential impacts of R/S transition on counselors-in-training was considered, including the possibility of impairment or remediation.

### **Counselors-in-Training Undergoing Religious/ Spiritual Transitions**

Considering the nature of counselor professional development through a transformational learning lens, it is clear this experience alone may be destabilizing. Exploring possible impacts was merely implicit, as there was no other known research exploring this phenomenon in CITs. However, there were several implications for how CITs could be impacted by undergoing religious/spiritual transition during training. These students may experience the disorientation and anxiety that is expected in professional education experiences, and develop in the expected ways, without harmful impacts on clients or themselves. Even if this typical counselor development does occur alongside R/S transition, little is known about the process of the change experience for these counselors-in-training. It is also possible that R/S transition could have more harmful impacts on the trajectory of counselor development. Counselor impairment, the necessity of gatekeeping, and the process of remediation will be considered in relation to R/S transition.

The precipitating factors resulting in counselor impairment are largely unknown (Witmer & Young, 1996). However, there are several factors from a theoretical perspective, which may have an impact on impairment. For example, counselors may have more risk than the general population of experiencing mental health concerns (Victor et al., 2022). In addition, there is a wealth of research regarding the impacts of vicarious trauma, especially on early career

counselors (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995). This experience of vicarious trauma may result in impairment (Jimenez et al., 2021). Part of the understanding related to the experience of vicarious trauma is permanent impacts on the counselors' cognitive schemas (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). Some of these schemas could include outlooks on the Divine and existential considerations. This outline is only one potential example of the ways in which religious/spiritual transitions may impact counselors-in-training.

If spiritual transitions have the potential result in counselor impairment, as preliminary evidence suggests (Wilt, Grubbs, et al., 2016), then it is essential for counseling programs to address the nature and impact of spiritual transitions on counselors-in-training. Examining the areas of counselor development that could be impacted by R/S transition, it is possible that any of these concerns could result in impairment or need for remediation. Programs are responsible for gatekeeping, which includes intervening when individuals behave in ways that could threaten the welfare of clients (Foster & McAdams, 2009). This process includes examining various characteristics of CITs (and counselors) including personal values, openness to feedback, and clinical abilities (Lumadue & Duffey, 1999). The personal spiritual beliefs of counseling students have been largely overlooked in the counseling literature (S. F. Hall et al., 2014). It is largely unknown how R/S transitions may impact counselors-in-training. Drawing from what is known about other kinds of transitions, it may be a disquieting experience. As outlined above, counselor development may be impacted and thus result in remediation or other gatekeeping procedures. Viewing the gatekeeping process as largely supportive, and not punitive, counselor educators should assess for R/S transition in the remediation process.

The shortage of research and understanding in religious/spiritual transitions, especially in CITs, on its own would warrant further exploration into the phenomenon. However, the

additional consideration that R/S transitions could have significant impacts on CITs relating to dispositional concerns, nondisclosure, or values conflicts which could result in the need for remediation, increases the need for counselor educators to understand R/S transition in CITs.

### **Summary**

This chapter endeavored to outline the relevant literature associated with religious/spiritual transitions in counselors-in-training. The chapter began with a holistic outlook on the landscape of religion and spirituality on a sociological level in the United States, including the notable shifts occurring on an individual level. The chapter also outlined the relevant theories that undergird this study and overviewed the experience of R/S transition. Religion and spirituality were considered in the general population, including the significant impacts on mental health, social function, and overall well-being. Further religion and spirituality in the counseling profession was outlined, including the necessity for counselors to be able to grapple with client R/S concerns. The beginning of this competency lies within counselor's ability to self-reflect and consider the impacts of their own personal R/S development.

The term religious/spiritual transition was introduced, as a synthesized view of previous understandings including religious switching, religious struggle, and even perhaps religious trauma. The chapter then outlined counselor development considering relevant professional development models as well as specific counselor development models in light of skill development and dispositional concerns. Finally, this chapter outlined the possible impacts of R/S transition on counselor development, noting the dearth of research in this area. The relevance of this research was highlighted by examining the gap in the literature regarding the understanding of R/S transition generally, and moreover within counselors-in-training. With this

research need outlined, the following chapter will outline the proposed methodology for this study.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

Building on the understanding of the research problem outlined in the previous chapter, this section will turn to the research methods by which to address the problem. First, an overview of the broad philosophical assumptions that undergird this study is provided, followed by the more specific use of narrative inquiry. With this background, the purpose to more fully understand the narratives of counselors-in-training (CITs) who have undergone a faith transition was outlined. This purpose was further delineated through summarizing the specific procedures and methods that were used.

The intent of this study was to explore the experiences of CITs undergoing religious/spiritual (R/S) transitions. Given the scarcity of research on this phenomenon generally, and no known studies exploring this experience in CITs a qualitative methodology was appropriate. Qualitative research focuses on studying things “in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). The voices of participants are prized as is complex and nuanced understanding of the problem identified in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative methods were an appropriate tool to seek a greater depth of understanding of this little-known experience of R/S transition. Further exploration into the philosophical assumptions of narrative inquiry will be outlined below. The lenses used to frame the research question are important foundations to explore as they guide the methodological choices in this study.



## **Narrative Inquiry**

Stories are an ancient phenomenon, and an essential way people have made meaning of their experiences. Since the development of language, crafting stories have served multiple important functions like enlisting help from others, crafting community purpose, or entertaining (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012). Narratives can help to make meaning from chaotic circumstances, for individuals or groups, and storytelling can be the pathway for creating meaning (Polkinghorne, 2005). Narratives do not simply tell us about life, but are experienced in life (Clandinin, 2013; Daiute, 2014). Narratives have a powerful impact on cultures across time as a dynamic way of communicating shared values, fostering a sense of belonging, or initiating social change (Riessman, 2008). In a very real sense, people become themselves through the stories they tell (Polkinghorne, 2005). It is from this broad conception of the importance of narratives that narrative inquiry arose.

Narrative inquiry experienced a relatively recent uptick in interest and usage in qualitative research. Due in part to this surge, scholars have recognized a variety of ways narrative inquiry is practiced, including a range of epistemological and ontological commitments (Clandinin, 2016; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012). Narrative inquiry can be undergirded by postmodern, realist, post-structuralism, post-positivism, and critical theory, to name a few (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012; Riessman & Speedy, 2012). In response to the potential tensions, further clarification is necessary to offer greater philosophical precision to the use of narrative inquiry in this study.

Given the broad range of narrative inquiry, it is important to briefly consider the history of the methodology. Several authors note the important “narrative turn” in the landscape of research (Clandinin, 2016; Riessman, 2008). The exact timeframe is debated, but agreement lies

with the impetus for the change--challenges to realism and positivism. This shift in epistemological ways of knowing was integral to many forms of qualitative research, but especially narrative inquiry, prizing lived experiences of individuals. In addition, a shift from numbers to words as data, as well as looking toward understanding particulars as opposed to only general understanding of various phenomenon, were beginning to grow in social science research. This change was fueled by a growing dissatisfaction with numbers alone to fully capture nuanced human experiences. In addition to changes in the academy, the broader culture was also set up for change due to movements including “identity movements” of the 1960s along with the growth in psychology on a cultural level (Riessman, 2008). Due to the challenges to positivism in research but also in the broader culture, the value of deeply understanding narratives increased over time. Technology also created the opportunity for average people to capture these narratives with accessible recording equipment.

### **Philosophical Assumptions of Narrative Inquiry**

Guiding the choices within qualitative research are several assumptions. A relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology form the foundations of this study, and align with narrative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2015). Ontology, relating to considerations of the nature of reality, is an important frame to consider in this study. Narrative inquiry is guided by a relativist ontology, seeing the existence of multiple realities (Heppner et al., 2015). Moreover, narrative inquiry understands ontology as relational; reality is actively co-created by an individual’s experience along with other narratives including familial, cultural, and institutional narratives (Clandinin et al., 2018). This interactive process is vital to the process of narrative inquiry and undergirds an understanding of how reality is constructed. The subjective nature of reality is only understood when considering the relational nature of how stories are

constructed (Clandinin, 2016). In addition, reality is constantly in flux as it is in constant relational interaction with other people, cultures, and institutions (Chase, 2005). The researcher must be included in this active relational process, and therefore researcher reflexivity was necessary to consider the ways in which researchers are also becoming and in process alongside participants (Clandinin et al., 2018).

Narrative inquiry is concerned with the ordinary experience of everyday people. Paramount to this is the understanding of experience. Clandinin (2016) provided a foundational conception of experience, which will form the understanding of narrative. This understanding was derived from Dewey's (1952) theory of experience, which defined criteria for experience. This understanding was that an experience was a continuous interaction between a self and the world in the areas of personal, social, and material environment (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012). This led to narrative inquiry's focus on temporal, social, and place of experiences that form narratives. This interpretivist epistemology sees knowledge as needing to return to the nature of experience for meaning to be understood.

### **Narrative Inquiry in Practice**

Narrative inquiry seeks to elicit in-depth narratives from participants about their experiences. Through this process, the content as well as the function and process of the story being told are of central interest (Riessman, 2008). Stories are social products and must be understood in their specific contexts. To this end, narrative inquiry is an interactional, relational, and complex methodology for understanding the lived experiences participants. These interactions take place both within the research process and also within the story itself as the narrative is co-created in practice.

Narrative inquiry sees three important dimensions for consideration in construction of narratives and their meaning. Experiences, and the stories constructed about them, are considered in light of their temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin, 2013). Temporality refers to the understanding that all experiences are built upon previous experiences and will be carried into future experiences. Sociality includes both personal and social conditions, and especially how these interact. Of particular note for this study, sociality includes existential forces at play in the environment (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012). Finally, place refers to the situated context in a physical or spatial area. As stories are embodied within place, they may also shift across time and sociality changes. Narrative inquiry looks at not only the content of a story, but also how these three factors influence the story being told (Butina, 2015). In this research, several dimensions of stories were at play as participants consider their religious or spiritual histories. Religious/spiritual transition includes not only individual experience of change, but also how this narrative fits in with the past, present, and future narratives of religion and spirituality. It also overtly includes existential conditions present in the construction of narratives (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012). The element of place included several concrete boundaries of physical characteristics of stories within R/S transition. The research took place through the conduit of relationships and invites participants to co-create expertise and knowing along with the researcher (Butina, 2015).

Narrative inquiry draws a distinction between stories and narratives. Stories are essentially the raw data of the content of stories, while narratives emerge from analysis of these stories (Baughan, 2017). This interpretive aspect of narrative inquiry communicates meaning to the raw data of stories. Co-creating narratives with participants is the art of narrative inquiry. In alignment with relativist assumptions, there is no one correct interpretation. Instead, the

researcher, through considering the myriad contexts, theoretical guides, and an interpretive structure, can provide a narrative account of the experience.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to understand the narratives of counselors-in-training who have undergone a religious and spiritual transition. The study sought to understand the narrative arc of the process of religious/spiritual transition, including how it related to their personal experiences, overall training experiences, and their counselor identity development. With an expansive understanding of what comprises a R/S transition as well as openness to how individuals experience these weighty changes, this study sought to understand the authentic experiences of counseling students. The study was interested in the stories of transition, including precipitants for change, the experience of transition, how they conceptualized the change at the time and retrospectively, and the stories of the impacts of R/S transition. There was also an interest in a full composite of experience through the lens of the participants' reflections on contexts including familial, social, and even larger historical contexts relating to privilege and oppression. This totality of experience was considered in understanding the narratives of CITs who have experienced R/S transition.

There is evidence that religious/spiritual transitions, broadly defined as transformations in spiritual values and beliefs, are occurring across the lifespan, and perhaps particularly with CITs due to the transformational nature of professional training programs (Dall'Alba, 2009). The dual transition of navigating shifts in R/S domains as well as developing a professional counselor identity, create the possibility for interactive impacts on both processes. It is important for counselor educators to understand the potential and kinds of impacts R/S transitions may have on counselor identity development. Grappling with this transition is especially important given that

when beliefs are not acknowledged and discussed counselors are more likely to impose their values than to avoid topics of potential bias (Souza, 2002). There are potential impacts on not only counseling students' experiences but the future impact on clients makes this inquiry an important avenue of research. Through this research, I hope to expand awareness within counselor educators regarding the occurrence and experience of students who are undergoing significant shifts to their R/S identity in addition to the significant shift in developing a professional counseling identity. Through the exploration of this phenomenon, coupled with the current understanding of how counseling students develop their professional identity, counseling programs can be better prepared to support students navigating these transformative experiences.

### **Research Question**

Guided by the purpose outlined above, this study sought to attend to the noted research gap based on the following research question.

- Q1     What are the stories of counselors-in-training who have experienced religious/spiritual transition, in relation to their personal experience, counselor training, and professional identity development?

### **Researcher Stance**

Given the nature of qualitative research including narrative inquiry, it is essential to discuss my own relationship to this phenomenon as well as my assumptions. There are several important reasons to attend to my own narrative in relation to the narratives I am soliciting from participants including understanding how we see ourselves or being unaware of the ways in which our narratives play out in the relationship and story of participants (Clandinin, 2013). The purpose of this process is not to justify my objectiveness, but rather my active process with my own narrative experience. The very act of storying my own narrative has been a dynamic and interactive process with my imagined audience. I am also aware that I interact with my own

narrative in light of social institutional, and cultural narratives (Clandinin, 2016). As a cisgender, straight, white woman, my religious/spiritual transition story is shaped considering those identities and social locations as a dynamic and interactive process. The story I have crafted has been formed in relation to this consideration. This disclosure along with continuing reflexivity journaling will serve to enhance the co-construction of participant narratives, and undoubtedly shift my understanding of my own narrative.

My own experience informed my approach to this research. I do not believe I have landed anywhere that will remain stationary over time. However, I can also understand through reflecting back on my own journey the significant changes that I have undergone throughout the years in relation to my spirituality as well as professionally and personally. I hold both a place of distance from my experience, and a recognition that change is ongoing for me. My own religious/spiritual transitions have occurred throughout my life. I attended a conservative Christian master's program, with the intention of integrating my faith into counseling. It is difficult to summarize the many complex experiences I had during this time, but I could say that I experienced R/S transition during the program as well as afterward. This experience shifted my perspective from comfortably evangelical to uncomfortably sorting through uncertainties. My own encounters with diverse clients, friends, and larger community forced me to confront questions related to my dogmatic belief structures. The very nature of counseling as a process-oriented, ambiguous, and relational space created conflict with my rigid, right or wrong worldview. Wrestling with these kinds of questions involved my personality style and development but were also deeply spiritual for me. They aimed right at the heart of how I viewed God and God's relationship to the world. Upending these structures was painful, disorienting, and ultimately transformational for me.

I have great difficulty providing labels to my own experiences. I would currently self-identify as a mainline Christian; however, I hold that label very loosely. I am not tied to that identity in the same way that I would have previously held a Christian identity. Over the years I would have self-identified as evangelical, Christian, a person of faith, and agnostic. These labels offer a shorthand to a very nuanced internal and transcendent experience of faith. However, they lack the context and story behind the meaning of these labels. Due in part to my own frustration in explaining my experience, as well as my deep belief that knowing a story is the beginning of empathy, understanding, and ultimately change, this research interest has emerged. With that understanding, I do not approach this research from a purely objective standpoint. I would argue that objectivism does not truly exist and owning my position as a researcher is important to the nature of this research.

I have several assumptions regarding this research topic. First, I believe spirituality is an innate part of being human. While not everyone would identify with that language, I believe most people would identify with an innate search for meaning and purpose. This broadly defined existential search has long piqued my curiosities. Innate spirituality does not necessitate a God-concept or transcendence but does provide a conduit for transformation and change. I have cultivated a spiritual story to guide my pursuit of meaning which I have cultivated a spiritual story that resonates with me; however, I recognize the cultural, geographic, and familial influences that have shaped this story. I also deeply value the many varieties of spiritual stories and how meaningfully they can shape individuals. I appreciate learning from traditions different from my own and hold deep respect for the uniqueness of each individual's R/S journey. The great many ways to define and pursue purpose offer exciting diversity of understanding our human experience. While I contend that pursuing meaning and purpose is universal, the great



many ways to embark on this journey make confining spirituality to any single construct impossible. Religion and spirituality in psychology has been described as diverse and multidimensional (Pargament et al., 2013). It is the pursuit of these many paths toward understanding greater meaning that intrigues me.

In addition, I believe religion and spirituality can be both profoundly healing and profoundly harmful. The study of psychological impacts of religion have vacillated from ignoring to minimizing impacts to more currently exploring the positive relationship between religion and well-being (Stone, 2013). While this attention to vital aspect of being human is necessary, there is still greater need for exploring the potential harm of religion and spirituality on individuals (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018). The ASERVIC (2009b) competencies helpfully acknowledged that spirituality could both enhance well-being and also contribute to therapeutic issues.

There is a plethora of research that supports the relationship between religion and mental health (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Pargament et al., 2013). Studies have supported the positive relationship between religion/spirituality and well-being (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, et al., 2015), greater meaning of life beliefs (Park et al., 2013), and lower levels of depression (Hood, 2009). This research supports my own experiences that have contributed to this assumption. In my work with clients and in my personal life, I have found religion and spirituality to be life-enhancing and protective.

In addition to enhancement, I also have personal and professional experience with religion/spirituality causing harm. I believe religion and spirituality can be both profoundly healing and profoundly harmful. This harm can vary and can include religious trauma and religious abuse. Religious trauma is a broad term that lacks consistent definition in the literature.

Religious trauma appears to share similarities with complex trauma, as it is not typically acute incidents, but rather pervasive patterns over time (Stone, 2013). Religious trauma is borne out of religious beliefs and experiences and cause psychological damage and often include interpersonal concerns in addition to emotional and cognitive symptoms (Stone, 2013; Winell, 2007). Religious abuse does typically consist of more acute incidents including clergy sexual abuse, financial coercion or harassment (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009). In addition to overt cases of religious trauma and abuse, spiritual struggle can occur as a result of harm perpetuated by belief systems and communities. Concepts like spiritual struggle and spiritual bypassing have attempting to understand some of the ways religion and spirituality may be directly or indirectly harmful. It is important to consider both the possibility for healing and harm when looking at R/S impacts.

I also believe changes in religious/spiritual journeys are normal and natural; however, that does not mean they are easy or painless to navigate. There is a wealth of evidence to support that humans continue to grow and develop in many ways in adulthood (Glanzer et al., 2014; Manners et al., 2004; Perry, 1999). One aspect of this development is ongoing spiritual development. While there are several ways of understanding this development, as previously outlined such as stage theories (e.g., Fowler, 1981) or process-oriented (e.g., Friedman et al., 2010), there is wide consensus that change does occur. My own experience confirms this and contributes to my underlying assumption that humans grow and change over time. This underlying belief was absolutely necessary for my work with clients, supervisees, and students. Walking alongside people as they navigate change is precipitated on the belief that not only is adapting to change possible but also growth and development. These assumptions connect with my own experiences with the phenomenon as well as my work with clients. Guided by the belief

that people continue to change and develop across the lifespan, including relating to R/S identities, and that these transitions may bring challenges and joys, the current study will be further outlined.

## **Procedures**

### **Participants**

Participants in this research were comprised of current students (having completed at least two semesters) or recent graduates (within 2 years) from CACREP accredited master's programs, across specialty areas. Participants have completed at least two semesters of graduate training to ensure they have adequate experience in counselor training to speak to the dual transition of counselor development and R/S transition of interest in this study. Participants self-identified as currently experiencing or having experienced a R/S transition. A broad definition of R/S transition was provided- "religious and/or spiritual transition includes any personally significant changes to your religious and/or spiritual beliefs, values, or identity." This definition drew upon some elements of Pargament's (2006) definition of spiritual transformation which speaks to fundamental changes in character of the sacred or changes in the pathways to the sacred. However, the language of transition was chosen to avoid connotations that can exist with transformation, which typically refers to radical positive change (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). Individuals may have experienced these changes as positive, while others may have experienced distress or doubt that may discourage them from participating in their current state of transition.

To understand the developmental process at play, the current study utilized data from the perspective of both current students as well as recent graduates. The rationale behind this choice was based on the understanding that post-graduates may benefit from additional meaning-making related to their process of retrospection. Current students, on the other hand, may be

better positioned to discuss the current experience of being in the midst of a R/S transition. There was additionally no prior research to indicate that R/S transition was completed at the time of graduation from a counseling program. The requirement to have completed two semesters of a counseling program was intended to capture participants who are experiencing R/S transition at least in part due to their counseling program itself. The expanded participant pool may help capture the phenomenon more fully. A final characteristic of type of institution was considered. The current study limited participants to those from public or non-religiously affiliated programs. Given the scarcity of research in this area, recruitment was restricted to public institutions. The experiences of students at religiously affiliated programs has the potential to be markedly different due to the intentional integration of faith concerns into professional programming (Mauch, 2016).

In addition to these qualifying characteristics, other demographic information was collected (see Appendix A). This information included age, gender, race, type of program, status in the program (pre-practicum, practicum, internship, or graduate), and current religious/spiritual identity as described by the participant. This information was gathered via Qualtrics survey, and also discussed in interviews, as appropriate for each participant. During this initial screening, participants also completed the informed consent (see Appendix B). The informed consent was also reviewed verbally at the beginning of the first interview.

### **Sample Size**

Qualitative research does not offer concrete answers to ideal numbers of participants, and recommendations differ based on methodology and theory. Narrative inquiry often uses only one or two individuals. However, this study attempted to develop a collective story of CITs experiencing religious/spiritual transitions during their professional training (Creswell & Poth,

2018). To construct this collective narrative, the sample included six CITs and recent graduates. Previous qualitative research exploring spiritual shifts represented a broad range of sample sizes. One study explored spiritual change outside traditional religious institutions, purposely gathering a heterogeneous sample and included 27 participants (Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2017). Another study used phenomenology to explore spiritual transformation in individuals with substance use disorders, and included a sample size of 10 participants (Williamson & Hood, 2013). However, when looking toward narrative inquiry in particular, this methodology may include only one or two individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In counselor education research, slightly larger samples appear to be more common, including examples ranging from three to seven (Benoist, 2016; Dayal et al., 2021). The current sample size of six participants aimed to encompass a variety of stories about religious/spiritual transition within the limited scope of counseling students at non-religious CACREP-accredited institutions to illuminate a collective story on this experience.

### **Participant Recruitment**

This study used purposive sampling, intentionally selecting participants with particular lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling prioritizes information-rich cases that can provide rich understanding of the phenomenon, as opposed to large or statistically representative samples (Patton, 2002). With this intention in mind, specific methods were used to recruit participation in this study. Participation was solicited through listservs including the Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET) and ASERVIC using the same research invitation email (see Appendix C). The Counselor Education and Supervision Network is a professional listserv composed of counselors, counselor educators, and supervisors. This general forum was also supplemented by the ASERVIC listserv, which represents a division of

the ACA. Members of ASERVIC are counselors who are committed to integrating spiritual and religious values in the counseling process (ASERVIC, 2023). Both platforms include counselor educators who were solicited to share the request with their students. The intention of soliciting a variety of potential participants was to capture an inclusive experience of R/S transition. This research aimed to capture a nuanced conception of individual's experience with the Divine, including those outside traditional religious institutions.

Students self-identified as having met the study criteria and participated in a brief Qualtrics survey that included gathering demographic information (e.g., gender, race, program status, religious affiliation, etc.) as well as provided a description of R/S transition that participants will assent to. After gathering this information, the researcher outreached participants via their preferred method (email or phone call) to provide a brief introduction to the study and schedule a time for the initial interview. Interviews were conducted via a Zoom professional account, video conferencing software, and were audio and video recorded for later transcription.

### **Delimitations**

The sample of participants had two aims: to include a broad understanding of religious/spiritual transition and to create a holistic, collective narrative of the phenomenon. The collective narrative must be bound by several characteristics to meet the aim of a nuanced, co-created understanding of R/S transition during counselor training. These included accreditation, type of institution, and self-reported R/S transition. Students enrolled in or having recently graduated from CACREP accredited master's programs were selected due to consistency in curricular requirements and learning outcomes. This aimed to increase homogeneity and help to ensure similar kinds of training that prioritize personal development and counselor professional

identity. In addition, the sample was limited to public or non-religiously based institutions. There were several additional factors that may be at play when considering R/S transition at religiously affiliated institutions including institutional pressures that may uniquely impact the narratives of these CITs. This population of students was certainly a consideration for future research. This study focused on students' experiences at public institutions to gain understanding of the experiences of a large range of students without the specificity of religious affiliation in the university. And finally, the study explored the narratives of counselors-in-training who self-report having experienced this phenomenon. The definition offered was broad but focused on religious and/or spiritual transitions specifically in contrast to other kinds of development or transition.

### **Semi-Structured Interview**

Participants completed an initial interview, followed by a member-reflection interview, which included discussion of the visual artifact (discussed below) chosen by the participant. All means of collecting stories through data lack access to the unmediated experience of the participants. The data gathered through interviews and artifacts were actively constructed and storytelling was prized (Riessman, 2008). One method for eliciting robust stories can come from diminishing power differentials and engaging in conversation with the storyteller. This method reduces the amount of structure in the interview and allows the participant greater power in constructing and sharing their narrative experiences, and was used in all participant interviews (Riessman, 2008).

Believing that storytelling is an innate part of being human, the purpose of the interview was to encourage diverse kinds of storytelling (Riessman, 2008). The interview was a crucial part of encouraging robust storytelling. Conducting a narrative interview is intended to be a

conversation, attending to the cues of the participant. As such, Riessman (1993) recommended only five to seven broad interview questions to allow for tailored questions to attend to the narrative of each participant. Based on these recommendations, a semi-structured interview protocol was crafted in connection with the research question and with the intention to produce narratives (see Appendix D). A member-reflection interview was used as well (see Appendix E). This is discussed further in relation to trustworthiness below. The purpose of this follow-up interview was to allow participants to provide feedback on their transcripts and to discuss their chosen visual artifact. This interview also followed a semi-structured protocol.

Narrative inquiry sees the transcription process as a vital step in constructing narratives. Transcription is inherently interpretive and requires the researcher to make choices beginning at this point about the narrative being co-constructed (Riessman, 1993). Attending to theoretical underpinnings as well as the research question, the researcher roughly transcribed each interview, and then returned to the transcription to attend to interpretive elements. Items like short pauses, utterances from the interviewee, and emphasis were all transcribed.

### **Visual Artifact**

During the initial interview, participants were asked to consider and reflect on a metaphor that helps to describe their experience of religious/spiritual transition. Participants were invited to bring a photo or other representation of the discussed metaphor to the next interview. Participants were asked to submit a digital version of this photo to the researchers. This photo served as a tangible representation of the metaphor they discussed in the interview, or a different concept they determined after further reflection. Use of artifacts is common in narrative inquiry, including the use of photos to depict narratives (Bach, 2007). Visual elements can attend to the three dimensions of narrative inquiry, temporal, social and place, just as spoken or written



narratives can. The use of artifacts in this way, following the initial interview, helped to elicit further reflection and offer depth of interpretation to the narratives they presented in the interview portion of the study. Visual narrative inquiry can also be used to uncover evaded themes (Bach, 2007). Visual artifacts can provide a conduit for collaboration as conversation moves between spoken and visual narrative. Through further conversation including the object, fuller narrative pictures can be formed. In addition, using visual artifacts serve as a means of triangulation of data, providing multiple sources of data to inform a comprehensive understanding of the narrative (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

There are a variety of methods to analyze visual artifacts. The nature of experience differs between individuals, and has a specific angle or perspective (Bach, 2007). Visual artifacts can add another dimension to this perspective. To analyze this added perspective the three dimensions of narrative inquiry were addressed- temporal, social, and place (Clandinin, 2013). Due to the integral tie between the textual and visual components, both were analyzed individually and then together. The analysis method was informed by N. Brown and Collins (2021) and modified to fit holistic content narrative analysis and the particulars of this study. The process included using similar strategies of multiple readings and viewings, gathering overall impressions, and then forming connections between textual and visual meanings to inform the holistic narratives.

### **Data Analysis**

In narrative inquiry, co-construction of narratives begins from the time of the interview, and the interpretive and analytic process remains throughout the transcription, reflection, and coding processes (Riessman, 2008). This study used holistic-content analysis as outlined by Lieblich et al. (1998). A holistic-content mode focuses on the entire story with an emphasis on

the content presented. When considering individual aspects of the story, it was done in light of the global impressions and overarching themes of the narratives. This approach can be used with collective narratives and can be especially useful when exploring narratives with a strong temporal dimension, such as experiences in graduate school and changes in religion and spirituality over time (Beal, 2013).

As noted above, transcription is seen as part of the data analysis process. In addition to this, other activities not directly associated with coding and analysis were also a part of this broad process. After each interview, I recorded my initial thoughts and reactions in a research journal as a part of the bridling process. This served as part of the audit trail, along with being an important container for process notes.

The analysis process included multiple readings of transcripts as well as process notes. I wrote out my initial overall impressions of the narratives. Through repeated readings, initial major themes were determined, and transcripts were coded with these themes. This process was iterative within and across transcripts. The collection of narratives were considered for the ways they are similar and dissimilar from one another (Beal, 2013). Through this process, categories were identified and synthesized in findings. An auditor was provided with transcripts and codes to enhance trustworthiness of the process.

An important element of procedures in any research is the protection of participants' data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Several elements were considered to attend to ensuring privacy. Demographic data and consents were stored securely using Qualtrics on an account associated with the university. These data were stored separately and not identified with other study data, including transcripts or artifact photos. All data were kept in a password-protected electronic file, stored on the university's OneDrive, to maintain security. All recordings, transcripts, and coded

data were stored in the same protected location. Any hard copies created were scanned and uploaded to the same password-protected file, and the original copies will be shredded. Transcripts from interviews reflect the pseudonyms chosen by the participants and will redact any other identifying information (e.g., program name, faculty names, etc.). Redacted information was reviewed with participants to ensure identities were protected. Consent forms, containing actual names, were stored in a separate password-protected electronic file in OneDrive. All data will be maintained for 3 years, and then destroyed.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical care of participants, their data, and the findings were integral throughout the research process. This study was approved by the University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix F). Several considerations were made for general ethical practice, as well as specific considerations within a narrative inquiry framework.

In narrative inquiry, it is important to consider the boundary between narrative inquiry and narrative intervention. There are no clear distinctions between therapeutic and research narrative practice, with some argument that there could be little meaningful difference (Riessman & Speedy, 2012). Narrative inquiry sees the research process as inherently relational. In this sense, the researcher's interaction with the participant creates a reflexive space in which narratives form or shift (Abkhezr et al., 2020). This process of reshaping and restructuring narratives could lead the participant to uninvited change. It was important to include information regarding the nature of possible change inherent in reflecting on personal narratives. In addition, a process of ongoing informed consent was used. Given the fluid process of narrative development, participants simply cannot be fully informed about the unforeseeable interaction, but can be informed of its possibility (Josselson, 2012).

Relationality is central to narrative inquiry. Qualitative research generally, and narrative inquiry specifically, has several overlaps with the development of a therapeutic relationship. It was imperative to maintain the boundaries between these two distinct kinds of relationships, while recognizing some of the inherent overlaps. Forming ethical research relationships with participants invites researchers to interact empathically, nonjudgmentally, and with openness to the individual experience of the participants (Abkhezr et al., 2020). Attention to fostering egalitarian relationships, in which power differentials are minimized, are important to align with the philosophical assumptions in narrative inquiry as well as enhancing participant sharing openly about beliefs, feelings, and experiences (Clandinin, 2013). Trustworthiness was increased through enhancing the participant's self-revealing, and this kind of sharing can only be gathered through the kind of warm relationship described (Josselson, 2012). It was my aim throughout to facilitate this kind of egalitarian, nonjudgmental relationship space. While it increases trustworthiness of the study, it also requires additional ethical considerations to maintain appropriate boundaries primarily through researcher reflexivity.

The qualities of empathy, nonjudgmental stance, and tolerance are all necessary in a quality therapeutic relationship, but the research relationship also contains distinctions. The purpose of the research relationship is to access robust understanding of the participants' lived experiences, and not necessarily attend to their well-being as a primary function. Relational ethics called for the researcher to maintain appropriate boundaries, protect the privacy of participants, and attend to the dignity of participants and their stories (Josselson, 2012).

In addition to attention on ethical relationships, the topic is another important consideration. The research topic, religious/spiritual transitions, could be emotionally charged or filled with pain for some. This is an important consideration in ethical research, to both explore

and create a container for participants to share their story without causing harm. It is important to note that emotional expression does not equate to harm, on the contrary, this kind of disclosure can be growth-promoting (Josselson, 2012). It was the responsibility of the researcher to remain aware of the potential impacts on participants and maintain an active discussion regarding consent and referrals for resources.

### **Trustworthiness**

It is essential to attend to components of trustworthiness in all research, and especially within qualitative research. To do this, I addressed the areas of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and authenticity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several brief references to trustworthiness have been made previously throughout this chapter. Special attention is paid here to the ways in which the outlined procedures will enhance the trustworthiness of this study.

### **Credibility**

Qualitative research findings ought to be plausible and persuasive to the reader, in other words, be credible. Credibility in this study was enhanced through practices like thick description, triangulation, and multivocality (Tracy, 2010). Thick descriptions are essential to any qualitative research, and this is no less true in narrative inquiry. These in-depth illustrations, concrete examples, and demonstration of narrative meanings are foundational to demonstrating trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation seeks to find several examples or voices that speak to the same finding. Multivocality points to the importance of multiple and varied voices being represented in the process and findings (Tracy, 2010). In this study visual artifacts as well as all participant transcripts were used as multiple voices speaking to the findings.

Credibility was also checked through the chair of the dissertation committee and the auditor, who were actively involved throughout the process.

Narrative inquirers echo the importance of representing the comprehensiveness of evidence through providing alternative explanations for interpretations chosen (Lieblich et al., 1998). This transparency lends to credibility of findings and the interpretations made by the researcher. While the goal in this narrative inquiry was to provide a coherent metanarrative, it is also vital to include multiple voices and perspectives, especially when those perspectives diverge. This does not take away from credibility, but rather honors the complex and multifaceted experiences of R/S transition.

### **Transferability**

Transferability was attended to through providing adequate information regarding the participants, so the reader can make informed decisions regarding the transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This information was provided through demographic information, but moreover through provision of thick descriptions that develop important contextual information about the storyteller and narrative (Elo et al., 2014).

### **Dependability**

Dependability in quantitative research may point toward being accurate or true, but this meaning shifts slightly within a qualitative paradigm which accepts the existence of multiple truths. Dependability instead speaks to the reader understanding the findings as worthy of actionably integrating into their own contexts. The reader can make decisions depending upon the findings in a study. This element of trustworthiness was enhanced through a description of the research process, audit trail, and meaningful coherence of the findings (Morrow, 2005; Tracy, 2010). This chapter has outlined the research process, as well as procedures for ongoing

research process documentation and continued consultation with the research committee of faculty members. More concretely, an audit trail was created throughout the process to document the procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Coherence was an important consideration in trustworthiness in narrative inquiry. The findings can be trustworthy through creating a coherent and parsimonious collective narrative of the experience of R/S transitions in CITs. This coherence were evaluated within participant narratives as well as how the findings fit into other related findings (Lieblich et al., 1998).

### **Confirmability**

Given and understanding that no one truth exists, confirmability can be appropriately demonstrated through member reflections. Using Tracy's (2010) term of member reflections, as opposed to member checking, points to a more holistic understanding of integrating feedback from participants. The second encounter with participants asked them to review transcripts as well as describe their artifact choice. The researcher encouraged dialogue regarding the transcription and provided opportunities for participants to provide feedback, critiques, or make clarifications to their original responses. Several participants used this opportunity to share ongoing changes they experienced since the initial interview, pointing to the living nature of narratives (Clandinin, 2013). Confirmability was also demonstrated through the use of an external auditor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The auditor was an advanced doctoral student with a background in qualitative research through coursework and participation in qualitative research. Information regarding narrative inquiry was provided, along with the option for ongoing conversation regarding the process. The auditor had access to review the research journal, transcripts, and analysis throughout the process and provided the researcher with feedback. The

auditor provided feedback regarding the codes, as well as concerns for potential bias or misinterpretation during the data analysis process.

### **Authenticity**

Authenticity as a form of trustworthiness arose from the dilemma of interpretive and constructivist frameworks that need to attend to the veracity of interpretation, given the epistemological understanding that knowledge is constructed. Authenticity can primarily be attended to through looking to fairness. Researchers seek to practice value-pluralism, that seeks provide a balanced view of constructed meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 2007). While perhaps straightforward at its surface, relating to narratives fairly requires a great deal of self-awareness and reflection.

Part of the reflexive process was examining my own narratives (Janak, 2018). This reflexivity can serve to enhance fairness, and therefore enhance authenticity. This examination was addressed primarily through processes of bridling. Bridling attends to both restraining pre-understanding that could limit openness, and also examining one's understanding as a whole so as not to foreclose on meanings (Dahlberg, 2006). It does not set aside assumptions, but rather examines them so they do not interfere unhelpfully with the research process. This is not a one-time practice, but rather an ongoing state of self-discovery, and was present throughout the process of research journaling (Janak, 2018).

In qualitative research broadly, there is an ongoing struggle between giving meaning and making meaning, essentially descriptive and interpretive qualitative approaches (Vagle, 2009). Narrative inquiry is unabashedly interpretive in nature (Riessman, 2008); however, navigating this balance between giving and finding remains important in narrative inquiry and specifically in this study. Bridling takes seriously the researcher's inability to set aside their experiences,



beliefs, and assumptions, and instead focuses on cultivating an intentional relationship with these same experiences, beliefs, and assumptions (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2009). Through reflexive practice, I sought to intentionally loosen or tighten the metaphorical reins on my perspectives to see the narrative in a different way. Training as a counselor provides an excellent foundation for this kind of practice. Self-reflection and thoughtful attention to internal reactions are necessary to be with clients nonjudgmentally. Practices like ongoing supervision, consultation, and personal reflection have provided appropriate “training” in this kind of bridling practice. Through paying attention to internal reactions, resistance or identification, greater intentionality can be expressed in how that plays into giving-making meaning of the findings (Vagle, 2009). Several strategies outlined above served to make concrete this intentional slackening and pulling taught my lived experiences as a researcher. Practices like journaling, member-reflections, and auditing served to enhance the bridling process across the life of this study. The strategies outlined above aim to attend to several key factors to enhance trustworthiness in multiple domains.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the foundational assumptions of this study were outlined along with the concrete procedures that will be used to explore the responses to the research question. Through providing an explanation of the theoretical underpinnings utilized in this study, the choice of narrative inquiry was illuminated. Utilizing a narrative inquiry framework, context and narrative form were the focus in attending to the purpose of understanding the narratives of CITs’ experiences of religious/spiritual transition. Following narrative inquiry underpinnings, a personal reflection attending to researcher stance and the personal narratives brought to the current study were shared. I outlined details of the procedures including attention to participants and artifact collection. Finally, I outlined steps I took to enhance trustworthiness of this study

including considerations specific to narrative inquiry and broader understandings of qualitative rigor.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Participants**

A total of six participants took part in this study. Each participant engaged in an initial video-conference interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. All participants also participated in a member reflection interview lasting approximately 20 to 30 minutes, also via video-conference. Additionally, all but one of the participants provided a visual artifact representing their religious/spiritual (R/S) transition. In all, 20 interest surveys were completed, including an additional three who expressed interest but did not complete the survey. Twelve individuals completed the screening questionnaire and of those nine met criteria. The researcher outreached these potential participants and six responded and completed the interview and follow-up interview. The six participants provided basic demographic data including age, race/ethnicity, and gender through the initial screening questionnaire (see Appendix A). In addition, participants provided their self-described R/S identity and brief outline of their transition experience (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Program Status	Religious Identity
Melissa	41	White	Female	Graduate	Interfaith/interspiritual
Piper	29	White	Female	Graduate	Christian
Rachel	45	White, non-Hispanic	Female	Graduate	Mainline Christian, pastor in specialized ministry
Jordan	36	White	Nonbinary	Pre-practicum	That's tough. Maybe follower of Jesus. Beloved of God. I don't feel strongly connected to my current faith community
Sydney	26	White	Cis woman	Practicum	Unitarian Universalist and also pagan
Tori	44	Caucasian	Female	Pre-practicum	Complicated? Haha. Deconstructing LDS, seeking and open to spirituality

*Note.* The acronym LDS indicates Latter-day Saint.

### Individual Narratives

To begin, a summary of the narrative of each participant is provided. Holistic content analysis looks at the overall narrative arc of each individual story as well as the stories of all participants considered together. This brief outline will help to provide initial temporal, social, and place dimensions to the experiences of religious/spiritual transition of these participants. With an understanding of these individual stories, the overall narrative impressions will be considered, then thoroughly examined through individual themes.

#### Melissa

Melissa (she/her) shared having a complicated spiritual journey. She shared her family of origin were nominally religious but was not a significant part of her family story. However, she

was sent to parochial schools and was very influenced by this experience. As a child, she shared certainly believing in God, and that figure of God was modeled after her own father in many ways. Melissa experienced several transitions over the course of her life, prior to the most recent transition throughout graduate school. There were several turning points in Melissa's story including her mother's terminal illness diagnosis. While she would not pass away until Melissa was in her 30s, this trauma impacted her relationship with God. Throughout her 20s, Melissa identified as an atheist, and this began to shift through several important pivot points. In her early 30s, Melissa was in an abusive relationship and at the same time began beekeeping. This practice was an opening for the spiritual in her life, even during what was otherwise a traumatizing experience. Following leaving the relationship, Melissa experienced a "dark night of the soul." Through caring for her mom at the end of her life, Melissa experienced an awakening to mysticism. She began experiences of receiving messages, especially through dreams, as a spiritual experience. She also began her own counseling, an experience she describes as spiritual, which ultimately led her to pursue her degree in counseling.

Even so, she would have described her spiritual identity at the beginning of her program as, "it's not agnostic. It's hard to explain. I was in a place I guess, of, like, just appreciating like the great mystery of things." Her training as a counselor coincided with an uptick in spiritual experiences (primarily dreams) and allowed her to develop both clinical skills and spiritual curiosity. Throughout her counseling program, she more fully embraced her spirituality and gained language for her experiences. By the end of her program, she would identify as interfaith/interspiritual. It was through her exploration of continuing education in counseling that she was introduced to authors, concepts, and language that resonated with her personally and professionally. Internal family systems were an important aspect of spirituality and healing for

Melissa both personally and professionally. The language of internal family systems resonated for Melissa spiritually, correlating to her own mystical experiences. Dreams and messages continue to be important to Melissa's spirituality.

Overall themes in Melissa's journey include interconnectedness. Melissa's spiritual transition holistically impacted her own mental and physical health, and she intentionally brings this interconnected understanding to her current work. Curiosity and openness were also primary themes throughout her R/S transition and overall narrative. Melissa also described the ways systemic concerns interact with her relationship to spirituality and counseling. Primarily, elements of a Protestant Ethic have impacted Melissa, and she has intentionally been deconstructing many of these tenants including individualism and shame.

### **Piper**

Piper (she/her) grew up exposed to Christianity, especially Evangelical and Lutheran contexts. Her grandmother was an especially important religious figure in her life. At times, her grandmother's influence was unwelcome, and felt forced, and at others has been encouraging to her spiritual journey. By the time Piper decided to attend a Lutheran college, she described herself as agnostic. She explored some forms of spirituality like yoga and meditation, but did not find a home here. A significant pivot point for Piper was a music festival in her early 20s. Piper seems to relate to this experience with mixed emotions. Piper shared about going to a concert and using drugs, she then experienced someone at the concert who shared she could see chakras, saying:

She looked at me and was like, "You, there's a disconnect between your root chakra and your heart chakra." And when she said that I was like, it kind of like sent me spiraling

down into like this place where, like I kind of knew what she was talking about, but I didn't want to admit it to myself at the time.

This experience resulted in Piper being hospitalized because “nobody could keep me safe” and she also experienced disturbing and scary religious delusions. She describes her grandmother putting together a spiritual survival kit, and that it was after that experience she became more open to revisiting the religion of her childhood.

Piper began her counseling program about a year after this mental health and spiritual experience at the music festival. While pursuing her training, several significant instances occurred, including the birth of two sons, and conflict with her children's father. She notes that while she did experience R/S transition during her program, it was not the primary catalyst to her change, but rather events like those noted above were the catalysts. If anything, elements of the counseling program generally confirmed her faith experiences with Christianity. Spiritual practices like prayer and Bible reading have been important to her ongoing development in Christianity.

Themes in Piper's narrative include finding protection and relief in religion. Struggle against various forces, demonic delusions, evil forces coming up in client work, or even difficult relationships, are a prominent part of Piper's story. Due to this, her experience with R/S transition is primarily one of finding protection and comfort through God and Christian beliefs.

### **Rachel**

Rachel (she/her) started Lutheran and has stayed Lutheran throughout her life. Even with this seemingly unchanging progression, there is a great deal of depth and complexity in Rachel's experience of R/S transition. She had an important spiritual experience in her 20's resulting in a call to parish ministry, even while at the same time grappling with atheism. These apparent

contradictions are present throughout Rachel's story, demonstrating the ambiguity of spirituality. Rachel returned to grad school (for a third time) with being a counselor as the next step on her spiritual path. Traumatic experiences in early parish ministry were instrumental in shifting Rachel's relationship with the church and her understanding of God. While being able to state there is no change in how she experiences God based on her title, she also acknowledged the felt experience of a possible "demotion" due to returning to grad school for counselor training. Rachel was installed in the synod with a role that integrates her pastoral, chaplaincy, and counselor identities. This installation felt like a validation of all the many aspects of her vocational identity being recognized by her institution. At the same time, she also expressed ongoing tensions with the institution, and willingness to release the institution if that is where her spiritual work leads in the future. She maintains her strong Lutheran faith and has additional tools in the work of counseling. During her training, Rachel had low expectations of her program in addressing these spiritual shifts. She was pleasantly surprised by several significant relationships with professors and professionals. Navigating this faith transition, simply one of many in her lifetime, felt more resourced and supported, but at the same time holding risks and fears.

Overall themes of journeying were present in Rachel's story, seeing her faith as a path she was journeying on. She notes the ways her faith has evolved over time and how her needs and expectations may have been different at those earlier transitions. Several larger contextual elements were at play throughout Rachel's spiritual journey (midwestern cultural expectations, racial reckoning, clergy sexual abuse issues, etc.). Valuing relationships across traditions was evident throughout.



## Jordan

Jordan (she/they) was in the process of spiritual transition as they were working through their counseling program. Jordan grew up with an eclectic mix of religious exposures but was an “every Sunday” kind of family. They had experiences, including a cancer scare in adolescence, that spurred existential questions. Jordan takes their faith seriously and has a several points come to a crossroads in which they made intentional faith choices. One of those was converting to Roman Catholicism at 17 years old, and later converting to Eastern Catholicism. Jordan has simply always known they were bisexual and non-binary; however, how these identities have been expressed has shifted over time. Largely, those identities have been ignored in most of their religious contexts or been adversarial. Jordan has continued to grapple with their place in the church, and it is complicated by their husband being a leader in the church. There is additional pressure for Jordan to conform and fit, although notably not from their husband. One role that has been important to Jordan as an outgrowth of their spiritual identity is that of a social justice advocate. They see this as an important part of their identity, even seeing this as an extension within their counselor identity.

Jordan had chosen to withhold their bisexual and nonbinary identities in their church context. This tension conflicted with Jordan’s overall ethic of transparency, and yet was coupled with a deep need for safety and boundaries for themselves and their family. Jordan made the intentional choice to pursue education at a secular institution, in order to have the space to untangle the complicated spiritual concerns they brought. The counseling program has caused Jordan to face several elements of their spirituality and other identities (activist, LGBTQIA+, etc.). Jordan saw that God was interacting uniquely in individual lives and that had resulted in some distancing from the religious community, and not feeling the need to believe all the ways

the community believes. Jordan does note that they were hoping for more robust and nuanced spiritual conversations in the counseling program. While the church is not safe for all of their identities, neither is the counseling program. There is a sense of stigma around being religious. Jordan has experienced disappointment in having difficulty finding spaces that will accept and honor the totality of all their various identities and expressions.

Overall themes of living in tension, liminal spaces were present in many stories throughout. Specifically, navigating transparency and disclosure in their current context were paramount. Spiritual exploration feels like a theme for Jordan. They are actively exploring spirituality personally, but also professionally. They see this ongoing work of shifting and changing as revealing their truest selves, deification. There are themes of grief and sorrow present as well, especially relating to their choice of non-disclosure and the actions of both professors and parishioners.

### **Sydney**

Sydney (she/her) was exposed to multiple faiths growing up, but the Lutheran faith of her mother was the most salient. Her mother's own shift with their faith community and going away to college led Sydney away from practicing any sort of faith. Sydney remained open to faith expressions as she attended Christian campus groups occasionally in college, and then later tried out a LBGTQIA affirming Lutheran church. Neither of these were a great fit, and she put aside the search for the time being. At the start of her graduate program, several courses discussed the personhood of the counselor and the need to practice wellness in multiple areas, including spirituality. This prompted Sydney to re-engage in her exploration of spirituality that fit her needs now. Through relationships, Sydney was encouraged to explore spirituality for herself. Her best friend converted to Islam, several peers held deep Christian values, and her first client in

practicum was also deeply religious. Seeing all these others encouraged her to find a depth of spirituality that fit for her. She was led by her mother to explore Unitarian Universalism, and Sydney easily found a home. While she expressed deep gratitude and connectedness to this community, she also acknowledges that her needs may change over time, and she anticipates continued development in her spirituality. She feels deep congruence between her counselor identity and her spiritual identity as inclusive and accepting of all. At the same time, Sydney recognizes the continued stigma in the counseling profession relating to religion. She has come to a greater empathy and understanding of those with deeply held beliefs and hopes for more robust conversations around spirituality in counseling programs.

Several themes were present throughout, including ongoing development and openness to ongoing change. She reflected on the person she was at the beginning of the program and sees significant development, including in her personal spirituality and how this plays out with clients. Sydney also had a great deal of support in a variety of places for her exploration, marking her as distinct from some of the other participants. Also, not as prominent, but certainly present was awareness around the harms that Christianity in particular has inflicted on marginalized communities. Social justice as an element leading her toward her faith expression of today.

### **Tori**

While Tori (she/her) was not raised in any particular faith tradition, she joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) at 18 years old. She described herself as very orthodox and very invested in the church- socially, spiritually, and theologically. Her spiritual transitions have taken place in stages, with her transition to agnosticism happening most recently during her graduate program in counseling. About 10 years ago, she experienced a more subtle

shift in which she became a “nuanced believer.” She was still very involved in church but held less dogmatically to some of the tenants of the LDS faith. She reflected on the many things that kept her in the LDS faith for the last 10 years, including the stability and answers it purported to offer. She noted several instances in her family and personal connections that led to tension within her faith structure. She shared about her son experiencing scrupulosity, her daughter coming out as bisexual, and youth she mentored having uncomfortable experiences with the bishop that were not taken seriously. This “perfect storm” occurred at the same time Tori started grad school for counseling. Even while experiencing these doubts, Tori started grad school as an “STP,” part of the “same ten people” who volunteer to make church happen every week. As of the follow-up interview, Tori has stopped volunteering at church and only attends part of the service when her son requests to go. She is continuing the process of separation, with plans to tell some of her extended family members in what she described as a “coming out” process.

The counseling program played a significant role in Tori’s spiritual transition, along with other factors. She described a pivotal interaction with a professor encouraging her to use her voice and speak out more often, occurring at the same time she was being told to stay quiet at her church in a conflict with the bishop. These two dramatically different approaches to authority and empowerment comprised a key turning point for Tori. She also noted learning about different concepts and theories have also helped her to understand herself and the mechanisms at work in her LDS faith.

### **Meta Categories and Major Themes**

In accordance with holistic-content analysis, multiple readings of the transcript along with process journaling helped to reveal an overarching narrative pattern (Lieblich et al., 1998). The individual and collective narratives were recorded in the research journal. The research

auditor reviewed these narratives along with transcripts, codes, and other elements of the research journal. While narrative analysis recognizes the researcher as an active participant in narrative construction, the auditor and my own self-reflective journaling serves to observe and monitor this active role as partner with the data and not imposing preconceived beliefs.

Analysis included textual and visual analysis that explored the transcripts and artifacts from each participant (N. Brown & Collins, 2021). Transcripts were coded and then collapsed into primary themes. Through constant comparison, meta categories were identified in relation to the overall content of the narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998).

The meta categories look at the overarching narratives and holistically examine their stories. The meta categories that emerged were: Beginning, During, After, and Overarching Contextual Factors. These meta categories are largely temporal in nature, given the focus of the research question on the experiences of counselors-in-training during graduate school. This time-bound experience lends itself toward this temporal focus in the narrative exploration. It is important to note that although a beginning to end structure can fit over the whole of the narrative, there are also many points of smaller changes that also flow through a beginning to end progression. Religious/Spiritual transitions are iterative and ongoing, as emerges from the findings. Through this overarching structure of beginning, during, after, and context, many facets of the individual and collective narratives can be explored and understood.

The Beginning meta category focuses on the themes that set the stage for the current religious/spiritual transition in counselor training. Themes including formative religious experiences, beginning beliefs, and prior transitions focus on the foundation of narratives brought into the current R/S transition. The During category, containing the most themes, explores catalysts for R/S transition, the emotional experiences, facilitative and unhelpful

responses, as well as the kinds of changes experienced, among other things. After focuses on both the realized and hoped for outcomes of such a transition. Themes included the impact of religious/spiritual transition on professional, personal, and spiritual domains and recommendations for counseling programs. Finally, Overarching Contextual Factors explores those characteristics that are present throughout the entire narrative, albeit in different ways. These themes include considerations like systemic factors, relationship to R/S identity, and spirituality as an ongoing journey. The following presents the findings of meta-categories as well as major themes.

### **Beginning**

The foundations of the narrative are an important element of the structure of the overarching story for each participant. An overall timeline of events was discussed, setting the stage for the focus of this narrative on religious/spiritual transitions during counselor training. These foundational considerations include the R/S beliefs inherited from family of origins, transitions experienced prior to the current one, motivations to be a counselor including personal mental health concerns, and finally belief structures in place at the beginning of counselor training.

### ***Formative Religious Experiences***

All participants recounted having inherited some kind of R/S faith from their families. There were differences in the faith traditions, the priority of R/S in their families, and how they were experienced. However, these experiences were foundational across all participants. From this foundation, participants experienced their R/S transitions currently, using these foundations as a reference point. For example, Jordan shared their foundational spiritual influences saying:

I grew up with a hodgepodge [laughing] of spiritual traditions, a whole bunch of different influences. I had family members who were in local leadership in the Unity and Christian Science churches. I also had family members who were Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran. I attended all of them ... I was baptized nondenominational. Conversely, Rachel shared starting her journey as Lutheran and continuing to identify as Lutheran to this day. She says:

In some ways, it's very easy. I've been Lutheran my whole life, was born, raised Lutheran, baptized Lutheran at 6 weeks, confirmed Lutheran, got married in the Lutheran church, got ordained Lutheran, am still Lutheran. Like, that part's pretty easy. Um, and then, underneath that has been, it's not easy to stay one religion anymore, I don't think. Like that's not normal.

Although her path seemed straightforward, Rachel has had a variety of spiritual shifts. Even so, her Lutheran faith has remained central. She shared knowing early in her life she wanted to be a pastor saying, "You know, I was like, leaving elementary school and knew I wanted to be a pastor." Piper described her journey as ultimately a return to her family's faith, although through her own unique expression.

Melissa differentiated her experiences within her family of origin and her childhood experiences in parochial school. "I come from a family of origin that they weren't religious themselves. ... Growing up as a family, we were very much like we would attend church on Easter, Christmas, like that." However, in school she "could nail like a Jeopardy category on the Bible" and believed in God as a child. Tori was the only participant who denied having any particular religious upbringing, being raised in the Pacific-Northwest. She said, "Okay, so I

wasn't raised in any religion or faith." Although she later joined and left the LDS church, her foundations were largely without faith.

### ***Prior Transitions***

From these foundations, participants described multiple kinds of changes over the course of their lives prior to their time in graduate school for counseling. In addition to these foundations, other experiences like traumas and mental health concerns also played a significant role. The theme of Prior Transitions emerged from participant's experiences emerging in their narratives. Melissa describes her time in parochial school, saying she was "really knowledgeable with like the Bible, with just, you know, church, basically doctrine, that kind of thing, right, as a kid." She goes on to say that she did believe in God during that time. However, following her mother's terminal diagnosis and other compounded traumas, she notes "my relationship with God started to change because of that trauma." Melissa experienced several other shifts in her spirituality in relation to other significant experiences. She shares becoming an atheist in her 20s and 30s in response to issues related to complex posttraumatic stress disorder and an abusive relationship with her former partner. All these experiences impacted Melissa in multiple domains of her life, including spirituality, and set the stage for her transition into a counseling program.

Sydney shared a similar trajectory of being raised in religion and then transitioning out entirely. She shared about a formative experience in which her mother decided to leave the Lutheran church due to interpersonal conflict involving the pastor. Sydney stopped attending the church at that time as well and then moved away to college. She described that she simply "drifted away" and "in college, I started rethinking everything that I thought about, like God and religion, and I was like, I didn't want to be part of a faith community." Sydney described her



spirituality as simply a low priority in her life during this time, saying she just “kind of ignored religion/spirituality” at that season of life during and right after college.

Rachel also described feeling familiar with religious/spiritual transitions, having experienced several over the course of her life, even as a pastor. She described her situation of an apparent contradiction, saying:

I was doing some things there [at a church], while also engaged to somebody who’s agnostic. While not really sure if I believed in God anymore at all, on my own side, while also feeling this internal sense that it was time for me to go to seminary [laughing].

While even grappling with spiritual doubts, Rachel simultaneously felt a calling to seminary to pursue her pastoral vocation. She went on to describe several other shifts and transitions over the course of her life of faith.

While Rachel’s prior transitions occurred within her Lutheran religion, Tori shared about her previous transitions to her faith between and within religions. Tori grew up without faith and then converted to the LDS church at 18 years old. After nearly 20-years as a devout Mormon, she described experiencing a shift within her LDS faith saying:

I came across some information about our church history, and kind of like the foundational truth claims, that just kind of shook my testimony a lot. I’m logical, and so these things were just like, wait a minute, none of this really makes sense. And there’s a lot of our history that’s kind of been spun to make it seem more faithful, I don’t know, more believable. (Tori)

She shared becoming more nuanced in her LDS faith, including becoming affirming of LGBTQIA+ community, in contrast to traditional LDS teaching. This shift within her religion

appears to help lay the groundwork for her current experience of transition during the counseling program.

All participants endorsed experiencing some kind of shift in their spirituality prior to the current experience during their counseling programs. Rachel summarized her experience of multiple transitions saying:

I really was picking out how different, you know, because I've had these spiritual shifts in my life. And recognizing how much it really did depend on my stage of life. Is that, you know, having a major spiritual shift when I was preparing to get married and being young, and, you know, leaving grad school, the first, from the first time around all of that stuff. I had different options. I had different resources, I was in a different state of maturity of all sorts of things. And, and it just looked different. And yet, at the same time, you know, even with all those resources that I had, there was also a lot to lose [in the most recent religious/spiritual transition].

Many things can impact the experience of R/S transition, including prior transitions and stage of life.

### ***Motivations for Being a Counselor***

An important foundational consideration for many participants was their motivation for becoming a counselor. Motivations for Being a Counselor, as a theme, arose spontaneously from many participants in relation to their R/S journeys. Melissa directly correlated her counseling experiences and experiences with spirituality leading to her decision to become a counselor.

I started seeing a counselor myself for grief. She happened to be spiritually minded. I didn't realize that at the time when I started to see her, right. But inevitably, through her validation of some of the things that I was experiencing [spiritual messages] and keeping,

it like, I started experiencing even more. And that's when I decided, in my own healing, that I wanted to become another counselor.

Spirituality was directly related to Melissa's decision to become a counselor, and ongoing changes continued to evolve for her over the course of her program.

Grappling with mental health concerns was also directly related to Piper's choice to pursue counseling as a career. Piper shared about a complicated experience of attending a music festival and using drugs, ultimately resulting in a hospitalization because "nobody could keep [her] safe." During this experience she experienced a fellow festivalgoer who "could see chakras" and told Piper there was "a disconnect between [her] root chakra and [her] heart chakra." This felt very impactful for Piper, and "sent [her] spiraling down" because she knew the message was true. Eventually, this led to a rediscovery of the Christianity of her youth but was experienced initially with fear and struggle. Piper shared experiencing religious delusions during her hospitalization and while she remembers little from that time, "all [she] remembers was like screaming in the darkness." This experience of receiving mental health care in connection with spiritual elements, along with her desire to advance in her career and help people, ultimately led her to pursue her degree in counseling.

There were other motivations for pursuing counseling in Rachel's story. She shared:

So, I was doing chaplaincy a lot. And then, and then also got a part time gig as a pastor in [City Name 2] and was down there for a little bit. And so I was doing all these things and ended up in the process discerning that I wanted to sleep at night, and chaplaincy involves a lot of on call, a lot, a lot of on call. And I was not sleeping well. And, and it was hard. ... And so then, decided it was time to get my counseling degree.

Rachel had a previous career as both a pastor and chaplain, and experienced burn-out in her current iteration of these roles. Counseling allowed her to continue pursuing her perceived vocation through a different avenue. For Rachel, her current R/S transition really started after making the decision to pursue counseling, requiring her to grapple with her identity in relation to the institutional church. While Melissa and Piper had initial spiritual experiences that led to ongoing transitions, the decision to pursue counseling appears to have catalyzed Rachel's transition in many ways, as will be explored further.

### ***Beliefs from the Beginning***

Participants experienced shifts in their religious/spiritual beliefs over the course of their lives prior to beginning their counselor training, but also outlined the nature of their beliefs as they entered their counseling programs. The theme, *Beliefs from the Beginning*, focused primarily on R/S belief structures that would eventually be reconsidered during R/S transition. Participants entered this R/S transition from a variety of spiritual places. As outlined above, the participants had differing spiritual foundations, differing prior transitions, and different motivations for pursuing counseling. This major theme continues in that same vein; participants began their R/S transitions with a variety of different beliefs. Some of these included a need to conform to religion by Sydney, Jordan, and Tori, leaving religion and spirituality largely unexamined by Sydney, identifying with agnosticism by Melissa and Piper, and exploring institutional status by Rachel.

For Rachel, pursuing a counseling degree put her pastoral status at risk within her Lutheran denomination. She discussed the church she served before returning to school saying:

It was the place that I officially had a letter of call like that, that's like the ticket to stay ordained is a Letter of Call. And so that was, so I was giving up on that. And so I was taking a major dive off the deep end of like, how was I going to do this?

There was substantial risk involved for Rachel to pursue a counseling degree as it related to her pastoral calling.

While there were several subthemes within this major theme, several stood out as important to consider based on how frequently they arose and across a number of participants. The idea of timing came up for several participants. Tori explained that, even after her initial transition to a nuanced Mormon, she still needed her religion to be true for the stability of her marriage and family. Piper similarly discussed following her hospitalization having a “spiritual kit, sort of survival mode” of Bibles and sermons brought to her by her grandmother and finding comfort in that. The need differed greatly between Tori and Piper, but religion served as a place of stability for both during an unsettled time, before entering their counseling programs.

Several participants noted challenges within their religious structure during this time before entering a counseling program. Jordan explained the impact of their spouse's spiritual journey on their own beliefs. Jordan's spouse serves in leadership in their Eastern Catholic parish and is discerning a clergy call. Jordan goes on to say, “I don't feel like I can show up with all of my identities and all of my belief structure there.” They were navigating the tension of their own spiritual journey along with their spouse's during a time of internal discord.

There was an already established sense of tension for many participants as they entered their counseling programs. For Rachel, this tension centered on her professional and spiritual identity of pastor.

And so for me to leave and start getting my mental health degree program meant that I was jeopardizing that element of my work. And my relationship with the church, because I had been in that leadership position, and I had a certain way of interacting in church spaces. And in, within my faith community, that to leave that I was, you know, it would be a demotion. ... And so, it really puts me in a very difficult position in terms of my relationship to my faith community.

In another way, Tori shared about holding a great deal of internal doubt, but externally performing her role in the church.

There tend to be what we call like the STP, which is like the Same 10 People will who ended up doing all of the volunteer service in our congregation, the ones who are like all in and like. And so I was that. ... And so our group of friends here, and who have become like family because we're so far from family, are like the STP, right. They're the all-in the, the ride or die. [laughing] And so that's, I guess that's how I would say where I was, as grad school started.

While outwardly appearing all-in, Tori went on to say, "all of those things that I had been struggling with for like the 10 years, they were just like, shoved down." Spiritual doubts were resonant among several participants, and when these doubts became untenable often resulted in a religious/spiritual transition.

Melissa and Sydney and Piper had different experiences, as they all began their counseling programs largely removed from organized religion. At the beginning of her counseling program she said, "At that point, I was, I would still describe myself, I guess as more, no, it's not agnostic. It's hard to explain. I was in a place I guess, of, like, just appreciating like the great mystery of things." Melissa lacked language for this appreciation but felt open to

spirituality. Sydney talked similarly about having a spiritual openness but no concrete identity, saying:

I kind of felt really lost with my spirituality. I was like, I know, I believe in like, something bigger than like, this and myself, but I don't know what it is. And I don't know, if there's a place for me to, like, practice spirituality without feeling like I have to buy in to, like, without feeling like I have to compromise my values in some way or without feeling like I have to, like perform these like, rituals, or these things that like, don't really make any sense to me.

A desire for spirituality that did not cause her to compromise her own beliefs was the beginning point for Sydney. Piper largely identified as agnostic, experimenting with other practices and religions, but never finding much meaning in these practices.

These differing challenges considered together serve to highlight the complexity of religious/spiritual lives that counselors-in-training (CITs) bring into their programs. Most often, these beginning belief structures would become fodder for R/S transition during counselor training. The preexisting challenges with religion would become highlighted in various ways during their counseling programs and compromising internal beliefs for external community would become a turning point in the During meta category.

## **During**

This meta-category had multiple major themes and subthemes within it and was a primary focus of the participant narratives. The experience of During was primarily tied to the religious/spiritual transition itself, although it largely correlated with their time in the counseling program, as seen in the Beginning meta category, there was a great deal of overlap in how R/S transitions take place over time. Given the nuanced nature of R/S transition, there were multiple

threads of beginnings and endings that interacted with one another, as will be outlined in this meta category. Generally, from a temporal standpoint, changes occurred during counselor training, but were certainly not constrained by this time period. During the process of R/S transition contained five major themes: Catalysts for Religious/Spiritual Transition, Kinds of Changes During Counselor Program, Characteristics Needed During R/S Transition, Counselor Identity Development, and Counseling Program Experiences which includes facilitate and unhelpful responses.

### ***Catalysts for Religious/Spiritual Transition***

There were a wide variety of issues that were identified as catalysts for religious/spiritual transition in the participants. These were explored through subthemes: Social Justice Issues, Conflict Between Religious and Personal Beliefs, Existential Questions, Clients as Catalysts, and Outside of Program. For some of these subthemes, there was a clear overlap between the content and focus of counselor training programs, such as Social Justice Issues, Clients as Catalysts, and even Existential Questions. While Conflict Between Religious and Personal Beliefs and Outside of Program clearly denoted concerns that were largely separated from the graduate program. Each of these subthemes were explored as they related to serving as an incitement toward R/S transition.

Graduate school itself was a catalyst for religious/spiritual transition for Sydney. She said:

I started grad school. And I feel like I talked to a lot of different people about all the elements of like, human well-being, like, you know, mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. And I started feeling like, “ah, I’m really missing that spiritual piece.”



Tori similarly said, “this program has been life changing for me.” Contending with the topics of counselor training in a graduate program appeared to spur changes in participants. Several other catalysts are considered below.

**Social Justice Issues.** Several social justice issues were outlined as impactful changes in religious/spiritual beliefs. Concerns like racial justice, LGBTQIA+ issues, clergy sexual abuse and misconduct, and #MeToo were all discussed by almost all participants. Tori reflected on catalysts for change specifically within her counseling program and she discussed the importance of “Learning more about marginalized communities and feminism” as important to spark change. She went on to say “I can no longer, like, support an organization that has done and continues to do harm to these marginalized groups with everything else they’re going through. So that was big for me.” For Sydney, it was important that any faith community she pursued aligned with her already formed beliefs around justice and inclusion. She shared, “I also have always been really uncomfortable with in any religion, the like, history of, like oppression of marginalized groups and like, the exclusive um, the exclusive nature of like religion.”

Rachel discussed the impact of the “unveilings that happened at that time of race relations, and MeToo, and clergy sexual abuse, and the position of a lot of national Christian leaders were taking on these various topics.” As she wrestled with the potential of losing her pastoral status, she discussed her disillusionment with religion saying, “I’m not sure I’m going to be sad about losing the church at this point. ... I’m not sure I’m going to be amiss for leaving it, if I get booted out.” Given her Lutheran identity, Rachel was thoughtful and open about the harms of Christianity while also distinguishing her own beliefs from other groups of Christianity.

For Jordan, these issues were very personal. They consider themselves an advocate for social justice issues and this has been a longstanding part of their identity. Jordan described their service in a previous church:

I went to a huge parish at that point. And I was always on the margins, like, walking with someone who was homeless, or someone who was, you know, in a difficult situation that would lead them to feel like, “I am not welcome here. I want to be here, but I don’t fit in here. (Jordan)

They explicitly stated, “I have been grappling in the counseling program with identity, spirituality, and social justice.” Jordan went on to say, “I don’t feel like I can fully disclose how I am in my religious setting, because I know how people have been treated there.” Jordan shared identifying as anti-racist, an advocate, working for inclusion and shedding light on existing biases. Contenting with social justice issues pervaded Jordan’s story of R/S transition. They spoke about their current choice to withhold their bisexual and nonbinary identities.

And that’s part of what I struggle with, is that I want to be transparent, because that is just, it is aligned with my ethics and my way of being. But I also realized that there are limitations um, to that, because of other people’s, you know, beliefs. ... So a lot of times in ministry, I talk to people who are grappling with, “my best friend is trans. And I don’t know what to do with that. And my church is telling me that that person is still a man, but I know that that person is a woman and like, what, what, how should I reconcile what I think the church is telling me about that person, and what I intuitively feel about this person who has been my friend for years?” [Mmhmm] And so I’m able to enter into those moments and like, help the person work through it. ... I think that I sometimes, you

know, it allows me, not disclosing allows me access in a way that I wouldn't have if I did disclose. So, I kind of am always trying to figure it out. (Jordan)

There was a great deal of nuance in Jordan's choice to not disclose their LGBTQIA+ identities in their parish context. Several were personal reasons relating to their family and spouse, but also some were spiritually considered.

Melissa spoke in broader contextual terms about the impacts of religion on social justice concerns. She discussed the "Protestant Ethic" as a systemic norm in which guilt and blame are primary forces. She described this overarching structure of "beliefs in a 'just world' where people get what they deserve." She related this to social justice concerns through naming the history of patriarchy within the counseling profession. She says,

We just can't deny like our history with like, like the patriarchy, right. And it kind of is what it is. And it pisses you off sometimes, but it's like, what are you going to do about it, right? And, um, yeah, anytime I feel the anger, it's like, okay, it's calling for change.

What can I do?

For Melissa, broader systemic factors were her consideration as she integrated social justice concerns into her spirituality. Unlike other participants, her focus was less on an individual religious structure and more on the overarching impact of religiosity in America, particularly in the Protestant Ethic that pervaded dominant culture. This was personally applied in Melissa's life as a catalyst in her own counseling and spiritual growth, and then as she received counselor training, to the counseling profession. In either specific religious domains or systemic forces, social justice concerns were a primary catalytic force in many participants' R/S transition.

**Conflict Between Religious and Personal Beliefs.** Very often, when participants spoke about conflicting beliefs within their religious conflicts, they centered on social justice issues.

There were other areas in addition to these primary concerns highlighted above. The societal climate of 2020 and reckoning with the discord between some strands of religion were an important consideration for Rachel. She said, “in this neck of the woods, people are evangelical. And that is such a loud and vocal voice. Very loud here. Very minority, but still very loud. And so that’s what people think I’m part of, and I’m like, ‘no. I’m not.’” While the conflict did not lie within her personal beliefs, but rather how the outside world saw her role as a Lutheran pastor, chaplain, and now a counselor. While discussing the ongoing conflict between factions of Christianity, she talked about how she lived within that tension saying, “I’m not responsible for making the church look good. I’m not responsible for getting the church functioning. And I’m not responsible for any of that. I’m just responsible for the person in front of me to help them.” The change in her profession had also changed her relationship to the conflicts, although the conflicts themselves remained.

Tori described an experience from during her counseling program with her church leadership. Tori was leading a group of teenage girls in her local congregation, and they began sharing with Tori that the new bishop “was making them uncomfortable.” She shared that she tried to talk with him, but “he and I butted heads a lot about what should be happening in the youth program.” She goes on to say:

And even after I started disclosing, like some of these things, to the leader above him about what the young women were saying, it was all like, “well, he probably means well, blah, blah, blah.” It was just a bunch of like, taking his side. And it just kind of all fell apart.

This experience was directly contrasted with her experiences in graduate school, in which she was “learning about fear-based reasoning, and conditions of worth, and repressing parts of

ourselves ... that don't make sense or that we don't want to face." The conflict she faced between her religious leaders occurred at a time when Tori was learning about other ways of relating to the world and served as a catalyst for change.

In contrast, Sydney described a more nuanced confrontation of differences in her personal beliefs and those of her previous religion.

When I moved here, I was really, you know, I didn't really know anybody here and I was really searching for a community. And I had really, you know, like fond memories of the community, at the Lutheran church, I grew up in, so I looked online, and it was really important to me to find like a queer affirming, or queer welcoming church. So, I found a Lutheran church like that in [Western City], and I went to a few services. I met for coffee with the pastor. I liked them, but it just didn't, it felt like putting on an old jacket that you've like, outgrown, and it doesn't fit you very well. And I just didn't, I didn't see myself reflected in the like, spirituality of the church.

This realization of the lack of fit, along with other factors, helped spur religious/spiritual transition in Sydney throughout her counseling program.

Piper shared her experience of conflict from a slightly different perspective. She shared: I never really felt connected in the church to begin with. Like, my church was so big, and so broad that I just didn't really feel connected there. So I kind of, I always kind of felt like an outcast, when I was attending church services, or Sunday school or anything like that. Because I didn't live in the area, I didn't go to school in the area. So I was kind of like an outsider coming in. And didn't feel as welcome. So that, I think, was a barrier to my growth, which was, you know, more of my own internal dialogue.

She went on to talk about how being more introverted kept her separated from her church. For Piper, resolving this conflict dealt more with her own personal work of returning to God. She said, “God was always there just waiting for me to turn towards God.” While the content and resolution of the conflicts differed amongst participants, the overarching contention of confronting the conflict was present for processing R/S transition.

**Existential Questions.** Existential questions, like anxiety around death, were catalytic elements within the narratives of participants. Sydney shared about how getting coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) raised existential concerns for her. Sydney said:

I talked to my therapist about like, what happens when you die and someone had given me the imagery of like when we’re alive as humans, it’s like a spray from the ocean, and you’re like a droplet of water. And then when you die, the droplet goes back into the ocean. And so you become part of like, the collective again.

Her therapist shared this was from the Hindu tradition. This resonated with Sydney’s growing openness to considering spirituality from different traditions to answer existential questions. She also discussed the role of existential questions in work as a counselor:

Especially because like, I don’t know, the world is crazy and like, I feel like more and more of our clients are going to be coming to us with like, existential issues. Like I don’t know, climate change anxiety or like, war, disaster, like illness, I don’t know. Like, and like really, those questions are like pretty unanswerable by like science or like our current perception of reality. And I feel like spirituality is kind of the only way or one of the only ways to find even if your spirituality is just like mindfulness or meditation, or whatever, like, that’s one of the only ways to find like, peace with a lot of these like, bigger, scarier like, existential anxieties.

Jordan also shared about experiencing counseling as an avenue for addressing existential questions in life. There was a great deal of overlap between existential concerns and spirituality.

In Tori's narrative, she shared about experiencing a great deal of instability in her childhood due to her mother's undiagnosed bipolar disorder. While religion offered "all the answers," she faced uncertainty and realized "nobody really knows the answers to the questions that religion tries to answer." The process of addressing these big questions has been a significant part of the R/S transition process.

**Clients as Catalysts.** Participants were at various points in their program but have all completed at least two semesters of classes, meaning participants had different experiences working directly with clients ranging from none at all, to working toward licensure hours post-graduation. All participants spoke about the impact of their religious/spiritual transition on clients or future clients, and in addition most spoke about how clients spurred them on in their pursuit of R/S transition resolution. While Jordan had not yet begun seeing clients, they powerfully described how they saw themselves in relation to working with clients:

Like I want to be an integrated person before I start seeing people as clients. Because, not that you're ever fully worked through everything. But I don't want to harm my clients by not showing up in the way that they need. By projecting the things that I haven't worked through, onto them. So, this transition is partially for me. And it's partially for my kids, because I think that I want to be the type of parent that who does their work. ... But also, it's for my clients.

Jordan described having in inner knowing that they had areas they needed to grapple with and saw counselor training as a place for this. They were drawing inspiration for ongoing personal work, at least in part, from their future clients.

Similarly for Sydney, she was discussing the ways in which she had shifted in addressing a client's spirituality in session. She relayed her priorities saying:

And I don't like as a counselor, like, I don't want there to be topics that I'm like, afraid of. Or like, you know, even if I am afraid of them, I want to be able to, like, put that aside and like, do what the client needs.

This emphasis on client care was prevalent across several participants. Piper and Melissa also shared similar sentiments about the importance of clients in their R/S transition and pursuit of integration of spirituality in counseling. Piper discussed her previous exposure to many kinds of religious constructs as a strength of her counseling. She shared an example of understanding a client sharing about being "tormented" by Lilith. She said:

And, you know, I thankfully, I knew the story behind Lilith, and I could, you know, make the pieces connect the pieces instead of having him to explain it again to another professional that had no idea what he was talking about, and thought he was just crazy.

Piper went on to describe the importance of having this awareness and curiosity about religious/spiritual concerns clients may bring to us. She said, "so if you know, we can all be semi aware of these stories, and curious enough to investigate them, like, I think that can help a lot of clients grow."

Melissa shared about how specific client concerns can spark curiosity for her. She said: Catalysts like, for instance, I work with a lot of eating disorders at my other site. And I, in just noticing the disconnect from the body, the mind over matter kind of things, a lot of times that comes with religious trauma. And so that was a catalyst for me to say, "Okay, I need to learn more about embodiment, right." I need to figure out how I'm going to



support like everyone with healing with this, right? So yeah, the like, the woundings that I hear are, are healing opportunities. And I usually catalyzes something for me.

This clinical intuition had a clear spiritual element for Melissa. Whether the conversation was explicitly regarding R/S concerns or not, clients have served as catalysts for ongoing change in these participants' narratives.

**Outside of Program.** For all participants, there were factors outside the counseling program that served as catalysts for R/S change. For Sydney, a significant outside factor was another persons' R/S transition. She shared:

My college roommate and like, really dear friend, she became Muslim. She started practicing Islam. She started like wearing hijab and like, following the Islamic faith. She had previously been just kind of, kind of like me, like didn't really have a faith didn't really know what she like believed. And then she found Islam and it really gave her so much like peace. And so, I think I also knew that I wanted that feeling. I didn't, like Islam wasn't it for me, but I, I could see how like at peace she felt and how connected and like, whole she felt from like finding that faith. And I was like, I want to feel like I can see her feeling.

Tori also referenced others' transitions, and while they impacted her, they were not driving forces of her on R/S transition. Tori's husband had previously left the LDS faith saying, "he no longer believed in it for his own reasons, separate than mine." She also discussed her daughter recently coming out as bisexual and attending a church-affiliated university. While her coming out did not impact her beliefs, as she was already affirming, she stated, "But it does make the, the fact that she is still in the system, and they continue to do things to harm that community makes it more personal now."

Piper identified that outside factors were more impactful than her experiences within the counseling program. “I really just want to emphasize that it was really compounded things that were causing this transition.” Piper discussed other significant life events including the birth of her two sons and conflict with her children’s father. It was her faith that sustained her, as she says, “that’s [faith practice] the only thing that’s ever offered any relief long term. And the change in a positive direction within myself.”

### ***Kinds of Changes During Counselor Program***

All participants endorsed experiencing a wide variety of changes during their counselor training program, including in religious/spiritual identity, professional practice, counselor identity, and personal characteristics. These changes were broad and far-reaching in the narratives of the participants. To explore the nature of these changes, we will begin by learning each participant’s definition of R/S transition, then explore the process of deconstruction, the kinds of theological, belief, and practice changes experience, and finally explore the idea that professional change is personal change in relation to R/S transition. Participants used a variety of language for the nature of the change experiences including Tori’s experience of “falling apart,” Melissa and Piper’s experience of “transformation, Rachel’s experience of “looking up” while on the journey, Jordan’s shifts toward a “more generous understanding of God,” and Sydney’s finding a spiritual home.

**Definition or Religious/Spiritual Transition.** In addition to focusing on their narratives, participants were asked for their personal definition of religious/spiritual transition. They shared personal and professional experience and shared several common factors. Rachel considered her definition for R/S transition, focusing on fit between self and their religion. She said, “Hmm. spiritual or religious transition? Um, that’s a really good question. I think it’s anytime that people

have to pivot or deepen their understanding of how they fit in with religion, or with their faith assumptions.” Development was a primary focus for Piper saying, “I think it is more of like a whole spiritual development. And a transition is a seems more of like a conscious choice to turn into a certain direction on the spiritual path.”

Melissa focused on the individual experience of R/S transition in describing her reaction to a client wanting to discuss their R/S transition by stating:

If someone is saying that [R/S transition], right, it piques my curiosity, and I just wanna, just tell me more. So that’s my, yeah, that’s it just piques my curiosity and I want to hear you. Like, I want to hear the other person’s narrative and language of how they’re going to describe that, because I feel like that can just show up in so many ways.

Grappling with changes was primary for Tori and Jordan. Jordan described an active and intentional process of change saying:

What comes to mind for me is someone who is actively considering and challenging their belief system, in a systemic way. So that might be somebody who has grown up with a certain faith who is reconsidering whether or not that aligns with who they are, and what they think. Or it might be someone who has taken on a particular religious or spiritual identity, that they are still trying to integrate that in some way.

Similarly, Tori noted how beliefs may not fit anymore:

I think it’s just a process of really digging down in and for me, it was um I think just realizing that how I had been living was not working for me anymore. It was, it wasn’t feeling comfortable anymore. It was feeling like I was being boxed in. And it was starting to feel like I was trying so hard to still make, I don’t know, make old beliefs work.

Finally, Sydney considered multiple factors for religious/spiritual transition. She identified that R/S identity were not fixed characteristics and could be expected to change over time. She said:

I think I, the first thing that stands out to me is the transition piece. Because I think that really speaks to the fact that religion and spirituality, like evolve for people throughout their life. And I don't think we often look at it that way, I think we look at it as something that's like inherent to someone and will never change. It's like the faith that they like were born into in their family, like the faith that they inherited, is the is what they are.

She continued discussing elements of R/S transition occurring as part of an ongoing journey, similar to Piper's definition. Here she said:

And then I think about how like different things serve you at different points in your life. So, like, growing up in the Lutheran church really served me when I was when I was growing up. That was like, a beautiful community for me. And now, like, the Unitarian Universalism, that really serves who I am in this moment in my life, and like, who knows, in 10 years, what that will look like.

There were many common factors across these definitions as well as components that were individualized to the participant and their narrative. The wide variety of definitions for R/S transitions pointed toward the difficulty of understanding this complex process through overly simplified terms. One such term that has been commonly used was deconstruction. The next subtheme addressed the concept of deconstruction as experienced by the participants.

**Deconstruction.** Deconstruction was a widely used term within individuals leaving conservative forms of Christianity, as explored in Chapter II. This term emerged in several participant interviews and was outlined further in relation to their R/S transitions. In these narratives, deconstruction points largely to taking apart beliefs, typically those inherited from

childhood. The process of untangling belief structures typically led from one issue that then led to another topic that called to be addressed.

Melissa discussed deconstruction primarily in her previous R/S transitions. A primary factor for her was seeing God in similar ways to her own father. This connection aligned with her Lutheran upbringing which had a significant focus theologically on God the Father.

My concept of God was tied so much to my father, to just have that, like, deconstruct it, and then really consider with an open mind and an open heart, like, what is this that I'm experiencing? Because it's not the way I conceptualized it before.

Part of her spiritual transformation was tied to entirely revisiting her ideas around God, and it was ultimately a part of her personal "healing journey." She described:

For me, it was like, starting to really deconstruct, reject so much about my Lutheran like upbringing, Catholic upbringing, a lot of different principles. That, of course, I would go through a period where I would become an atheist, right, like. Because, yeah, nobody was ever just allowing me to have feelings, right? [laughing] And I knew I didn't "deserve" the abuse and neglect that I endured although my family system told me I did.

Melissa saw deconstruction as rejecting many of the elements of this formative religious experience. For her, taking apart and reconsidering her beliefs led to healing and pursuing counseling. She described an ongoing sense of transformation throughout her counselor training as well. She described discovering internal family systems (IFS) and said, "having that model was deeply spiritual for me, and transformative in making me a better counselor too." Continuing to do her own parts work using IFS. "I've got strong protective parts that have internalized that Protestant Ethic." The process of deconstruction was ongoing as she said, "I still have more to

explore with my relationship with God.” This sense of an ongoing process included deconstructing formerly held beliefs and integrating new ways of knowing and being.

Jordan recounted similar characteristics of taking apart beliefs. For them, choosing to begin the deconstruction process felt like embarking on a project of sorting. Jordan said:

I think that I have been pulling apart a lot of things that, within myself, that I knew where there is this like muddled up set of things that would just, you know, I could let them lie until I had to directly face it. But I know I’m gonna have to directly face it. So, like I have started with intentionality, parsing through that, and doing research and reading books and working through things, so that I will be more prepared for my professional roles. But that also means that I’ve changed a lot personally.

The intentional process of untangling aspects of faith takes courage and dedicated effort. Similar to Jordan, Tori had an internal sense of knowing beginning the process of taking apart beliefs would have larger impacts.

And so I know there was a part of me that was a little bit scared of that going in, Like, gosh, what if I, you know, completely deconstruct and, and so I think there’s that fear of going in and starting to starting to look at all this stuff.

She did embark on the journey of taking her beliefs apart and was faced with her fear around what it would mean for her religious faith. She said:

And then it was just a lot of deconstructing like, okay, how much of this do I believe? Like for a while, it was like, “Okay, can I be like more of a nuanced believer, like believe some of it and not believe all of it.” But then it just became like, the more and more I took apart, it was like, “what’s left?” Like, basically, what’s left is I love the community, and I love the people. And is that enough to keep going?

Tori shared her journey had led her to a new place saying, “So right now we are, I would say I no longer believe in the truth claims of our church. I’ve kind of deconstructed all of that.” While Tori’s fear of “completely deconstructing” was in most ways realized, she also shared being grateful for her journey.

**Changes in Beliefs and Spiritual Practices.** Aspects of deconstruction or other ways of experiencing religious/spiritual transition resulted in changes in belief as well as changes in spiritual practice. Changes in beliefs for some participants centered on theology, while for others looked at social justice concerns. For Jordan, this change took place generally as well as in specific beliefs. They said, “I have been reflecting on theology and the way that my understanding of God has shifted significantly in the past year or two.”

For Tori, the process of R/S transition included shifting beliefs on many individual topics of faith. For example, she discussed her growing misgivings regarding inherently trusting male authority. In addition, she shared, “you know, facing the fact that I no longer have a certainty that like, I’ll see my loved ones again, or in something after this life, or there’s all of those things that are hard.” In addition to the theological change, she followed this by saying, “But a lot of what has been hard, has been relationships shifting and changing.” Jordan went on to discuss specific ways in which their beliefs have shifted. In this case, part of those changes occurred between the initial interview and the member reflection interview. They said:

But I have come to what I think, or hope is a more generous understanding of God as infinite, and the ways that God speaks into our lives are as unique as we are. So I hope that I can afford myself the grace of, believing the truths that God speaks into my life, while also believing the truths that God speaks into other people’s lives. And I am gradually pulling away, I think, from how other people tell me to think about God. And

maybe that is, you know, if I look at it very rigidly becoming “anti-religion,” but I think it is more so that I am encountering God as an individual, which is what we’re all meant to do, while still worshipping in community. (Jordan)

This view of God and the role of the church seemed to be an ongoing process. Jordan continued to grapple with their role in the church as well as the church’s role in their life.

For Piper and Rachel, aspects of their beliefs remained steadfast, while others shifted. For Rachel, she described the difference between her theological beliefs and her felt experiences. In discussing the potential loss of her pastoral identity, she said:

We all know that God is not going to change God’s opinion of us based on how we are, or what we’re doing or not doing. Like true Lutheran theology there. It looks very different when the church then is going to behave very differently towards us.

In a similar way, Piper discussed aspects of her view of God that had not shifted. Instead, she said, “And since I’ve been turning more towards God, that I feel more spiritual growth from doing that.” For Piper, her R/S transition was in many ways a return to her childhood faith in new ways. The growth and development she discussed came as a result of that return, connecting her root and her heart.

Theological changes have had a relationship to counseling outlook as well. Jordan described, “I think that I’ve kind of shifted from a sin-based model to a wellness model, which is more in line with Eastern Catholicism to begin with.” However, their outlook has become more nuanced as they go on to say, “But there are still perspectives within eastern Catholicism that I have not embraced fully, and that I’ve been distancing myself from.” This shift in beliefs correlated in direct ways with counselor training and professional values.



A concrete way of experiencing R/S transition often takes place in new spiritual practices. For Piper, prayer was a primary vehicle for noticing changes. She observed:

I didn't really do anything when I first started seeing clients and my internship and just notice myself, like thinking a lot about them. And there was I didn't really have a way to privately and confidentially release all of that. So that's why I turned to prayer.

In her current practice, she continued using prayer when she was concerned about clients. She also read the Bible daily. She saw these practices as helpful to her as she said, "I kind of see that as well, a sword in a way, like, for my mind, to defend my own mind and to arm and guard my tongue." These practices helped Piper remain grounded and feel protected. She shared a story of interacting with a client. She said:

For example, I was speaking to a parent about um. A parent had said that he had summoned Lilith. And I felt like uh as the session went up, and I kind of felt like this burning on my one foot. ... And I had to do a lot of praying to like, make it go away. It wasn't anything physical that I could explain. And yeah, and even with that same client, they were, like pressing on my back to like process like a medical trauma. And on the way home, I just prayed for protection. And for nothing like that, to that would that she was pushing into me was going to affect me physically.

The process of R/S transition has had concrete impacts on her professional and personal life now. In a similar way, but with a different approach to spiritual practices, Melissa also used prayer before going into sessions. She shared how her prayer had evolved over time:

In the beginning, my prayer was really simple about just turning things over to a higher power so that the highest and greatest good could be realized, right? And then I started to also incorporate starting off with Person Centered concepts, like the prayer involved with

that, first right, to stay in the present moment, active listening with empathy, genuineness, unconditional positive regard. And then when I got introduced to IFS [internal family systems] and the eight Cs of self and the four Fs, that I incorporated that then. ... And I am sure to sit for at least a moment with each word that I can hold that as I hold the space throughout the day for counseling.

Melissa used her prayer to prepare herself for seeing clients, and Piper primarily spoke about using prayer to cope after experiencing challenges with clients. Both used prayer as a primary practice, and one that had evolved for them personally over the course of their religious/spiritual transition.

**Professional Change is Personal Change.** Regardless of the kind of change experience, there was an overarching sentiment in the narratives, that professional change was personal change. The two cannot be meaningfully separated. During counselor training, the participants shared about various changes in their counselor development. For Melissa, she described discovering internal family systems as transformative both personally and professionally. She said:

But it like, the whole idea is that you do your own parts work. And then you counsel from the place of self, right? In IFS, we know that Self is present when we are able to find calmness, compassion, clarity, curiosity, creativity, connectedness, courage, and confidence (the 8 Cs of Self). And so, inevitably, it's just, it makes you a better counselor too for your clients. And in doing that, the thing that was amazing is doing IFS with people, I started to have spiritual experiences with people in session. Like actual, really, like, you just can't even believe that this is happening kind of stuff, right? Yeah, and it just, it's just strengthened so much more of my connection with that.

Sydney, Jordan, and Tori all spoke more generally about the nature of graduate school training. Sydney said:

I think for everyone, starting grad school changes pretty much everything. At least for me, like I, my life changed, I started learning things about myself. And I think especially grad school for counseling, like, the whole degree is you self-reflecting. Like, and you're just challenged in ways that are like, you know, they push you to examine, like, all of the aspects of who you are.

For Tori, the interchange of working on oneself was engrained in the program as part of the expectations. She said:

And so much of our program is focused on reflections. ... Like, part of our interview process was, "are you ready to dig into your own crap? Right, because we're gonna make you dig into your own crap."

Both Sydney and Tori endorsed the concept of the self-reflective nature of counselor training as part of their overall change as a person and ultimately their R/S identity. Jordan spoke similarly about change in graduate school, even saying they were intentional in their choices to prepare for the kinds of changes they might encounter:

So, like I have started with intentionality, parsing through that, and doing research and reading books and working through things, so that I will be more prepared for my professional roles. But that also means that I've changed a lot personally.

As Jordan was nearer the beginning of their counselor training, they were anticipating further personal changes as they continued in their programs. Rachel even spoke to this, although in a slightly different way. The work of counselor training was in line with their personal development and R/S transition. All occurred together, in various capacities, for the participants.

In order to confront the changes specifically tied to R/S transition, the participants noted several needed characteristics, as explored in the next theme.

***Characteristics Needed During Religious/Spiritual Transition***

Participants identified several characteristics they needed throughout their religious/spiritual transition. Subthemes in this category included Courage to Face Doubts, Living with Tension, and Openness among many others. There are many overlaps within this theme with counselor development. The interactions of counselor identity development and R/S transition are explored in a later theme. However, it was worth noting at this point that several characteristics aligned with what was known about counselor development generally.

**Courage to Face Doubts.** Addressing uncomfortable R/S issues required courage. Participants noted this in several ways throughout their narratives. During a previous R/S transition, Rachel described how her doubts changed over time. During seminary she relayed, “I’m still having a lot of questions. But they kind of had, they weren’t boiling over anymore, they were just simmering.” Facing doubts can take several forms over time. The experience of doubts was common across participants, and then making the choice to face these doubts appears as an integral part of R/S transition. Tori experienced dissonance that eventually reached that boiling point. She said, “it was starting to feel like I was trying so hard to still make, I don’t know, make old beliefs work. ... Finding the courage to admit that to myself, and then to start to admit that to other people.”

Religious/spiritual beliefs often offer stability and a sense of security for existential questions. Tori discussed instability in her childhood and how it impacted her interactions with religion saying:

And so I clung on to this [religion] for stability, and for all the answers, right. They have all the answers for everything. And I think for me, it's just then a process of realizing that nobody really knows the answers to the questions that religion tries to answer. And becoming okay with that. I was telling my friend the other day, I feel like I've kind of come full circle. It's like, I'm back to being like, "well, I don't know." But, and there's a lot of, I guess, insecurity in that, but I don't feel, I don't feel threatened by it like I did as a younger person. Like, I don't need that certainty anymore.

The safety in other areas, like her marriage and family life, were essential for Tori to be able to face the doubts that had been simmering in her faith for the past decade.

**Exploration.** The idea of curious exploration was present in all participant narratives as they experienced religious/spiritual transition. The ability to put aside previous beliefs enough to explore new possibilities was crucial for transition to occur. For Sydney, this exploration was spurred by cohort members. Sydney's program included exposure to those in her cohort who were very religious. Through conversations with them about how important their religious beliefs were to their overall worldview she said:

And then that is what made me question like, Okay, like, how do I do those things? Like, what are my spiritual, like, beliefs and values? And how do I check in with myself around that?" ... And I started thinking about like, Okay, if I don't know this about myself, it's, it's like, much harder for me to like, relate to clients who like, are struggling with it, or like, have, you know, based their worldview off of this set of beliefs, or whatever it is. And so then, that even further pushed me to be like, okay, like, I this is something I really want to dive into. And then once I found the church that I found, then I understood even more, like, just why that's so important in people's lives.

Piper spoke about the importance of exploration for herself but also encouraging it for others. She said:

But I think that, you know, we need to sort out our own religious beliefs, to, you know, sort out those spiritual biases that we have. In order to, you know, whether they're conscious or unconscious, you know, unconscious, being from our family that we never realized, as, you know, part of our spiritual beliefs. And, you know, people need to sort that out before they can start having these deep conversations in sessions with people.

In a similar way, being curious and following curiosity was an important part of the process for Melissa. Part of her spiritual experiences included messages in dreams. She noted that she was, "Prompted to seek out and then go down that to find what the, because really what I what I've looked for is what are the academics saying." For Melissa, her spiritual experiences prompted her curiosity to engage with the literature. Through that exploration, she found important authors and language for her own experiences. She said,

Well, a lot of it was finding the language of other people, too. Like, and so that was key to it, because particularly in the dreams that I started to have, and the prompts that I started to get for some of my research. ... I had I had another dream where I woke up from it. Because I'll sometimes have like a message that comes in and it'll say, that's a thing. Like, you should look that up. Right? And so was, there was there's another dream, it was really specific wording. And I just went in Google after I woke up and typed it in, and then that introduced me to Mirabai Starr.

Melissa's curiosity and exploration were very intimately tied with her spiritual experiences, while for others there was some dissonance between the freedom to be curious and the religions

they were exploring. In either relationship to exploration, the characteristic itself was an important element of R/S transition.

**Risk-Taking.** Many participants described the risk they took in undertaking religious/spiritual transition. For Rachel, taking the risk to pursue this next aspect of her vocation had risks that differed from previous R/S transitions. She said:

I've had these spiritual shifts in my life. And recognizing how much it really did depend on my stage of life. ... I had different options. I had different resources; I was in a different state of maturity of all sorts of things. And, and it just looked different. And yet, at the same time, you know, even with all those resources that I had, there was also a lot to lose.

Jordan's narrative included elements of balanced risk-taking with many other considerations. In an early ethics assignment, Jordan described wrestling with how to articulate their affirmation of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Jordan said:

I knew that I wanted to ensure that I was giving good care other LGBTQIA people. ... Um, you know, when we say hey, counselors need to be, you know, prepared to counsel everyone in a non-discriminatory way. Like, I'm all on board with that. But I realized that publicly sharing even just that would cause members of my parish to raise eyebrows. I needed time to figure out how to share my interior reality in a safe way that protected myself and my family, but then there was this assignment due in less than a week. I knew it was unlikely to get back to my church. But even putting things in writing about ethical obligations to support this Catholic, lesbian client felt dangerous and vulnerable as I signed my name to it. A bit too close to self-disclosure, maybe. Now I have fewer fears ... but at the time it felt scary.

Rachel's risks centered mostly on her social relationships. She noted, grappling with theological belief changes was challenging, "but a lot of what has been hard, has been relationships shifting and changing." In reflecting on these relationships, she said, "all of our, all of our friends, all of our support system, all of our family is very much still all in. And so I'd say right now, that's the biggest thing that we're dealing with." She was planning on sharing their family's disconnection from the church and drew connections with the queer community "coming out." She said, "I was amazed at the similarities to how I felt about, quote unquote, coming out to people about no longer believing in this high demand religion." These represented some of the risks participants faced as they went through R/S transition. In response to these necessary characteristics, many emotional experiences were also present during this turbulent time.

### ***Counselor Identity***

During counselor training, counselor identity development was a consideration throughout. There appeared to be correlations with developments as a counselor and religious/spiritual transitions. As R/S transitions were taking place along similar timelines as counselor training, certain correlations may be expected. Even with this expectation, participants outlined specific ways in which R/S transition and their spiritual lives in general integrated with their counselor identities. Piper described her personal spiritual beliefs as supportive to her counseling. She said:

I kind of see Christianity as a way to support my counselor identity. And not in the terms of like, putting Christianity out with my clients, but more of supporting me as a counselor, and knowing that there is a force behind me that is guiding me.



This personal belief system was protective and positive for Piper, even if it did not come out explicitly in her counseling relationships. Sydney spoke about the ways her values were demonstrated in both her counselor identity and spiritual identity saying, “it makes me feel like my personal identity and my counselor identity are really congruent. Because like, as a counselor, I am accepting of people of all faiths, and my faith is accepting of people of all faiths.” There was cohesion for Sydney across identities. She also reflected on the ways her cohesive identity impacted her presence with clients by saying:

I think it [spirituality] makes me feel stronger in my counselor identity because um well, I think it’s, it’s, it gives me more empathy. I think it also gives me a well-rounded perspective of my clients. And in terms of like the identity piece, I think I think I’m like, excited to bring this part of myself into the room now. I think maybe before I was like, like, “Oh God, I hope my client doesn’t ask me about my like faith, because I don’t know, like, I don’t know what to say.”

Jordan and Rachel spoke about a more integrated overall identity--personal, spiritual, and counselor identities. Jordan described this integration by saying:

The counselor identity feels like a natural expression of my identity. As does my religious, you know, identity. So, both of them flow from me living out love in my own way. I am always seeking truth in ways that feel integrated and authentic to who I am and to my relationship with God.

Jordan went on to describe the ways their particular journey felt in-line with their counselor and spiritual identities.

It’s very cohesive to this counselor identity. ... I feel like I really want to do like this one-on-one encounter, or you know, a couple, and it feels very like I-thou. And there are

existential questions that are raised within counseling that I think I'm more comfortable confronting, because I grapple with them. And I don't run away from the loneliness, the fear, the discomfort, the suffering, or tensions. And I don't say "Hurry up and pick one side already." You know, I can hold all of that without feeling like we need to resolve it in one session.

Rachel also described counselor identity, and she connected it with her overall vocational identity. She said, "being a spiritual director, and, you know, all and being very intentional about making this, you know, being a counselor as part of my spiritual path, my spiritual work." Counseling was a direct path that connected other parts of her career path, all of which were parts of her spiritual journey. She went on to say, "I've worked so hard to never disintegrate my religion and spirituality from the rest of myself." The connection between counselor identity and spiritual identity, whether intentional or more implicit in nature, has been an important part of development for many participant narratives.

### ***Counseling Program Experiences***

The interrelated nature of religious/spiritual transition with counselor training revealed several important considerations. The primary subthemes included a focus on training programs themselves--Facilitative Responses and Unhelpful Responses. Participants shared throughout their narratives the aspects of training, from individual professors to overall counseling impressions, that were both helpful and harmful. Before looking at this, we will first explore the nature of public university counselor training with this group of participants.

**Public University Counselor Education.** One participant requirement of this sample was soliciting narratives from non-religiously affiliated institutions. While there was evidence that R/S transition was occurring across all kinds of programs, it could be materially different

from students's experience their R/S changes in a secular space. This was affirmed by both Rachel and Jordan discussing their intentional choices to seek counselor training at a secular institution. Rachel said:

Um, well, I mean, some of it was like, I, you know, [City Name 1], we have a Christian university here with a good counseling program. And I took one look at that. And I was like, "that's not the place for me. I need to be in a secular institution." And so like, some of it was already formed, right at the get go that I had been very intentional about wanting a secular education this time around.

She went on to say that continuing counseling from a chaplaincy perspective, which was more interfaith in nature, was more consistent with her goals, and that would likely not have been accepted at this university. Similarly, Jordan discussed their decision to attend a public university. They shared having applied to multiple universities, three with a Christian-affiliation, and one public university. Jordan said:

And after I was accepted to all of them, I had a decision to make about what type of education I wanted and how I wanted to be formed as a counselor ... I, I ultimately decided to go to a public, secular university instead of one of the Christian schools. Partially because I felt like I had a lot to work through internally, that I wasn't sure that I was going to be able to at the Christian universities. And that, I think, was the moment where I made a choice about what type of clinician I was going to be and what type of "Christian counselor." How those identities were going to relate to one another.

For both Rachel and Jordan, choosing a secular institution was intentional to allow themselves the space to explore both counseling and spirituality in the ways they needed to. The public institution was a large component of Tori's R/S transition as well. Tori said:

I had a lot of fear that I was just being influenced by people around me, because you hear that, that story. “You’re gonna go to grad school, you’re going to think you’re so wise and you’re going to lose your faith.” And I had to learn that just because it was in grad school that all of this happened, that it wasn’t grad school that made me lose my faith. That it was grad school that empowered me to feel safe to start looking at stuff that I had not felt strong enough to face before. ... And so if people want to blame grad school, I almost get defensive because of the process. Because it’s like, look, these aren’t people tearing down religion and telling me to leave my faith and everything. That’s not what this is about. It’s about like I said, the word that just keeps coming to me as grad school has been very empowering.

These participants spoke to the intentional choice of a public institution as well as to the material outcome of attending a public university for a counseling program. There appeared to be a significant role public university programs can play in CITs navigating R/S transition.

**Facilitative Responses.** All participants spoke of ways counseling programs were helpful or could be helpful in their experiences of religious/spiritual transition during counselor training. A significant part of what was helpful included parts of counselor training that were already engrained within the process. Self-reflection and confronting dissonant beliefs were important experiences for many participants. Overall, a focus on person of the counselor work was important for the process of R/S transition. As noted above in the subtheme Professional Change is Personal Change, when programs required this kind of deep exploration, they facilitated not only counselor development but also R/S transition as experienced by these participants.

Sydney shared her experiences with a person of the counselor focus. She discussed its overall integration across the program, saying:

Well, in the orientation class, I took that the like, very first summer, it was online. But I remember we talked about, like, the personhood of the counselor. And I feel like we've had this discussion a lot throughout grad schools. ... Um, but I remember at orientation, we talked about like, you as a person doing counseling, and one of the elements that we talked about with that was like religion and spirituality.

She went on to discuss the way in which these kinds of discussions highlighted a missing element of her own self-care. "in counseling classes, we talk about spirituality being part of a client's journey. That was a huge motivator for me to be like, 'What is my spirituality?' So, I do feel like there's definitely a causal link." This was an essential element of exploration that would ultimately lead to R/S transition.

Overall, Rachel did not identify many aspects of the program that facilitated her R/S transition. Primarily she saw the institution recognizing her particular vocation as facilitative to her R/S transition. However, she did note aspects of the program itself that were helpful during her program. She said:

And so you know, those were these little moments where the school really did help out in terms of helping me understand how to do this. And so, I got to set up an interview with one or two professors who I didn't ever take classes from, who were, you know, who marketed themselves as Christian counselors, so I could find out what that option would look like. And so that was really helpful.

Melissa experienced a similar simultaneous transition saying, "during my time in the program was when I started to have kind of my own sort of like awakening where I really started to be able to develop more of a language and an identity was during the program." For Melissa, she had previous spiritual experiences that led to her pursuit of becoming a counselor. She also

continued integrating her spirituality through continuing education outside of the program. For Melissa, the program itself provided new information by which to process through her developing spiritual lens. For example, Melissa described how her spirituality interacted with counseling theories by saying:

It [spirituality] helps me to see [sigh] because, like, our theories aren't perfect, right?

Like so many, right? And so many of them are, like developed by a white man in [laughing] the 20th century, right, and are viewing things through a lens that invalidates a lot of people, right? And so my, so my spirituality allows me to have like, the openness to hear that too.

In Tori's narrative, the connection with counselor training was more overt. She discussed the power of "empathic reflections from professors" as pivotal moments for her. Confronting dissonance was also key for Tori. She said, "but they [doubts] come up. And it's like, no, don't think about that. Don't look at that. And all of that comes apart real quick when you start studying counseling, right?" Learning about various aspects of counseling was empowering and liberating for Tori as it offered a new way of understanding the world.

The facilitative aspects of the program combined with Tori's doubts very clearly in one instance she described. She shared about leading teenage girls, and the teens reported that the new bishop "was making them uncomfortable" during individual ecclesiastical interviews.

And basically, anytime I went to him, he just kept telling me to trust the patriarchy, kind of. Like, just trust Him. He's the one in authority. He's the one he's the man, right? And, and so that did not sit well with me at all. So I went to the leader above him, and kind of just got the same thing. And even after I started disclosing, like some of these things, to the leader above him about what the young women were saying, it was all like, "well, he

probably means well, blah, blah, blah.” It was just a bunch of like, taking his side. ... At the same time, I’m in grad school, I’m learning about being congruent with myself and learning about fear-based reasoning and conditions of worth, and repressing parts of ourselves (or our belief systems) that don’t make sense or that we don’t want to face.

(Tori)

In direct contrast to this experience with the admonition to trust church leadership, she also had an encounter with a male professor. During a class with this professor, Tori interrupted him. In response she said:

I went home, and I felt so bad. I was like, this is an authority figure, like, you know, and I cut him off. And that’s so disrespectful. And so I sent him an email, apologizing for that. ... And his response, I got his email as, right as I had been told by my bishop that I needed to basically back off and know my place and trust Him and the decisions he was making, right. So, I was going through that with the male leadership at church, and the email that I got back from [Professor] was basically he said, he said, ... “You know, I would invite you to be kind to yourself, and I would invite you to continue to speak, and speak loudly. And to continue to interrupt men in power like myself.” ... And I just burst into tears.

She described facing this dichotomy as a defining moment for her in her R/S transition.

For some participants, facilitative responses were found in supportive others found during their counselor training, but not directly tied to the university. For example, Rachel discussed being connected with another professional in the community through her spiritual director. This professional was able to help speak to Rachel’s specific needs.

And so, anytime I had tricky questions to ask about, like, ... “how do I make sure that I am being appropriate and not bringing in too much therapy into my spiritual direction? That I’m not bringing in too much spiritual direction into my psychotherapy?” She was really helpful on helping me conceptualize how to distinguish those two.

Melissa also discussed the importance of other professionals, namely her spiritually-integrated supervisor. She said, “And it was, while I was in the program, I had a supervisor introduced me to internal family systems.” She went on to reflect that, “when I got that internal family systems model, it was just like, like everything came together. ... And having that model was deeply spiritual, for me and transformative in making me a better counselor, too.” This aspect of supervised experience aligned with Melissa’s needs relating to R/S transition and counselor development simultaneously.

**Unhelpful Responses.** There were aspects of counselor training that were facilitative for some participants to encourage their religious/spiritual transition. However, all participants noted ways in which programs were unhelpful and at times even harmful to participants and their R/S transitions. The ways in which programs addressed religion and spirituality were impactful for participants. They experienced stigma, avoidance, microaggressions, cultural insensitivity, and even pathologizing spiritual experiences. In addition, shallow discussions of R/S issues led to assumptions, fragmented conversations, and a sense of forced self-disclosure.

Religious/spiritual issues were simply not discussed in the experiences of some participants. Piper described her openness to discussing R/S in the program but said, “I think a lot of people might not be open to it.” She also said:



It's [R/S issues] not being integrated into, you know, counseling programs currently, you know. I just graduated. So, you know, I kind of see a lot of new counselors like freeze up when they talk about religion and spiritual, and even some of my supervisors. (Piper)

Jordan shared similar sentiments about the lack of R/S discussion in relation to their counseling program. They said, "apart from a little bit in the multicultural class, there was not much discussion of either spirituality or religion."

In addition to avoidance of religious and spiritual considerations, some experiences also point to more harmful reactions by programs. Tori succinctly said, "I definitely feel like it's not popular to be religious, to be conservative, that kind of thing in our program." Melissa shared a similar sentiment discussing her experience. She said:

I've definitely run into hearing other professors talk about cases in which I'm hearing a person possibly having like a spiritually significant experience. And then, like, openly, like pathologize it in front of a classroom of students, right. A lot of cultural insensitivity in that too, right? Yeah, I just feel like in this country, in our culture, specifically, we view things that other cultures can see as a spiritual, it like awakening or experience, right, we will turn it into something that needs to be treated.

She continued by saying, "that's part of why I have a feel like an underdeveloped narrative of even talking about this because, like. No, I did not feel like it was always a safe space to bring in discussions about spirituality." Melissa experienced spirituality being misunderstood, stigmatized, and even pathologized.

This kind of experience was shared by Jordan. They said:

And they use some really loaded language where I was like, uhh? ... I think the professor said, religious people can hold some very strong views, that we need to be very careful

not to undermine, no matter how much we, you know, disagree [laughing] with what they're sharing. But like, it was in a detached, judgmental tone. Like, it kind of had that same tone of like, "these people are delusional, but you have to just kind of roll with their delusions until they get better, okay?" And it was like, I don't know how to explain it. It wasn't like a, you know, let's talk about how to, you know, pull in all of this stuff. And it wasn't in a respectful way. It was like this very like dismissive. Like, "just be careful what you say around those people."

Piper described similar sentiments of feeling dismissed or overlooked in her religious beliefs and practices. She described a situation in a group Zoom discussing different cultural practices of self-care. Piper shared that in the group she said:

"Yeah, I really like to pray as like part of my own self care." And she was just like, "Oh, that's great. You know, that's great for some people, what else do people do?" and it just felt really dismissive to me in the moment. And I was, like, I, I just kind of shut down for the rest of the group and didn't want to participate more.

She said, "since I was like, transitioning while still in my training program, it made me a lot more hyper aware of, you know, spiritual like micro aggressions." These minor experiences appear to speak volumes when they are some of only a few discussions related to R/S issues.

One common place religion and spirituality were discussed was in ethics courses. Often the discussion revolved around imposition of counselor values on clients as it related to R/S beliefs. Sydney reflected on this message by saying:

And I think part of the reason we don't talk about spirituality as much in the counseling, like field is that there is a little bit of that stigma that like, we want to not be viewed as, like, Christian counselors or like these other types of like, you know, we're not like

rabbis, or pastors or whatever we're like, you know, this other thing. And I don't know, I wish there was more of a conversation around that, because I feel like there's a way to get both messages across that, like, yeah, don't let your beliefs impact the way you treat your clients. And it's okay to like, have strong beliefs.

Sydney outlined that strong beliefs were not the problem and that there were ways to have both strong beliefs and strong ethical commitments to avoid imposing values.

Jordan had outlined their differing identities based on the space they were occupying.

Jordan stated overtly about their experiences in the counseling program by saying:

And it makes it also challenging that I don't feel like my religious or spiritual identity is integrated into the program in any way. So like, even if I can bring most of who I am as an activist, and with my gender and sexual identity, and all of that. Even though I can bring it into those counseling spaces, it doesn't feel like spirituality or religion is on the table to discuss about integration.

As much discomfort Jordan had experienced in navigating their fragmented identities in the church space, they also felt similar fragmentation in the counseling space. This separation made it more challenging to address needed areas of R/S transition. Perhaps due in part to this division, Jordan also described an experience in their ethics course. There was an early assignment asking students to resolve an issue of how to ethically treat a Catholic lesbian client. Jordan said:

So that was a very difficult assignment for me. Because it put my values already in direct juxtaposition, and like, "how are you going to reconcile this? And how are you going to show up as a clinician? And what do our ethics say on this?" And so I had to figure out how that fit with my spirituality and my religious values.

They also said, “I needed time to figure out how to share my interior reality in a safe way that protected myself and my family, but then there was this assignment due in less than a week” For Jordan, the problem was not with the assignment itself but rather the incongruent nature of counseling and R/S in Jordan’s experience in counselor training.

The experiences of During R/S transition varied widely amongst participants. However, several important considerations comprised the experience of R/S transition during counselor training. The kinds of changes experienced, the catalysts for those changes, the nature of counselor development, and program experiences all comprised the experience of During R/S transition. The next meta-category looks at the experiences After R/S transition.

### **After**

After religious/spiritual transition explores the outcomes of transition as experienced by the participants. It is important to note the cyclical nature of transition could result in multiple After experiences in some narratives. The focus of this meta-category is on outcomes of R/S transition in personal, professional and spiritual realms and also recommendations for programs based on experiences of progressing through R/S transition.

### ***Outcomes of Religious/Spiritual Transition***

There were several important outcomes that emerged from participant narratives. These outcomes cut across multiple domains and often intersected with one another. Participants expressed feeling expansive, liberating, authentic, and healed, among many other things. Gratitude was a common outcome discussed by participants. Melissa spoke about the difficult process of during her R/S transition then reflected on the aftereffects saying:

And at the end of it what’s really cool is that the, the predominant feeling is now gratitude. And that’s, I get, like, choked up in saying that, [with tears] but like, that’s such

an incredible place to be like, when you have felt everything, you know. Just get on the other side of it just kind of just say, “thank you.”

Tori also expressed both the challenge of R/S transition and gratitude for it. She recalled the prominence of fear in her beginning R/S identity and how it had now shifted. She said:

I think the, the empowerment that I felt from grad school just offset the fear just enough, that I could finally go through it. And so, I’m thankful for overall, even though it has been a really rough year, like I wouldn’t change it. And I wouldn’t take it back.

Doubt and dissonance were common elements of During R/S transition. In After, these questions were not all resolved but rather individual’s orientation toward the questions shifted. Participant narratives overall demonstrated an increased tolerance for ambiguity and ability to hold conflicting beliefs. Tori describes this in a professional context of being with clients saying:

It isn’t about knowing all the answers and guiding people, it’s about sitting with them and, and about being in this space with them and embracing that I’m not going to know the right thing to say all the time and being okay with that.

Melissa spoke to the outcomes of religious/spiritual transition on her professional experiences as well. She said:

In actually starting to practice as a counselor and seeing all these wonderful, kind of serendipitous things that were happening, just the people that I would align with in just the right ways. It became clear to me that, as like a helping professional, who’s non-directive and genuinely open with, like, who has the intention that the highest and greatest good may be realized with the people that work with, like with not my personal agenda. It seems that I’ve just feel very supported that way, spiritually. And I just every

day, it's validated again, and again. So it's like my work as a counselor has strengthened my faith in that experience.

The professional and spiritual were woven together in Melissa's narrative of transition.

Resolving tensions was also discussed in Rachel's narrative. Rachel had discussed the impact of the racial reckoning and other "unveilings" that brought to light concerns within the Christian church. In discussing how she reconciled these issues, she said:

Well, I can't say I've fully resolved it, honestly. Because, yeah, churches are weird. They're just so weird. Competing agendas, and what happens in the faith community. And all of them unspoken. It's a tricky place. And it's a type of transition. And, um, you know, I, I've kind of come to the conclusion, especially since that installation last fall, that, you know, if it doesn't work out permanently for me with the church, I feel like what needed to be healed has been healed.

Rachel's new role of minister of mental and spiritual health for the synod, has changed her interactions. She said, "I'm not responsible for making the church look good. I'm not responsible for getting the church functioning. And I'm not responsible for any of that. I'm just responsible for the person in front of me to help them." There is a certain amount of freedom for working in this different way with individual clients. In whatever way her evolving relationship with the church settled, she felt a sense of peace by saying:

Recognizing that there really is still space and much need for people to recover from, you know, spiritual wounding, and having their spirituality and mental health needs combined. And a lot of pastors are not equipped to do that. So recognizing that there's this deep need for this in whatever form it ends up taking.

The ability to hold tension also resulted in a loosening of R/S identity markers for Melissa.

While she still identified as Lutheran, she was also open to what her vocational life could look like entirely outside of the church structure. Sydney resonated with this by saying, “now, like, the Unitarian Universalism, that really serves who I am in this moment in my life, and like, who knows, in 10 years, what that will look like.” Tori has also moved from concrete religious identity of LDS toward something more amorphous. She said:

I guess I would consider myself an agnostic at this point. Like, I still think there’s *something*. I don’t know what it is. And for the first time, in probably my life, I’m okay just saying, I don’t know. And sitting in the mystery and in the, in the not knowing.

The ability to make independent choices for one’s own spiritual journey was another important outcome. Participants spoke of the importance of making their spirituality their own. Piper, who comfortably identifies as a Christian, went through a R/S transition to make the faith of her roots her own. Due to that experience of finding a Christianity that fits for her, she describes feeling protected, grateful and at peace. She said, “I feel more connected to myself, my roots/ family, God and feel like I’m practicing more authentic love for everyone and myself.”

For Sydney, she was looking for a spirituality that aligned with her ideals around being able to make change in your own life, as is congruent with counseling. She said:

I was like, looking for something that celebrates all the beautiful things about humans and takes the stance of like, like, the empowered stance of like, there’s no like, spiritual like deity or being that’s gonna, like, fix your life for you like, or, like, do things in your life for you. It’s you like, you have the ability to make change, you have the ability to, like, treat people with kindness, like you have the ability to make meaning out of your life, basically.

Empowerment was an important element in Tori's narrative as well. She described, "And so I just feel like I'm just progressing down that road of finding my inner spirituality and letting go of the dogma and becoming more comfortable with it. Less fear, and just feeling more settled." The ability to exercise personal agency to craft a R/S experience that aligned with each individual's needs.

### ***Recommendations for Programs***

While not the focus of exploring the narrative experiences of religious/spiritual transition, several important recommendations came to light that could be helpful for others addressing R/S transition while in a counseling program. A general theme is having more discussion throughout the program. Tori overall spoke highly of her program's integration of R/S topics into her experience. Even so she saw room for additional training by saying:

I guess that would be my only thing is just more training on how religion plays into counseling, how those two intersect, and what to do about that? You know, we talk a lot about what do we do with power differentials in the room? And, and intersectionality, and race and gender and sexuality and all of this other stuff. It's like, how do we, how do we do that with religion?

More generally, Jordan was looking for, "proactively having the discussion of how to integrate your own spirituality and religion into your counselor identity." Several participants noted ways this discussion could have taken place. Additional coursework was a common recommendation from Piper and Sydney. Piper noted the various kinds of specialty classes required in counselor training. She said:

Like there was like the sexuality, the human sexualities there was, you know, development and a lot of other cultural stuff, but there wasn't like an introduction to



religion class on its own. ... So that would be something that I would recommend for my own experiences to be integrated into a counseling program, is just like a general intro to religions class. (Piper)

Sydney shared very similar thoughts saying, “we have like, specific classes for lots of areas of counseling, like, sexuality counseling, so like, I feel like, a spirituality counseling ... class, or like a seminar, or something that just like provides a little bit more structure.” Her intention in having additional structure was to have more depth to her understanding of spirituality and counseling. She said, “it feels like it’s always mentioned like last or like as an afterthought or something. And like, honestly, this interview is the first time I’m really like, thinking through all of it in like a holistic way.”

Specific courses were one recommendation but also overall robust conversations integrated throughout the program was another. Jordan offered their idea for having these kinds of nuanced conversations. They said:

So, I wish that part of the process was having these active conversations, not just about clients in an abstract sense of like, if we have to ever, like, interact with a Catholic client or a Mormon client or a, you know, whatever client, then here’s some strategies for doing that. Like, instead, I would, I would want to hear from faith leaders. ... But I would love to have faith leaders come in, share a little bit about their faith, whether it’s formal leader or not, and then have questions about like, if somebody came from your congregation, to counseling, what are some of the things that you would want a beginning counselor to know? You know, what are some of the words that, you know, they that may come up in counseling? And what’s your understanding of those words? ... So having a little bit of cultural information, in those cases is very useful. (Jordan)

More conversations and more time dedicated to processing difficult R/S issues were ideas brought forward by Jordan and Tori. Both referred to due dates on papers as their parameters for processing and desiring other ways and times to have additional conversation.

Not all recommendations need to be integrated into counseling programs themselves but rather encourage connection to other spaces that can be helpful to CITs experiencing R/S transitions. Sydney and Melissa advocated for the importance of personal counseling. Sydney said:

One of the things that stood out to me and my program was that it wasn't required for the counselors to be in counseling. It's kind of a weird, ... people need to be processing things themselves, like on their journey. And inevitably, they're gonna have things come up.

Support groups was another consideration for outside of program supports. Jordan outlined their work for bringing this kind of space to the program. They said, "So I've been trying to kind of create spaces where students can talk about the totality of who they are." They struggled with broaching R/S concerns themselves as they are facilitating the group. Having an outside or separate leader could be helpful for this purpose. Tori also shared her own experiences with peer support that connects her to experiences of those disaffiliated from the LDS faith. More conversation and more spaces for conversation was the overriding theme of these recommendations.

### **Overarching Contextual Factors**

In narrative inquiry, an important element of narratives were the contexts in which narratives took place. These elements actively shaped the narrative experiences. Two major factors arose in Overarching Contextual Factors--Systemic Considerations and

Religious/Spiritual Identity as a Journey. All narratives occurred during some aspects of important systemic factors including the COVID-19 pandemic and the various social justice reckonings that took place especially in the summer of 2020. This context interacted with another context, considering R/S as identity, journey and vocation.

### *Systemic Considerations*

The coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic played a significant role in the narratives of the participants on multiple levels. For Sydney, there were personal and direct impacts. She outlined her timeline of engaging with different R/S traditions. She recounted, “I think the pandemic really, like, threw a wrench in like everyone’s timeline for everything. Because I was kind of exploring these things before the pandemic, but then when everything shut down, it didn’t feel like there was a point.” This delay coincided with her counselor training and resulted in her current iteration of R/S transition.

Sydney also spoke to larger societal impacts of things like COVID-19 and other issues that cause existential anxiety.

I feel like more and more of our clients are going to be coming to us with like, existential issues. Like I don’t know, climate change anxiety or like, war, disaster, like illness ... I feel like spirituality is kind of the only way or one of the only ways ... to find like, peace with a lot of these like, bigger, scarier like, existential anxieties.

In a similar way, Rachel discussed the impacts of COVID-19 and other important shifts that took place during that time. She said in reflecting on her own counselor training:

I mean, like COVID happened during that time. So that of course was [pausing] um, I. So I mean, like on the bigger scale, not necessarily COVID itself, but all of the other unveilings that happened at that time of race relations, and [#]MeToo, and clergy sexual

abuse, and the position a lot of the national Christian leaders were taking on these various topics. Was like, was very much one of those moments where I was like, I'm not sure I'm going to be sad about losing the church in this point. Like, this is what the church is showing to the world. I'm not sure I'm going to be amiss for leaving it. If I get booted out. I'm not sure that's a great loss.

She also described doing pastoral ministry during this time of great division. She reflected that, "the mask conversations in churches was just, kind of a proxy of that division." In her preaching role she shared, "I was having to, like, really navigate this with a group of people that I wasn't officially called to serve anymore. [laughing] And they were talking conspiracy theories. ... And I was like, I don't see the world that way. And I don't think that's helpful." One of the ways she had interacted with the systemic contexts had been through a shift in her role toward a focus on individual interactions with systems instead of a sole focus on church systems interacting with societal systems.

Jordan shared experiences of systemic context on the microlevel in their parish. Jordan described their parish as "politically conservative" saying "God forbid, like most of them associate trans people with pedophiles. So, like, for me, as someone who considers myself to be under that umbrella." They went on to share a story about a trans woman who attended the church for a time. Soon after Jordan facilitated the parish's sexual abuse prevention training an individual brought up his concerns. Jordan reported, "He's like, 'Yeah, we're like when that man who thought he was a woman went into the girl, the women's bathroom, I know that that made some of the parents really uncomfortable.'" Jordan was confronted with not only this very personal transphobia but also holding a leadership role along with desire to be an advocate. This

example represented the ongoing tension Jordan experienced holding their nonbinary identity, religious identity, and social justice advocacy identities.

A final systemic consideration was the impact of significant relationships. Previous findings had already outlined the importance of supervisors, professors, and many other outside relationships. One story that highlighted the impact of significant others on participant's narratives was Sydney's. She described her "really dear friend" converting to Islam and "wearing hijab and like, following the Islamic faith." In thinking about R/S transition in general, Sydney went on to say:

I do think about my friend who, you know, was born in Kansas to like a, you know, typical Midwestern family, and transition to being like a practicing Muslim. And, you know, I think about people, I often think about people who transitioned out of the faith, because maybe like, they were raised in the Christian church, but then realized they were gay and didn't feel safe there anymore. So I think often, it's kind of seen in that like, sad light, or that like negative light. But I'm glad I have like the example of my friend who like finding a faith really brought her peace.

Sydney's friend was inspirational to her to pursue her own spirituality. While Islam was not Sydney's path, the path of deeper meaning and positive experiences with religion was helpful in inspiring her R/S transition. Jordan shares about the impact of relationships in a different way. They discussed the difficulty of being "emotionally invested" in the church community. They described a situation in which a woman invited their family over for dinner, but Jordan declined by saying:

She invited me over and I'm just like, "nope." Like, "I'm not going to tell you, it's your husband. But nope." ... But I would love to have a deeper relationship with her. But I

don't necessarily want to spend more time with her husband, who shares homophobic and transphobic views very openly.

Jordan did share about the support of their partner. They said, "So there is support there, like active support in reconciling who I am, and who God is, and where the church is in this current season, and where our spiritualities are, and what our prayer life looks like."

Systemic factors could include those microsystems of friends and family to larger societal reckonings. All types of systems played a role in the narratives of R/S transition in this study.

One unexpected example of relational and systemic impacts was the notable change that occurred for many between the initial and follow-up interviews. Participants noted that changes in the R/S transition had occurred since we had last talked, and they wanted to share about these ongoing shifts. Jordan explicitly noted this in their member reflection interview:

Um, [pausing] and some things that have come up since I did this was that I've kind of had more reflection on where I'm currently at with my spirituality, which has been beneficial for me. So, do you mind if I share a little bit more?

Similarly, through the process of member-reflection, Piper noted making intentional changes to her visual artifact by saying "I feel like I have flowered since our talk, that's why my picture has a flower in it." Tori also noted how much things had changed since our initial interview. She stated:

So, I feel like when we spoke, I was still more in the ... "well, I no longer believe this."  
But I don't feel like we had transitioned out as much as we have now. So, I have basically told the leadership at church like, "I cannot help anymore."

These ongoing changes pointed to two possible factors, perhaps in combination. The first was that R/S transition for some was an ongoing process. Pargament (1997) described spiritual

conservation and spiritual seeking as two aspects of spirituality. There was some inquiry into the rise of spiritual seeking, as opposed to most often feeling a permanent spiritual dwelling (Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2017). Therefore, it could be the case that spiritual seeking was a typical and natural part of spiritual development and may also be more common in the current religious landscape. The second related to reflections on narrative inquiry as intervention. The changes in participant narratives could point to assertions that there was little meaningful difference between narrative inquiry and narrative intervention (Riessman & Speedy, 2012). The mere act of participating in co-constructing their narratives could have influenced the changes experienced (Josselson, 2012).

### ***Religious/Spiritual Identity as a Journey***

A final contextual factor was the overarching ideas around personal religion and spirituality in terms of an ongoing journey, part of vocation, and the nuances of religious/spiritual identity. Finding language was an important aspect of understanding these shifts for many participants. The language participants used to describe their R/S identity points to the need for deeper understanding of broad R/S categories. In reflecting on changes since the initial interview, Jordan described the changes they have experienced saying:

But I have come to what I think or hope is a more generous understanding of God as infinite, and the ways that God speaks into our lives are as unique as we are. ... And I am gradually pulling away, I think, from how other people tell me to think about God. And maybe that is, you know, if I look at it very rigidly becoming “anti-religion,” but I think it is more so that I am encountering God as an individual, which is what we’re all meant to do, while still worshiping in community.

In asking Piper if she was comfortable with simply being referred to as Christian she responded, “I mean, I read the Christian Bible. So that’s, you know, the best thing that fits [laughing] Even though, you know, yeah, there’s a lot of things attached to it. But you know? It is what it is. It’s part of it.” For Piper, she was willing to accept the entire Christian community because it best described her relationship to God. Rachel had a different take on the nuances within Christianity. She said:

I’m much more likely to tell people I’m Lutheran because especially in this neck of the woods, people are evangelical. And that is such a loud and vocal voice. Very loud here. Very minority, but still very loud. And so that’s what people think I’m part of, and I’m like, no. I’m not.

Language and labels were very important for both Piper and Rachel, and yet their approach to this language was very different. Melissa attempted to describe her R/S identity at the beginning of the program. She said, “At that point, I was I would still describe myself, I guess as more, no, it’s not agnostic. It’s hard to explain. I was in a place I guess, of, like, just appreciating like the great mystery of things, right.” She also said that, during her time in counselor training, she experienced an “awakening” and was “able to develop more of a language and an identity” in relation to her spirituality.

There were limitations in language that could not quite capture the kinds of internal changes that were occurring in R/S transition. Jordan said, “I needed time to figure out how to share my interior reality in a safe way that protected myself and my family, but then there was this assignment due in less than a week.” Being in a state of instability internally made it difficult to put language around beliefs that were very much in flux. Rachel also discussed the limitations of labels in the assumptions others make. She said, “Cuz I’m, I mean, my husband, we’ve been



married for 20-some years, and he still doesn't always know. Like, he makes assumptions about my faith. And I'm like, 'No, that that isn't where I'm coming from.'" The labels Tori used shifted over the course of her transition, first converting to the LDS faith, then becoming a "nuanced believer," and finally coming to a comfort with agnostic and at peace with mystery.

Finding a community of others that shared similar beliefs was helpful for Sydney and Melissa in this process of evolving spirituality. Melissa spoke about intentionally seeking spiritual integration resources for her counseling. She discussed:

And I had this summit going and that's what I was. Okay. I'm interfaith, interspiritual is how you would explain it. And these other people have it, like started to get the language there. But, but that was through a continuing education, like a counseling thing that, yeah, like they were doing.

A professional community was the place Melissa found deeper understanding. For Sydney, it was through finding a church community. She discussed finding a Unitarian congregation saying:

And pretty much since then I've started going every single week. I serve like, I volunteer to serve coffee a lot of Sunday mornings. I also joined a group through the church. It's called earth-based path. And it's for anybody who falls under sort of like a pagan, like nature-based spirituality. So we'll like, go into the woods and like, do like sing and chant and pray with like nature. ... So just like a place that I found, and like, immediately got really involved in and just feel like it has already, like, added so much to my life.

The nature of religion and spirituality as experienced in this study appeared to be a continuous process. Participants had previously experienced R/S transition and also seemed to anticipate further transitions may occur in the future. Piper talked about in discussing her

metaphor for R/S transition, which will be described more fully below, that the bulb of her spirituality was “pushing through. [laughing] I haven’t quite bloomed yet, but we’re pushing up.” And even in her follow-up interview, the bulb she described had bloomed in her visual artifact. Piper described, “I think it is more of like a whole spiritual development. And a transition is a seems more of like a conscious choice to turn into a certain direction on the spiritual path.” The journey of spiritual development continued for Piper. Similarly, Melissa spoke to the ongoing nature of spirituality. She said:

I still have more to explore with my relationship with God. And I still work through symptoms that I know now are related to complex PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. It’s just a whole other thing, and it’s a whole other level of healing to see it as like, like really, I was just a spiritual being, being impacted by this human experience.

Continuing the process of change resonated with what Tori shared as well. She said, “So there’s definitely some anxiety about that, but I just feel like it is a journey. And so just looking at where I was at at that point, it’s just further down that road.” She shared this in relation to her next phase in stepping away from the church.

In some narratives, a desire for rooted connection was present. While there was still an expectation that change would occur, they found solid footing in various religious/spiritual paths. For Rachel, she discussed her vocation as a point of grounding by saying:

Like one of our, one of the big parts of the Lutheran tradition is the idea of vocation. [pausing, becoming tearful] I’m getting weepy again, I’m sorry. But that our identity is given to us as Christians when we’re born, or we were baptized. And that is our identity. And that whatever we do in this world is our calling to live out that identity.

She also described her overall journey as a process of “trying to faithfully keep moving forward” and that included a variety of job titles and training, but all related back to her understanding of her vocational call.

Piper also described her desire for rootedness in her understanding of reconnecting her heart and root chakras through returning to Christianity. She said in terms of her R/S transition:

I wanted to understand my roots more, so that I could help him [her son] to grow in this life as well. And because if you don't understand your family, and you know how your family thinks, you're not gonna be able to help your kids grow either from the things that your family [laughing] has done, or whatever.

A desire for roots as it connects with becoming a parent and starting one's own family was also present in Sydney's narrative. She shared,

So then I was thinking about how, like, something that's really important to me right now, or something that's really always been important to me is like roots. And I'm really close with like, like, my family. ... And like, um, so when I think about, like, a faith community of any kind, or like spirituality in general, that, to me, it feels like another source that's just like family, like another place of like, stability and groundedness. And I feel like right now, as I'm, like, 26, and like, just starting out in a lot of places in life, I'm looking to, like, form a solid foundation for the rest of my life to grow off of. And I think having this like spiritual, like community, um, is part of that because like, I don't know, like, one day, I'd love to, like, get married at my church. And like, I'd love to, like, bring my like future children to that church. And so I feel like right now, it's like me growing those like roots.

The ideas of religious/spiritual identity changing over the course of time, as a part of an ongoing journey, and as an element of overall groundedness served as overarching factors to the narratives shared in this study. The next section explores another aspect of the findings through the visual artifacts shared by the participants.

### **Visual Artifact**

The use of visual artifacts was consistent with the tenets of narrative inquiry. Visual artifacts has been part of language and communication as they convey experience (N. Brown & Collins, 2021). The visual artifacts in this study resulted from conversation around a metaphor that represents the participants' religious/spiritual transitions. These artifacts were considered on their own as visual representations of the participants' R/S transition then were connected to the specific parts of the interview relating to the metaphor. Then all the visual artifacts were considered as a holistic unit, correlating with holistic-content analysis. And finally, the meta categories and major themes from the interview data were weaved together with the essential elements of the visual artifacts to explore their connections together.

### **Melissa**

Melissa's visual artifact was a photo of an everyday object, her personal book stamp (see Figure 1). It was her personal library stamp that she puts in all her books. As such, it was a common object, one that Melissa would see regularly and be a reminder of the place of the bee in her journey. Artistically, it was simple with sharp contrasts in line and background. It was only one color, and there was some detail in the bee, but overall, it was a simple design. It should be noted that this image was cropped as the original disclosed Melissa's real name. In the original design there was symmetry and containment of the bee within the words. The art felt utilitarian in nature, serving a purpose while also being beautiful and meaningful.

**Figure 1***Melissa's Visual Artifact*

The nature of a stamp led to the feeling that Melissa's bee image may remain the same over time, as it was meaningful in the past and was still meaningful in the present. There may be less movement or flow in this image than others. However, the stamp represented the bee as a pollinator, collecting information from different sources, noted in every book and bringing it back together for the collective good. Interestingly, a stamp felt like it indicated more finality or being set in stone. This starkly contrasted with Melissa's discussion of ongoing spiritual exploration and curiosity.

Considering the textual data, the visual artifact took on added dimensions of meaning. Knowing this object was something Melissa used and saw regularly in her life connected with Melissa's overall integration of spirituality into all aspects of her life, including counseling. The bee was described as Melissa's totem animal. It represented many aspects of how she viewed herself as a person and also a spiritual being. She drew from many different sources, like the bee as a pollinator. She was also drawn to the alchemy of honey-making, just as she saw alchemy and mystery in spirituality. She also saw the bee as a connection to nature as well as the planet

and higher forces. The fact that it was used as her library stamp indicated that she referenced it regularly and it was infused into her daily life.

## Piper

Piper created her object using an artificial intelligence art generator, using prompts she provided. The largest focal point was the tree and roots in the center of the picture (see Figure 2). It took up most of the space and had several details in different colors and types of roots. The yellow flower did stand out in contrast to the other colors in the art. In the background were several trees, although they were dark and had no leaves. It appeared to be twilight or evening. While the flower did stand out, the eye seemed to be drawn toward the roots, especially the many different styles and colors represented in the image.

## Figure 2

### *Piper's Visual Artifact*



Piper outlined several elements of her artwork in both her initial and member-reflection interviews. It was noteworthy that, at the initial interview, she described herself as a seedling,

just pushing through the soil. But at the time of the follow-up, she shared feeling like she had flowered since then and had experienced ongoing growth and development. The image depicted a flower, instead of seedling as she described at the initial interview.

While the flower and bulb were the primary characteristics of the metaphor in the initial interview, the image depicted a large tree, drawing the eye toward it. Piper described in follow-up that “since the roots are deeper it is aware of a mighty tree that helps protect it. The tree is representative of the support received from God, as well as the blessings I have received.” This seemed to align with Piper’s overall belief in God as a spiritual protector.

Piper very clearly defined what each element was in her photo in connection to her metaphor in the initial and follow-up interviews. The parenthetical additions were made by Piper in writing in the follow-up interview process.

There was a bulb (The bulb was the seed of me asking God into my heart) planted in the ground (Ground is representative of my heart). And that bulb grew into a flower (My own spiritual development peak). And then Winter came (The Holy Spirit guiding me back towards The Creator) and destroyed the flower. And you know, the flower was in the dark for a while (I wasn’t on any particular path and in the dark Exploring all kinds of religions all at once). But it (Spiritual development) was still in the bulb (God was still in my heart working through me and within me.). And then when spring (New season represented by changes in my life ultimately leading me to seek a connection to the only place I felt a spiritual connection throughout my life.) came again, the bulb came back up. And then the flower knew that when the snow comes (We all have different seasons of life and developmental stages), it will go in the dark. [Yeah, right so ...] and that it will come back up again (And when it comes back, this time, since the roots are deeper it is

aware of a mighty tree that helps protect it. The tree is representative of the support received from God, as well as the blessings I have received.).

Even in her systematic review of her photo, she spent most of her time commenting on the bulb and flower. But the tree, representing God, was the focal point of the image. It should be noted that the parenthetical additions were Piper's from member reflection. This did seem to correlate with other elements of Piper's narrative; however, in seeing God as a protective figure, guarding against evil forces in her life. From that perspective, the proportions seemed to fit. She did discuss the root and heart chakra throughout the interview, and this image certainly captured the roots aspect of that discussion.

### **Rachel**

Rachel did not submit a visual artifact or describe a metaphor describing her religious/spiritual transition.

### **Jordan**

Jordan's visual artifact correlated with their metaphor description in the initial interview. The focus of the image is the single large tree at the center of the frame (see Figure 3). The tree was large with expansive roots. There were other green trees in the background, but the focus was on the green branches. No other trunks or roots could be seen. The other predominant feature of the image was the light pouring through the canopy of background trees. The light brought contrast to the heavy, grounded trunk. The two juxtaposing forces complemented one another in the whole image they create.



**Figure 3***Jordan's Visual Artifact*

This photo connected with Jordan's metaphor in the initial interview, and they also expanded upon its meaning in the member reflection interview. Jordan's metaphor was of a tree, growing and changing with the seasons but remaining rooted in what is true. The leaves and even the fruit of this tree may change, but the essence remained the same. Jordan shared about their family connection to trees and forests. They discussed a close relationship with their grandmother and her land. During this time together, they felt connected to other people and "the totality of life." It was a time in which they felt grounded and connected, especially considering the root systems of powerful trees.

Jordan discussed their appreciation for the light in the photo they chose. They discussed the pouring out of light over all of creation indiscriminately. Light created the conditions for growth and was not dispersed based on perceived worth. They connected this with "divinity shining forth" in those they love and in experiences of truth and beauty.

## Sydney

This personal photo depicts a plant Sydney is propagating (see Figure 4). The focus of the photo is on a clear mason jar of water with the young plant immersed in it. You can see the roots beginning to grow from the bottom of the plant in the water, awaiting being ready to be potted on its own. In the background are personal books, including “My Grandmother’s Hands,” “More than a body,” and “The Art of Happiness.” While not the focus of the image, they do relate to Sydney’s own personal and counselor growth. The jar with bright green shoots sits on a dark wooden desk or counter. The photo is a close-up; not even the top of the shoots are visible in the photo, but the roots are fully depicted.

**Figure 4**

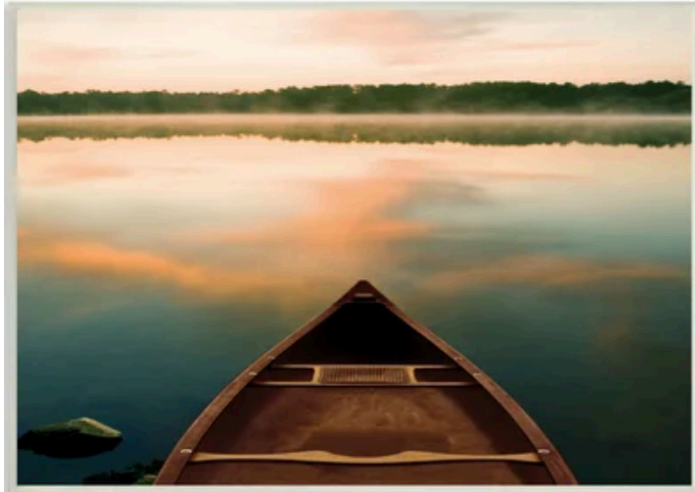
*Sydney’s Visual Artifact*



Sydney discussed in her original metaphor a sunflower and seed. She described the seeds of her spirituality always being present. The soil was comprised of values like kindness, compassion, taking care of the earth, and a belief in something greater than humans. Her seed laid dormant for a while, until she intentionally started to nourish it. She watered the seed with elements from different religious and spiritual traditions and experienced safety in the environment to bloom and grow now. The roots of the seedling were family and spiritual community. She was intentionally focusing on growing these roots in her early adulthood in preparation for the next stages of her life. She was focusing on stability and groundedness during this season. As she grew these new roots, she felt she was in a transition phase of not being planted in the earth, yet, but in process of becoming its own plant.

### **Tori**

Tori did not share a metaphor in the initial interview, asking for more time to think about it. Through the follow-up process she crafted and shared his metaphor of a canoe on still water. The image was taken from a first-person perspective, with the implication of a person behind the lens as it were. The image captured glass-like water of a lake, with vision out to the shoreline and sky. It appeared to be captured at twilight as orange clouds were reflected off the surface of the water. The canoe itself was simple but felt sturdy as it took up of foreground of the photo. There was no human in the visual artifact, but it was the only one of the collection that hinted at a pilot of the canoe (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5***Tori's Visual Artifact*

The metaphor that Tori described in her member-reflection was a powerful reframe on a metaphor from her LDS tradition. She shared about national LDS leadership speaking at General Conference and offering the metaphor of a boat. In this version, the crux was to stay on the boat, that is the church:

There's this whole, you know, "yes, the church is imperfect, yes, people are going to offend you, yes, people are going, you know, they're the churches, the gospel is perfect, but the people are not," and, you know, and all of this. And so this metaphor of, well, if you're just looking at the problems with a boat, and you choose to get out of the boat, you're now leaving everything that was good about the boat- the safety of the boat, everybody, the community of the boat, and the boat is the one big ship going back to God, right, and everybody else is lost. You get out of the boat and you're lost at sea, or you're drowning, you're in the, the waves of the world, the big scary world, right? And how you will never get back to God that way.

However, a friend offered a different interpretation saying she saw no drowning people and one big boat. Instead, the friend saw “lots of different ships that are going.” For this season of her journey, Tori aimed to “block out all the ships.” Instead, she is focused on:

What it looks like first-person being in a canoe or kayak or whatever, and being alone on still waters, and the peace in blocking everything else out and being calm and tranquil about being on my own journey. And being okay with that and not being afraid of it.

Tori’s reclamation of a previously fear-based metaphor now brought peace and serenity to Tori on her spiritual journey.

### **Common Elements Across Artifacts**

Each individual visual artifact was representative of a very personal journey in each participant’s life. The individuality of each image was highlighted through their distinct narratives above. There were some common elements shared by all or most of the visual artifacts when considered as a group. From a purely visual perspective, the colors of each visual artifact had an impact on the art itself. Jordan’s tree photo starkly contrasted light and the sturdy tree, while Piper’s tree depicted differently colored roots as central to the image. Sydney’s green seedling contrasted with the colorful books in the background. Color impacted all of these artifacts in different ways but was a powerful element throughout.

All the artifacts were based in nature. There were no people in any of the visual artifacts. The focus and perspective of each artifact differed, but all drew meaning from nature in connection with their spirituality. In connection with nature, many of the artifacts also included a natural change element of things like growth, transformation, and movement. The tree images from Piper and Jordan depicted natural changes over the course of seasons. Similarly, the propagated seedling from Sydney’s image spoke to growth from seed to plant. Tori’s canoe

photo represented movement across the water, and even the bee stamp from Melissa was steeped in change themes around pollination and making honey. A wooden element also appeared in most of the artifacts, except Melissa's bee stamp. The others included trees, but also a table and a canoe. The sturdiness of wooden elements was often contrasted with other images in the visual artifacts. These common elements across all the visual artifacts led to a holistic analysis of them as a group. Having already considered the meta categories derived from participant interviews, the final step was to consider both holistic elements- visual and textual- together.

### **Weaving Together Artifacts and Themes**

As visuo-textual analysis suggested, the visual artifacts and textual elements were both considered individually, within participants, and across participants (N. Brown & Collins, 2021). This method hoped to weave together meaning and narrative, valuing both kinds of data as storytelling elements (Bach, 2007). Using a metaphor and a visual representation of that metaphor aimed to capture some of the ineffable qualities that often arose in the exploration of spirituality. Recognizing the language-based delivery of this study, the purpose of including a visual artifact intended to not be simply an afterthought. Instead, the visual artifact was an integral part of the storytelling process, simply using different means. Through careful attention to the visual artifacts as art, as metaphor, and as story, I hoped they could be meaningfully woven into the textual meta categories.

The ongoing process of change was present in both the textual and visual data. Even as a visual representation was a snapshot of one place in time, the artifacts contained themes of ongoing process in them. This related to the themes in the textual data as well. The study was based on change, and so this may be no surprise as a unifying finding. However, the distinction in this woven together finding was the concept that change continued. Participants were at

different points in their R/S transition process, and yet an anticipation of continued changes was present. Anticipating ongoing changes as a part of the life of religion/spirituality became apparent in visual and textual narratives.

By extension, the process of change was also iterative and repeating. Just as a tree repeatedly changes over the course of seasons, so does the experience of R/S transition occur. All participants endorsed experiencing prior R/S transitions in addition to their current experience. There was also a common sentiment that these kinds of changes would occur over the course of their lifetimes as an expected part of their R/S journeys.

A final consideration of the overarching data was that nature was a powerful spiritual conduit. The natural world offered apt representations of the spiritual. Spiritual connections with nature were found throughout history and across religious traditions. Even as individual participant narratives were different, nature offered connections across stories. Bees, trees, roots, water, and sunlight all offered meaningful metaphors for spirituality and even more spiritual changes. The natural world offered unmediated connection to the Divine across many traditions. The participants identified with different traditions and yet found expression of their spiritual experiences through elements of nature. Tying back to the first point, these natural connections were founded in development, progress, and change over time.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the textual and visual findings of this study. While the individual narratives varied widely, there were several unifying components that served to create of holistic narrative of religious/spiritual transition in these counseling student participants. Major themes outlined the kinds of experiences counselors-in-training had while undergoing R/S transition. These included things like the foundational elements from the beginnings of their narratives, the

disorienting experiences of during R/S transition, and identifying outcomes on several facets of life including professional, personal and spiritual impacts. This chapter sought to outline both the unifying narrative factors as well as the individual uniquenesses of each individual story. The following chapter seeks to interpret and apply the findings to the counseling field. In addition, the chapter explores limitations and possible future research.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This chapter seeks to bring together what was described in the findings into applications for counselor educators and counseling programs. This section revisits the purpose of this study and considers limitations of this research. Then a discussion of the findings along with interpretations is provided, followed by exploring implications for counselor training and the larger field of counseling. This discussion and implications are informed by relevant literature, creating connections with information in Chapter II. The chapter concludes with possibilities for future research in this area.

#### **Discussion**

This discussion was informed by the purpose and research question that have guided this study throughout the process. As this sets the stage for the nature of the discussion, the original purpose statement and research question are included here. Following this, a discussion of the meta categories and major themes will include integration of relevant literature and

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of counselors-in-training (CITs) who had experienced religious/spiritual (R/S) transitions. The study sought to understand the narrative arc of the process of R/S transition, including how it related to their personal experiences, overall training experiences, and their counselor identity development. The ways in which CITs understood their R/S transition was vital to the purpose of this research along with the specific nuances of being a counseling student. The study was interested in the stories of

transition, including precipitants for change, the experience of transition, how they conceptualized the change at the time and retrospectively, and the stories of the impacts of R/S transition. The research was interested in several components of the experience including, familial, social, and even considering larger historical contexts relating to power, privilege and oppression. These elements all comprised the narratives of CITs who have experience R/S transition.

### **Research Question**

- Q1     What are the stories of counselors-in-training who have experienced religious/spiritual transition, in relation to their personal experience, counselor training, and professional identity development?

### **Beginning**

Setting the foundation of narrative experiences is necessary as participants embarked on their current religious/spiritual transition. Narrative inquiry sees experience through the lens of temporal, social, and place dimensions (Clandinin, 2016). The Beginning meta category addressed these elements for the beginnings of both R/S transition and counselor training. Self-reflection forms a bedrock of counselor training. This focus sought to develop the person of the counselor, and often asks CITs to return to their own beginnings (Coll et al., 2013). These narratives were no different, as the foundations of their R/S experiences were all formed in some ways in childhood and in particular within their families of origin.

Understanding participant beliefs form the beginning aligned with many aspects of spiritual development models. For example, alignment with religious authority is seen in sentiments about being all-in with religion. Melissa, Tori, and Jordan all spoke to this mentality of dedication to their religion. Jordan said in their conversion to Roman Catholicism earlier in life, “I’m just gonna go all-in over here. And so I started getting super involved in religion and

listening to podcasts constantly and going to daily masses, and I even just discerned religious life for 5 years.” For Melissa this sense of being dedicated to her religion manifested at a younger age. She said, “I mean by the, by the time I was like, in second grade, I could, I could nail like a Jeopardy category on the Bible, right?” And Tori discussed her transition into the LDS faith, and she said, “I was very much orthodox, all-in, church was very central to everything I did, how I live decisions I made. Very much trying to do the right thing all the time, and just very orthodox.” These sentiments aligned generally with Fowler’s faith development stage three, synthetic-conventional faith. Conformity to the community was essential in this stage as individuals sought to live out their faith claims. Alignment with orthodoxy and authority marked the beginning beliefs for many participant narratives.

As participants described their motivations for becoming a counselor, there were similarities between counselor development models like Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003). The lay helper stage was present in some participant narratives. Their experiences spoke to their natural desire to help and a desire to provide advice to relieve immediate suffering. Tori expressed her “hubris” as she recounted herself at the beginning of the program. She said:

I would say, like, the beginning, I think, I think I probably saw myself like, I think I viewed counseling as I am going to learn how to give people the answers, right? Like, I’m going to learn all the wisdom. [laughing] And I’m going to be able to give the best advice, and I’m going to be able to show people the path towards better mental health. For Tori this aligned with the lay helper stage outlined above and also the concrete confidence seen in spiritual development, prior to a crisis of faith.

Piper discussed her motivations for becoming a counselor. “I kind of wanted to, because I’ve always just wanted to help people, when it really comes down to it. I just love helping and

nurturing people.” Choosing the career based on natural helping patterns is common in the lay helper stage of development. However, others, like Rachel, came to counseling already having a profession. Her motivations differed as she said, “I already had a way to make a living in the world. I just wanted to do it differently. And this was the next step to be able to do it during the daylight hours instead of on call.” For her the decision was both pragmatic and the next faithful step in her vocational journey. This appeared to differ from major developmental models. Although she was a novice as a counselor, she was a professional in other spheres. This simultaneous learner and expert role presented a challenge in Rachel’s training experience. She went on to say:

I was kind of like kind of a little snobbish about it too, I think at the time. Going, “I know these things, and you don’t know what I’m talking about.” And it’s partially true and partially not. So, I missed people who were very into their faith and missed those opportunities.

The motivations for Rachel to pursue counseling differed from others and her experience in this space of development also seemed to differ. Exploring the impact of calling on counselor motivations seems to be a more appropriate fit for her (S. F. Hall et al., 2014). These beginning foundations led to the experience of disorientation and instability found in During.

## **During**

During religious/spiritual transition was a broad category that encompassed a variety of experiences. Given the dearth of research in this specific area, several component parts of the experience were explored. Spiritual struggle was an important area of research that aligned with the findings of this study, although the current study went beyond only spiritual struggle as a component of During R/S transition. Faith development models were also relevant in this meta

category along with counselor development. Finally, elements of successful programs were explored.

### ***Catalysts for Religious/Spiritual Transition***

Previous research regarding catalysts for religious/spiritual transition has focused on concepts like religious switching or conversion. Within these concepts, demographic factors have been the focus of change. Factors like higher levels of education, political affiliation or place of residence now have had little impact on disaffiliation (Fisher, 2017). One demographic factor that did seem to have an impact was marriage to a person of a different religion and moving away from family of origin (Fisher, 2017). Interpersonal relationships may serve as a catalyst for some types of R/S changes. The current findings did not speak to any of these particular catalysts. Rachel, in fact, discussed her marriage to an agnostic person, and while she had undergone several iterations of R/S transition, her relationship did not seem to have significant impact of catalyzing this change. Sydney similarly did discuss her move away from her family of origin, but did not recount this as a catalyst for exploration and later R/S transition.

Research has also explored the possibility of religious trauma catalyzing religious/spiritual transition (Stone, 2013). The pervasive impact of a betrayal trauma like religious trauma can have far-reaching impacts on interpersonal relationships and religious beliefs. No participants used the language of having personally experienced religious trauma. Certainly, some of the participants' experiences aligned with what was known about religious trauma; however, as they did not self-identify with this label, it was difficult to ascribe religious trauma as a catalyst.

Finally, from the perspective of quantum change, precipitants for change include a "rock bottom" experience, a sense of aimless wandering, or lacking purpose (Miller & C'de Baca,

2001). Piper did endorse some of these concepts in her story, especially relating to her mental health crisis prior to deciding to become a counselor. She said about this experience:

And all I remember was like screaming in the darkness. And there was a lot of like religious delusions going on in that as I was, like, coming down from all of that. ... And that's when I started getting back into the Bible.

Melissa also endorsed some components of a crisis point over the course of her journey.

Although there was not one “rock bottom” or one transformation point within her narrative. She described her experiences with complex trauma in childhood as well as intimate partner violence in her relationship. Through several experiences including beekeeping and beginning to understand diving messages in dreams, she became more open to her current understanding of spirituality. Melissa did say that, “I definitely would describe myself as a person who’s experienced what they would call a dark night of the soul, right? Like the death of death of the ego, and then come out on the other side of that.” The research on precipitants for R/S changes appeared to have some alignment with this idea around a crisis point impacting change.

While not described as “rock bottom,” there were several inflection points in which simmering conflicts between religious and personal beliefs boiled over into making change. This conflict may be better understood through the lens of spiritual struggle. Spiritual struggles noted in this study included divine, demonic, interpersonal, doubt, moral and ultimate meaning concerns, all six identified domains (Exline, Pargament, et al., 2014). Spiritual struggles are painful, pervasive and pivotal moments for change. All of these components also seemed a part of the current narratives. For example, Tori noted feeling her deconstruction was pervasive. She saw her counseling program as requiring her to compartmentalize, and if not, she said, “I probably would have just been around the clock obsessed with that one aspect of my life.” All

participants noted aspects of distress and disorientation with their R/S transition, aligning with painful experiences in spiritual struggle.

In relation to the kinds of spiritual struggles present, Piper described experiences related to demonic spiritual struggles in an account of working with a client. She said, “A parent had said that he had summoned Lilith. And I felt like uh as the session went up, and I kind of felt like this burning on my one foot.” She described using prayer to protect her and make the sensation go away. Another example of spiritual struggle related to divine spiritual struggles. Melissa said, “my relationship with God started to change because of that trauma.” Melissa has deconstructed her paternalistic view of God and has continued to express a desire to explore her relationship with God. These were only a few examples of the kinds of spiritual struggles described by Exline, Pargament, et al (2014). It seemed apparent that spiritual struggles were an important component of R/S transition in this study.

A novel finding of this research was the theme that clients could serve as catalyst of religious/spiritual transition. While it was well known that direct work with clients was responsible for exponential growth in counseling, this extension to growth and change in other areas, specifically R/S transition, has not been explored, to my knowledge. The structure of an apprenticeship model of internship was built on the idea that counseling practice facilitated growth. It appeared there was also a connection with practicing counseling and addressing R/S transition concerns.

Sydney stated, “I do feel like, in grad school, like in counseling classes, we talk about spirituality being part of a client’s journey. That was a huge motivator for me to be like, ‘What is my spirituality?’” Even before directly engaging in work with clients, Sydney was motivated to explore this part of herself. Jordan similarly said, “So this transition is partially for me. And it’s

partially for my kids. ... But also, it's for my clients." Melissa discussed this concept in sharing about her work with clients. She said:

I work with a lot of eating disorders at my other site. And I, in just noticing the disconnect from the body, the mind over matter kind of things, a lot of times that comes with religious trauma. And so that was a catalyst for me to say, Okay, I need to learn more about embodiment, right. I need to figure out how I'm going to support like everyone with healing with this, right? Yeah. So yeah, the like, the woundings that I hear are, are healing opportunities.

In Melissa's interspiritual understanding, the wounding was a place where healing could begin. She saw herself like the bee, as gathering information from multiple places to enhance the client's healing.

Sydney offered a specific client experience, recounting a client from her first practicum experience. She shared, they were "really strong in their faith." She went on to recall how she interacted with them saying:

I think a past version of myself, or even myself when I started grad school, I would have been hesitant to talk to this client about God or about how their faith impacts like the things that they were struggling with. But I wasn't, I didn't hesitate with this client. Like I just jumped in, I brought up God.

She attributed this comfort to addressing her own spirituality while in the program. This personal shift had direct professional implications. She said:

As a counselor, like, I don't want there to be topics that I'm like, afraid of. ... Um, so I think that definitely, it definitely makes me like a more well-rounded counselor. And just,



like, more empathetic in that area, like I like, like I said, like, now I can understand more why faith is such an important part of who our clients are.

The mutual impact of the counseling relationship was well studied and understood. For example, relational depth spoke to the mutuality in counseling relationships, along with postmodern theories like relational cultural theory (Jordan, 2018; Ray et al., 2019). These findings extended the mutual impact to the specific impacts on CITs' religious/spiritual transitions. The connection between undergoing counselor training and experiencing R/S transition appeared robust considering these findings.

### ***Kinds of Changes During Counselor Program***

The kinds of changes experienced by participants reflected in many ways aspects of spiritual development models. Fowler's (1981) faith development model importantly outlined a stage of dissonance and distress with their faith. Individuative-Reflective faith is characterized by conflict along several different domains (Fowler, 1981). The nature of these conflicts was outlined above, but the impact of these conflicts on faith development was explored here.

Sydney described confronting these kinds of conflicts during her R/S transition during counselor training. She said:

I think for everyone, starting grad school changes pretty much everything. At least for me, like I, my life changed, I started learning things about myself. And I think especially grad school for counseling, like, the whole degree is you self-reflecting. [Laughing] Like, and you're just challenged in ways that are like, you know, they push you to examine, like, all of the aspects of who you are.

The challenge for Sydney was often rooted in her counseling education among other things.

Melissa also described confronting conflict as she described having experienced "a dark night of

the soul” as “the death of death of the ego, and then come out on the other side of that.” An important factor in Melissa’s spiritual and counseling philosophy was a belief in the wound being a place of healing. For Melissa, experiencing the conflict led her to journey with others going through their own unique journeys.

Rachel’s experience of change was in many ways more subtle. While she remained a Lutheran throughout her relationship to the church and even to God shifted during her counselor training and subsequent installing in her current role. These kinds of changes appeared to align more with a cladogenic model of development. A cladogenic model refers to an evolutionary biology concept which indicates that change takes places along several parallel pathways at the same time (Dale, 2011). Not only did development occur along counselor and spiritual development, but also appeared to occur along multiple lines within those categories.

Tori, for example, shared about her complicated path of both emerging as a feminist while continuing to volunteer in children’s ministry in her church. She said about others, “they’re like, but it’s a beautiful teaching that families can be together forever. It’s very difficult for them to see the shadow side.” Even as Tori held this belief internally, she was still volunteering in the children’s ministry until the time of the follow up interview. Changes take place in multiple steps and also along multiple developmental lines. Jordan’s narrative also spoke to this complex development. They are continuously navigating the tension of an ethic of transparency, the need for safety and support, and an increasingly generous view of God. Jordan recognized these multiple paths by saying:

Maybe some of it was, threads of it, we’re always there. Maybe the roots of it were always present. But I have come to what I think, or hope is a more generous

understanding of God as infinite, and the ways that God speaks into our lives are as unique as we are.

They went on to say, “withholding a portion of myself in community is challenging to do. It’s something that doesn’t necessarily come naturally to me.” Jordan continued to discern the next right steps in their unique journey, and this aligned with the transpersonal developmental model of spirituality (Friedman et al., 2010).

Participants described counselor training addressing religious/spiritual concerns as they related to the potential for values conflicts. This is certainly an important element of training for counselors, and several legal issues attest to this need (Francis & Dugger, 2014). Several important legal cases arose surrounding mainly counselors with values conflicts regarding LGBTQIA+ clients. Generally, counselors with these kinds of conflicts identified a struggle to counsel LGBTQIA+ clients in an affirming way. Perhaps due to this history, Sydney reflected the impacts on her own counselor training, saying, “I feel like such a big deal was made out of, don’t let your, like biases based on your religion impact your client. Like, such a big emphasis was made on that.” Ethics classes were common places participants described R/S values being integrated into class. However, this singular coverage from a negative perspective spoke loudly.

Sydney shared her frustrations with conversations solely focused on values imposition. She said, “I feel like there’s a way to get both messages across that, like, yeah, don’t let your beliefs impact the way you treat your clients. And it’s okay to like, have strong beliefs.” It appeared that participants largely heard the message that imposing beliefs were unethical, and they also wanted the conversation to continue to deeper and more nuanced reflections on R/S in counseling.

### *Characteristics Needed and Counselor Development*

Many of the characteristics that participants needed during religious/spiritual transition have overlaps with counselor training. Change often occurred as a result of confronting existing models when they no longer aligned with present needs. Addressing this mismatch could be disorienting and could result in change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). In counselor training more specifically, challenges to existing frames of reference could result in disorientation that would ultimately serve as a catalyst for transformation (Nogueiras et al., 2019).

Participants shared things like curiosity and exploration were important for their spiritual journeys. In addition, for many, an ability to hold complexity also increased as they worked through a R/S transition. Cognitive complexity and tolerance for ambiguity were both previously explored as elements of counselor development. Tori described her shifts from dichotomous thinking to more nuanced and dialectical thinking (Hanna et al., 1996). She described her experience with certainty.

My childhood was a lot of not knowing and a lot of instability. And so I clung on to [religion] for stability, and for all the answers, right. They have all the answers for everything. And I think for me, it's just then a process of realizing that nobody really knows the answers to the questions that religion tries to answer. And becoming okay with that. I was telling my friend the other day, I feel like I've kind of come full circle. It's like, I'm back to being like, "well, I don't know." But, and there's a lot of, I guess, insecurity in that, but I don't feel, I don't feel threatened by it like I did as a younger person. Like, I don't need that certainty anymore.

She was able to hold uncertainty with less distress than at earlier points in time. Tori recognized a variety of reasons for this former need and saw changes as part of her ongoing growth.

Recognizing ambiguity in complex problems is a common element of spiritual development models (Fowler, 1981) and adult development (Kegan, 1982; Perry, 1970). The common thread among several developmental models also appeared in the narratives of participants. Melissa, for example, spoke to following her curiosity to pursue spiritual intuitions with academic rigor. Tori spoke to appreciating the mystery of her spirituality and contentment to sit with that mystery. Her canoe metaphor also resonates with this idea. Jordan shared their experiences of navigating their own complex tensions around multiple issues, especially relating to their own gender and sexual identity disclosures across all spaces. Jordan said of working with clients:

And there are existential questions that are raised within counseling that I think I'm more comfortable confronting, because I grapple with them. And I don't run away from the loneliness, the fear, the discomfort, the suffering, or tensions. And I don't say "Hurry up and pick one side already." You know, I can hold all of that without feeling like we need to resolve it in one session.

Jordan recognized the importance of being able to sit with tension while working with clients. Their personal experiences along with their religious beliefs have helped to prepare them for tolerating and even valuing this kind of ambiguity inherent to the complex work of counseling (Granello, 2000).

### ***Counseling Program Experiences***

Counseling Program Experiences included both helpful and unhelpful responses from programs themselves. Counseling programs have the potential to be transformational, including along R/S dimensions. Tori said, "I have told both of those professors that they have changed my life. Like, this program has been life changing for me." Sydney also said about graduate school

for counseling that it “changes pretty much everything ... my life changed, I started learning things about myself.” Several participants voiced many elements of transformative learning theory (TLT; Mezirow, 1991).

Within narrative analysis, it was important to include multiple voices from the holistic narrative, especially when those voices diverged. As such, it was important to note that, while Piper experienced spiritual transformation during her time in counselor training, she saw outside forces as the primary catalyst and conduit for that change. She said, “I really just want to emphasize that it was really compounded things that were causing this transition.” While those compounded factors included elements of her counselor training, they were primarily outside relationships and experiences.

It seemed that counselor training had the potential to be transformational, even when in practices it was not. From a TLT perspective, deep learning which lead to transformation, began with a disorienting dilemma. This dilemma then caused learners to deconstruct their meaning schemas and reconstruct a new more flexible and responsive meaning schema (Mezirow, 1994). Disorienting dilemmas took many forms. For Jordan, one such dilemma included the ethics assignment that directly put their values of inclusion in conflict with their values of transparency. Rachel also discussed an ethics paper, saying:

They told us to interview a seasoned therapist and ask them for an ethical dilemma they came across. And she gave me one that did bridge, the spiritual realm and the psychological realm. And so even just for my class project, I got this really interesting, useful story to kind of help chew on these various dynamics.

For Rachel, it was a helpful story that inspired critical self-reflection, but also brought this interaction to classmates as well.

Critical self-reflection, an element of TLT appeared present in the narratives. The importance of self-reflection was congruent with the philosophy of counseling and was a frequent counseling program task. What appeared to be missing for most participants was critical discourse. Critical discourse refers to dialogue with others about their learning and reflections. The transformational potential of a back-and-forth engagement with both the material and one another is essential for deep learning (Mezirow, 1990). The shortcomings in critical dialogue noted by participants primarily revolved around a lack of conversation. For some, when conversations did occur, they presented a stigmatized view of religion and spirituality. All participants referenced some kind of stigma, microaggression, or avoidance of R/S considerations in their programs at some point. This appeared to be a missing piece within the narratives of these participants.

### **After**

While there may not truly be an After to religious/spiritual transitions, the time-bound nature of this project focused on experiences during graduate counselor training. Both R/S transitions and counselor growth have continued to occur after this boundary. For the focus of this discussion, participant voices of their outcomes were combined with the literature relating to counselor development. As little literature related to the outcomes of R/S generally, the focus of the population of interest was counselors-in-training. Therefore, inferences will be drawn from the outcomes participants experienced and what is known about counselor training.

### ***Outcomes of Religious/Spiritual Transition***

The desired outcome of counselor training was to prepare counselors for the complex work of facilitating “mental health, wellness, education, and career goals,” as outlined by the American Counseling Association consensus definition of counseling (Kaplan & Gladding,

2011). These outcomes were assessed by multiple measures including dispositional, knowledge and skills. Outcomes of R/S transition has differed from counselor preparation, and yet there appeared to be some overlaps just as outlined above in Characteristics Needed During R/S Transition.

Participants voiced feeling liberated, more authentic, healed, and more expansive, among many other things. Personal agency and empowerment have overlapped with counselor preparation. In one exchange, I offered the language of having to “swallow it whole,” referring to the information and perspectives offered by professors in school. Melissa reacted strongly saying, “No, I don’t like that language, ... Yeah I don’t have to ingest it if I don’t want to.” This settled peace with herself and agency to take or leave the damaging perspectives of her program seemed to result from her R/S transition. As she learned to trust the dreams and messages she received, an overall trust in herself and the counselor process grew.

Increasing authenticity was another important outcome of R/S transition. Piper shared, “I feel more connected to myself, my roots/ family, God and feel like I’m practicing more authentic love for everyone and myself.” Similarly, Sydney shared about the changes she experienced relating to authenticity. She recounted feeling previously like her belief in God is something that she should avoid. However now, Sydney said:

Yeah, I believe in God. And I believe in like, these things, and I believe them in like, a really inclusive way. And, and it makes me feel like my personal identity and my counselor identity are really congruent. Because like, as a counselor, I am accepting of people of all faiths, and my faith is accepting of people of all faiths. I don’t know. Like, it just feels like I can be like, really transparent with my, with my clients.



Her personal authenticity has freed Sydney to be transparent with her clients in ways that were helpful to them as well.

This impact on clients was an important outcome to consider. A focus of most counseling literature pertaining to religion and spirituality in counselors was competency based. This was certainly an important consideration and was echoed by the voices of participants. There were contradictory findings in the literature as it related to personal spirituality's impact on spiritual competencies. One quantitative study found that as counselors were more spiritually aware, their ability to recognize spiritual concerns in clients also increased, and along with this their perceived spiritual competency increases (van Asselt & Senstock, 2009). However, another study found very nuanced differences in perceived competency in counselor educators. The personal journeys of counselor educators have differing impacts on their integration of R/S concerns. religious/spiritual development did not presuppose competency, but instead varying actions of hesitancy, avoidance, and confidence occurred (Johns, 2017).

Rachel experienced a shift in her competence as a result of what she experienced as her authentic call being recognized by the larger institution. She said:

And so like, it's interesting, like, November, once I got that install, got installed, I just had this major shift in just my confidence level in general. Of being able to be present, not worry about myself not feeling, "oh, my gosh, am I competent? Did I do that because I'm not competent?" Like, all that second guessing. And shift into just being present.

The process of journeying through the additional layer of counselor to her vocational identity was one crucial piece to this competence, and the other was being validated by her church.

Others voiced the importance of all CITs exploring their personal religion and spirituality. Piper expressed her desire for others to deeply understand their own spirituality or lack thereof. She said:

I think that, you know, we need to sort out our own religious beliefs, to, you know, sort out those spiritual biases that we have. In order to, you know, whether they're conscious or unconscious, you know, unconscious, being from our family that we never realized, as, you know, part of our spiritual beliefs. And, you know, people need to sort that out before they can start having these deep conversations in sessions with people. Have them figured out their own.

Piper expressed a clear need for all CITs and counselors to become aware of their “spiritual biases.” This sentiment was in line with the ASERVIC spiritual competencies that recommended ongoing exploration of personal beliefs and values in the section relating to counselor self-awareness (Cashwell & Watts, 2011). The ways competency could be achieved related to Recommendations for Programs. Many of the specific recommendations made by participants are outlined further in implications for counseling programs.

### **Overarching Contextual Factors**

While the previous three meta categories focused primarily on the temporal dimension of narratives, Overarching Contextual Factors attended to sociality and place considerations. Certainly, all facets of narrative inquiry were present in the above meta categories as well, but this meta category explicitly addressed these facets of sociality and place. Contextual factors were key for understanding both the narratives in this study, but also the larger implications for R/S transition. A primary systemic consideration was the “unveilings,” as Rachel described, that took place among many social justice issues in the wider society. This element of sociality saw

both personal and social conditions of the narratives, and especially the interaction of these as a primary focus (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012).

### *Systemic Considerations*

Several factors were important in the overarching context, as described by the participants. Some of these factors included the impacts of COVID-19, social justice issues especially related to racial justice and LBGTQIA+ justice issues. Participants also mentioned things like #MeToo, clergy sexual abuse, and the climate crisis among other important societal factors. It was important to acknowledge these as they have a direct relationship with religion and spirituality overall.

Jordan discussed the importance of their social justice identity both in the past, saying, “I was always on the margins, like, walking with someone who was homeless, or someone who was, you know, in a difficult situation,” and currently in their role as the head of children’s faith formation as they bring their “social justice energy” into that space. This advocacy identity seemed interwoven with their spiritual beliefs. In sharing their spiritual identity, Jordan shared:

I would say that I am someone who seeks after God’s heart. That I desire to know the nature of God, and I seek after that. ... I think that humanity is this, is capable of rich and profound relationships, including with God. And that when we accept a really rigid, narrow way of encountering one another, and God, then that relationship is no longer reflective of what God is capable of.

This overarching view of aligning God’s nature with “the totality of our humanity” pointed to a justice orientation. Sydney also shared a desire to integrate her social justice concerns into her spirituality. She shared having trouble with religion that have a history of oppressing marginalized communities. In the Unitarian church:

There's like a covenant that goes along with it. That's it starts with "Love is the spirit of this church service is our law. Our goal is like to dwell together in peace." It just was so like, so beautiful. And yeah, I really felt at home.

Finding spirituality that addressed some of the systemic concerns that arose in the previous theme on conflicts with religion appeared key in these narratives.

An interesting consideration was that participating in the research process seemed to have had an impact on some participant narratives. This consideration was outlined as a possibility in ethical considerations of narrative inquiry in Chapter III. There, the ambiguous delineation between narrative intervention and narrative inquiry was outlined as a possibility (Riessman & Speedy, 2012). By nature of the relational and interactive research strategy, there was space for narratives to be formed or to shift (Abkhezr et al., 2020). For some participants, there was a relationship between participating in this research and continuing to recognize changes in their religious/spiritual journey. It was important to note that participants did not use any causal language to infer that research participation caused their current changes. Instead, the already occurring process of change continued and, as additional time passed, their narratives evolved. Melissa noted, "that's part of why I have a feel like an underdeveloped narrative of even talking about this because, like. No, I did not feel like it was always a safe space to bring in discussions about spirituality." Sydney said in the member reflection interview:

So that was like, fun for me to like, reflect in that way. I'd never really like connected my like, spiritual journey with like my counseling journey. But it's cool to see how those timelines kind of overlap. And I feel like it kind of sneaks up on you the ways that grad school changes your life, and then you're like, Oh, that was because of grad school.

While the aim of this discussion was not to make claims about the kind of relationship present, what was apparent was that space for reflection and authoring narratives were offered in the research interviews and that some participants experienced further change between the initial and member reflection interviews. Change was possible as a result of reflection on personal narratives.

### ***Religious/Spiritual Identity as a Journey***

An important consideration in looking at the shifts that occurred for participants over the course of time was the language they used. Terms outlined in Chapter II included things like conversion, religious switching, nones, and dones. Interestingly, participants used very few terms found in the literature for this kind of experience aside from “transformation.” Even this use was fairly limited. Piper noted in her member reflection that, “I don’t really get to talk about my religious transformation a whole lot.” And Melissa said, “And having [IFS] was deeply spiritual, for me and transformative in making me a better counselor, too.” This focus on specific phrasing was important in considering the language people actually use to describe their experiences with religious/spiritual changes. Terms related to R/S interests ought to be based in the lived-religious experiences of individuals (Johnson, 2013). It was possible that the language provided in the study of R/S transition impacted language choice, and yet it was an important consideration. While Tori, for example, may have undergone what was classically understood as a conversion and deconversion experience, that was not the language she used to describe her journey. Terms and definitions did not seem to “un-fuzzy” the incredibly complex understandings of the transcendent (Stewart-Sicking et al., 2019).

Even as language was insufficient, participants also pointed to the importance of language in understanding R/S transition and R/S experiences in general. For Melissa, finding

shared language was essential to finding shared community and validity in her understanding of her own spirituality. She said from attending a continuing education summit, “that’s what I was. Okay. I’m interfaith, interspiritual is how you would explain it. And these other people have it, like started to get the language there.” She continued to explain:

Okay, other people experienced this too, right? Oh, this professor at NYU is talking about it. So, in hearing other academics talk about it, that was so validating and healing for me, and I feel like I might have my tribe out there. And helped me develop the language around it, but that was not happening in my program [laughing] at school.

The last aspect of the absence of this language in her counseling program was explored above in Counseling Program Experiences and will also be further outlined in implications. Even so, finding language that brought meaning and shared experiences to her own journey was empowering to Melissa’s religious/spiritual transition. Finding this kind of shared language could be even more meaningful for those whose spirituality lied outside traditional religious structures (Russo-Netzer, 2016). In similar ways, Rachel discussed her identification with being Lutheran as opposed to even Christian. In conversation about interacting with peers in her program, it was discussed:

Interviewer: The people that you were interacting with in the new space may or may not have a shared understanding. And like you said, like, there’s some cultural pieces around that, of what saying I’m “a Christian” means to people.

Rachel: Right. Yeah. And so I’m much more likely to tell people I’m Lutheran because especially in this neck of the woods, people are evangelical. And that is such a loud and vocal voice. Very loud here. Very minority, but still very loud. And so that’s what people think I’m part of, and I’m like, no. I’m not.

Language can be a powerful way to align with as well as separate from others, based on beliefs, understandings, and experiences. However, even shared language can mean different things to different people. Jordan described their experience with seeking out practicum and internship sites as a “spiritually integrated counselor.” They went on to describe the interview saying:

The person that I interviewed with does Christian counseling, and ... the first 20 minutes was her asking me questions about my faith and my religion and my spirituality and like, not in the context of like clients, but just trying to get to know me. ... So I kind of like tried to redirect back to supporting clients from all traditions, and [Pausing] But I think she wanted to make sure that I wasn’t going to share information with the clients that would conflict with what she was aiming for.

Even with shared language, a deeper understanding of the individual meaning and story was necessary to grasp what was meant by the terms used. The literature pointed to this concept as well in exploring the political overlay to some religious categories. For some, publicly renouncing their religion serves as a symbolic disaffiliation while maintaining many of the same beliefs and practices as they previously did (Strawn, 2019). Findings in this study seemed to point to the opposite being true as well. Shared language can infer radically different beliefs and practices.

The language of a journey was resonant in these findings. While all journeys were unique, they contained the common elements explored in the above themes. One aspect of the journey specifically was the nature of seeking some grounded or rooted space. As participants embarked on the many kinds of personal and spiritual changes they experienced, there was a desire to remain rooted in something. For Tori, she used that exact language saying, “I still think there’s *something*. I don’t know what it is.” For Piper, her roots lied with her family and through

her family, her experiences of God as a protector. Sydney similarly noted the importance of relationships as roots, namely her family and now her church. These examples brought to mind attachment theory's notion of a secure base (Ainsworth, 1989). In theistic religions, the study of attachment has been inserted to relationships with God (Counted, 2016). The secure base may be God, but the narratives pointed to a diversity of secure base relationships that offered the space for exploration, curiosity, and experimentation that ultimately led to R/S transition.

### **Limitations**

As with all studies, this research had several important limitations to consider. First, it was possible that the current sample did not account for particular subsets of this population. The goal of this study was not to provide universal generalizability, but rather to simply begin the conversation through an initial exploration into the experience of religious/spiritual transition in counseling students. Even so, further research is needed to explore the possibilities of other kinds of experiences and even other subsets within the population of interest. These subcategories within the population were by virtue of their possible exclusion were unknown. However, there were some considerations regarding the kinds of experiences that would be beneficial to understand more deeply.

A further limitation of this study lied potentially in the sampling process. Participants were purposely selected based on their experiences from specified email listservs. This meant participants self-selected to be involved in the study and, thus, could indicate a bias toward positive R/S transition experiences. While participants found the experience of R/S transition challenging, they reflected positively on this experience. A possible category of participants needed for additional understanding of the process may include those who reflect on their experiences more negatively.



In relation to this consideration, an area of additional insight may relate to the experiences of trauma. Individuals who have experienced clergy sexual abuse or other forms of religious abuse may have important distinctive experiences. While certainly some participants alluded to religious trauma in their narratives, none self-identified with this language. It was possible that the intersection of religious trauma with R/S transition formed a unique experience that was needed in relation to this overall body of research. What was known about attachment to the Divine intersects with research on betrayal trauma and could elicit very different narratives that would further inform this overall conversation.

A final limitation to consider relates to participant demographics. In relation to gender, there were five women and one nonbinary participant in this study. As such, men, transgender, and other expressions of gender identity were not included in this study. As little was known about the experience overall, it was unknown what kinds of gender differences may be present. Additionally, there were some age diversity within the study, but five of the participants would likely have been considered nontraditional. Seeking counseling as a second career, parenting, part-time status, and employment in allied professions all constituted aspects of nontraditional status. While graduate students are generally more diverse in terms of these features, it may be an important consideration as it relates to R/S transition. Future research is needed to add breadth to the understanding of this experience and inform the field generally.

### **Implications**

In light of the findings in this study, several important implications were drawn out to apply to counselor educators and counselor training programs. These implications focused first on counseling programs. Programs and educators must more fully understand religious/spiritual transition including possible impacts on CITs. Through a lens of transformational learning,

counselor educators could apply previous knowledge to a new paradigm. Also correlations between R/S transition experiences and overall counselor development were considered. And finally, seeing religion and spirituality as a multicultural component lead to recommendation for cultural humility. Outside of counselor training programs, implications for possible outside supports include personal counseling and support groups.

### **Implications for Counselor Education Programs**

Counselor training programs have an opportunity and responsibility to help support students grappling with religious/spiritual transitions. In this study, participants themselves offered several ideas for ways to address R/S transitions in counselors-in-training, which were woven into these implications. In addition to those ideas explicitly stated, others could also be inferred from the findings. Counselor education programs may not directly address counseling students' R/S transitions but could offer conditions that were facilitative to exploration and change.

It seems, counselor training programs have a responsibility to their students as well as their future clients to be aware of the possibility and nature of R/S transition in their students. While some may be tempted to point to the numerous religiously affiliated counseling programs and determine that addressing spirituality in their programs was not necessary. Perhaps students interested in such integration would simply attend a religiously affiliated program. However, as three participants explicitly noted, the public institution was necessary for them to be able to have enough space in thoughts and beliefs to explore their religion and spirituality. As such, it is imperative for all counseling programs to understand this component of spirituality as it relates to counseling.

## **Transformational Learning in Counseling**

Counselor education programs certainly cannot and should not take the lead in guiding students on their personal religious/spiritual transition journeys. Instead, the responsibility of programs is more connected to the overall process of transformational learning. Understanding that graduate school, and particularly counselor training programs can be transformational experiences, educators must be aware of the various ways transformation may be occurring for students and provide space for applying these changes to their counseling training. Counselor training programs can be instrumental in creating spaces conducive to exploration and experimentation. Considering elements of TLT, discussed in Chapter II, students grappling with R/S transition will likely have faced a disorienting dilemma as it relates to their current R/S identity. Paramount to TLT pedagogy is critical self-reflection, critical dialogue, and experimenting with new roles (Mezirow, 1994).

Like universal designs for learning, what is good for some students could quite often be good for all students. Space for experimentation and trying-on new roles is beneficial for all students, regardless if they were navigating religious/spiritual transitions. Similarly, critical self-reflection was a cornerstone of many counselor training programs. Counselor training programs could tailor these self-reflections to include components of R/S transition. While ethics courses appeared to be fertile ground for this kind of reflection in the experience of the participants, R/S considerations could be integrated across classes. Providing case studies, role play examples, and course readings that represent a variety of R/S identities along with changes to those identities could more fully represent the experiences of counseling students and clients alike.

William Sparks, a leadership scholar and consultant, said in a Ted Talk, “Self-awareness does not comfort. It disturbs and disrupts,” (TEDx Talks, 2018, 15:08). He went on to discuss the

importance of providing developmentally appropriate feedback that allows others to learn through holistic self-awareness. Through this kind of process he said, “transformation occurs when we have the courage to face our own shadow” (TEDx Talks, 2018, 16:30). Counselor training programs could be transformational spaces. Part of that transformation could occur when self-awareness was given the space to be disruptive to CITs. Appropriate challenge and support could facilitate transformations, whether in R/S realms or in other areas of life (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

A primary component of grappling with disruptive information is critical discourse. This element of TLT requires courageous conversations and wading into challenging territory with nuance and humility. In order to engage in this kind of critical dialogue, counselor educators must be attuned to the lived experiences of their students (Magill & Blevins, 2020). Critical dialogue seeks to incorporate multiple viewpoints but especially those with marginalized identities. The role of critical discourse is to enhance self-awareness and the individual’s relationship to the class and society as a whole. Jordan recounted a conversation in class about religion. They said:

And they use some really loaded language where I was like, uhh? ... I think the professor said, religious people can hold some very strong views, that we need to be very careful not to undermine, no matter how much we, you know, disagree [laughing] with what they’re sharing. But like, it was in a detached, judgmental tone. Like, it kind of had that same tone of like, “these people are delusional, but you have to just kind of roll with their delusions until they get better, okay?” ... And it wasn’t in a respectful way. It was like this very like dismissive. Like, “just be careful what you say around those people.”

This example did not illustrate the kind of nuanced conversations that were needed. Instead, Tori shared an example of critical dialogue with a professor. In response to an apology that Tori made to the professor, she recounted his response:

And the email that I got back from [Professor] was basically he said, he said, “You know, I think I’ve shared in class that I consider myself to be a feminist. And I’ve been doing research about women and self-policing in patriarchal societies.” And he said, “You know, I would invite you to be kind to yourself, and I would invite you to continue to speak, and speak loudly. And to continue to interrupt men in power like myself.” And I just, [Interviewer indicates getting shivers] yes, right? And I just burst into tears. ... And I think that was one of those, like, defining moments for me, where I just saw that what was happening was not right. And just the dichotomy there. So that was a powerful moment for me.

This response indicated an attunement to Tori’s lived experiences and nuanced response based on those experiences. These kinds of conversations were learner-centered and ultimately aimed to ultimately inform personal and social transformation.

Counselor educators could be aware that their courses may require some students to directly confront their spiritual beliefs. Counselor educators could help to normalize this in discussions about assignments or the nature of counseling programs. These kinds of confrontations are likely necessary for their development as counselors and may be more disorienting if they do require untangling deeply held religious or spiritual beliefs in addition to whatever the requirements of the particular assignment. The disorienting dilemma was not the problem but only a catalyst for change. For Jordan, an early assignment in their ethics class presented this kind of unsettling dilemma. They said:

I needed time to figure out how to share my interior reality in a safe way that protected myself and my family, but then there was this assignment due in less than a week. I knew it was unlikely to get back to my church. But even putting things in writing about ethical obligations to support this Catholic, lesbian client felt dangerous and vulnerable as I signed my name to it. A bit too close to self-disclosure, maybe.

This assignment held a very different weight to it than it might have for others even in the same class. Counselor educators with awareness of a variety of R/S experiences may be able to offer different support, additional structure, or in-class discussions.

Opportunities for processing appear important as well. Participants noted the feeling of isolation in being asked to write a paper and then never discuss it further. Bringing assignments, or anything that was done in isolation back into classroom discussions could be helpful for creating a cohesive throughline pedagogically but could also help in processing difficult topics, including relating to religion and spirituality. As was seen within this study, space for self-reflection and awareness could facilitate change. In a foundational counseling textbook, students were encouraged throughout to practice self-reflection and to increase their self-awareness (Granello & Young, 2019). The very foundations of counseling relied on the importance of self-reflection to help facilitate change.

Cultural humility could be an important element in discussing religious/spiritual concerns. Counselor educators need to be aware of the vast array of R/S expressions present in their classrooms. Religious/spiritual considerations are an element of multicultural competence. Just as multicultural courses have largely moved away from the piece-meal model of strategies for counseling a particular group, discussions of R/S must also be nuanced, intersectional, and robust. It would be important to address R/S ideas from a similar perspective of racial, sexuality,

or ability status, to name only a few. Just as social identities are important considerations for client care, these same social identities, including religion and spirituality, are important for CITs. Tori spoke to the desire for R/S integration from a multicultural lens. She said,

I guess that would be my only thing is just more training on how religion plays into counseling, how those two intersect, and what to do about that? You know, we talk a lot about what do we do with power differentials in the room? And, and intersectionality, and race and gender and sexuality and all of this other stuff. It's like, how do we, how do we do that with religion?

Melissa talked about an experience in class, where the intersections of race and religion were not attended to. She said:

The professor talked about mystical experiences that I have personally experienced (in nature, dreams, etc.--although she was unaware that I had experienced them) as though they were phenomena experienced exclusively by indigenous peoples. The professor clearly assumed that she was speaking to an audience where no members could relate to these experiences and cautioned us not to jump too quickly to diagnosing these clients with mental illnesses. I did not speak up to offer my perspective in this instance because I was concerned about being misunderstood and possibly labeled by my cohort.

While well meaning, in an effort to reduce pathologizing clients with different religious experiences, the professor still neglected to include the wide variety of students in their class. Attention to religion and spirituality as a multicultural consideration could allow a wealth of research knowledge to be opened up as it relates to application in counselor education classrooms. Multiple resources could attend to these factors, chief among them the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2016).

### **Links Between Religious/Spiritual Transition and Counselor Development**

There may be many complimentary changes that occur in religious/spiritual transition and in counselor development. For example, the theme of loosening grip on R/S identity markers has been linked to cognitive complexity. Several other examples were outlined in the above discussion. Counselor educators who were assessing CITs could recognize the connections between these two kinds of changes. In another facet of attunement, recognizing R/S transition within a developmental framework offers a known paradigm for a potentially unknown experience. Through understanding faith development models as well as counselor development models, the insights offered could be applied to R/S transitions.

Supervision and pedagogical models have tended to include a developmental perspective. Looking at religious/spiritual transition as a developmental process could assist counselor educators in finding their role. Primarily, this role could be process based and not dealing specifically with the content of shifting beliefs. Working with a student in practicum who was grappling with a client who held beliefs the student previously held could be approached developmentally. Another example was drawn from the participant narratives. Sydney described her change from “a past version” of herself. Sydney recounted her change from the start of graduate school to the time the interaction occurred in her first practicum experience, she dramatically shifted her perspective. She shared having a deeply religious client and she “didn’t hesitate with this client,” as she “brought up God.” As she went on, she said, “I’m really like, proud of that, because I think it was helpful for the client. And I don’t like as a counselor, like, I don’t want there to be topics that I’m like, afraid of.” It has been common for CITs to be afraid of religious topics, especially if they were grappling with their own R/S transition. Supervisors



could play a role in broaching religion and spirituality through the lens of the ASERVIC (2009b) competencies.

### **Spirituality in Counseling Course**

All participants shared a desire for further conversation of spirituality in their graduate programs. For some, this led to a recommendation for a separate class that addressed the complexity and nuance of spirituality in counseling. Piper advocated for the importance of more fully addressing R/S concerns through a class. She said:

Like there was like the sexuality, the human sexualities there was, you know, development and a lot of other cultural stuff, but there wasn't like an introduction to religion class on its own. And I think that's something that, for me, I feel like it kind of sets me apart because I have a general understanding of a lot more world religions than a lot of other counselors do. So that would be something that I would recommend for my own experiences to be integrated into a counseling program, is just like a general intro to religions class.

Sydney similarly expressed a desire for a “spirituality counseling class” or even a seminar.

Participants recognized the need for further conversations in this area. Sydney said, “I also have like, friends who are working in the field, who when their clients bring up like spiritual issues, they like panic, and they're like, ‘I wasn't really taught how to, like help you with this.’”

Previous research had found that clients were interested and willing to bring up their religious/spiritual concerns in counseling (Rose et al., 2008). Prior research and this study indicated that CITs were eager to learn more about this dimension of counseling but were too often left feeling like it was an afterthought to their training (Henriksen et al., 2015).

Recognizing the curricular challenges of adding a separate class, this recommendation minimally called for further integration for R/S considerations across classes. Robust, inclusive, and deep conversations relating to religion and spirituality are needed across the curriculum. As Sydney said, “we’re not like rabbis, or pastors or whatever we’re like, you know, this other thing.” This “other thing” sought for whole counselors to interact with whole clients, considering all the multiple identities that constitute a holistic person.

### **Support Outside Counselor Education Programs**

Counselor training programs have not been solely responsible for facilitating religious/spiritual transition in CITs. They, in fact, may not even be primary forces in R/S transition. Instead, outside supports may be an important aspect of holistic support for students experiencing R/S transition. The primary methods for CITs to receive outside support included significant relationships like friends, partners, and family members. Other forms of more formal supports included support groups and individual counseling. For the topics that were outside the scope of professional development, these outside resources may be necessary for individuals undergoing R/S transition.

Significant relationships have been a key component of support during religious/spiritual transition. Others facing R/S transition have served as a source of empowerment and encouragement. Tori discussed the changes her husband had previously gone through as he disaffiliated from the LDS faith. Similarly, Sydney’s college roommate converted to Islam and helped spark an interest in her own spirituality. For Piper, her relationship with her grandmother was pivotal to her transformation. These interpersonal connections were invaluable resources for the kinds of self-reflection, critical dialogue, and room for experimentation noted above.

Transformation could occur outside the walls of a classroom and may often be facilitated by these kinds of interpersonal relationships.

In terms of more structured supports, support groups and group therapy could be helpful along with individual counseling. While this could be done in connection with a counseling program, others providing these resources could also be used. Bowser et al. (2020) designed an intervention focusing on spiritual competency. This constructivist group format offered education and support to build spiritual competency in counselors-in-training. Similar groups could offer support to CITs experiencing R/S transition. Tori discussed the importance of having a support group connecting others from her specific high demand religion. She said, “I did join like a group therapy for religious deconstruction from our faith specifically. Because I think it’s a little different than just, you know, I don’t know, there’s just, there’s differences. And so that was really helpful.” Being able to connect with others who have similar experiences was even more important for Tori than those who were also counseling students.

A final option for outside support was individual counseling. Melissa shared the importance of this for her personally but also recommending it to other CITs. She said:

One of the things that stood out to me, and my program was that it wasn’t required for the counselors to be in counseling. ... I really do feel like that’s a good idea. I, people need to be processing things themselves, like on their journey. And inevitably, they’re gonna have things come up.

From a personal and spiritual perspective, Melissa saw the value of processing concerns as they arose. There are many components of religious/spiritual transition that counselor training programs could not and should not manage. Counselor training was not personal counseling, but it was personal. Navigating that difference was important in R/S transition. Especially for those

whose transitions included religious trauma, disconnection from family, or other significant impacts, counseling programs were not the space for processing on their own. Instead, counselor educators could be knowledgeable about resources and offering possibilities to students and supervisees. There could be many ways to support students encountering personal R/S transition, and counselor educators should be willing and able to utilize a wide range of resources to help facilitate growth, whatever that looks like for the individual CIT.

### **Future Research**

As has been previously discussed, an understanding of religious/spiritual transitions was largely absent from the academic literature generally. Considering the specific factors at play in counselors-in-training, this study sought to contribute to the literature in offering the narrative experiences of counseling students undergoing R/S transition during counselor training. Given the relative newness of this body of research, there are a great many avenues available to explore in future research. Additional studies are warranted to explore in connection with these findings, exploring the universality of these experiences or their possible uniqueness.

The current study sought to balance gaining a variety of experiences of R/S transition with needed homogeneity for depth of understanding. Due to this, the current study was limited to public university students only. Future studies could expand the population or seek to explore the experiences of religiously affiliated programs specifically. As Jordan noted in their decision to attend a public school for the room to explore. They said, “I felt like I had a lot to work through internally, that I wasn’t sure that I was going to be able to at the Christian universities.” It may be possible the experiences of CITs at religiously affiliated institutions are qualitatively different from other experiences of R/S transition. Additionally, other population considerations may be helpful, including diverse genders and ages, as discussed in the limitations above.

Future research would also be needed related to the recommendations presented by participants. This kind of research could explore the impacts of having a specific class available for spirituality in counseling as it relates to CIT's experiences of R/S transition. While there were many studies related to counselor competency regarding religious/spiritual concerns, there is a dearth of research in personal experiences of counselors (S. F. Hall et al., 2014; Magaldi-Dopman, 2014). This kind of exploration of the self would be important, as the ASERVIC spiritual competencies noted the importance of counselor's personal exploration in order to reveal possible biases and assumptions (Cashwell & Watts, 2011). Additionally, specific program implementation, such as support groups, could be areas of future research. Support groups could be structured around the experiences of foundation, disorientation, and recalibration outlined in these narrative findings. Interventions, whether inside or outside counseling programs, would be helpful for exploring their impacts on counseling student's R/S transitions.

A final avenue of future research could include expanding the population of interest beyond counselors and CITs. Clients also experience religious/spiritual transitions, and little has been understood about these experiences overall. Specific interventions tailored to clients with these experiences may be needed as the field of research in this area expands. There may be an ongoing need for understanding R/S transition both generally and within specific populations. The overall aim of this future research could seek to support students and clients as they embark on R/S transition.

### **Conclusion**

Counselor educators and counselor training programs have the opportunity and responsibility to be aware of the experience and potential impacts of religious/spiritual transition

on their students. This responsibility does not extend to having any say-so over the R/S itself but rather as a supportive container for reflection and experimentation. Findings from this study indicated that CITs were indeed experiencing R/S transition during counselor training. Furthermore, the narratives of these transitions demonstrated the ways counselor training programs could be supportive of this kind of change.

The findings of this study indicated that experiences and outcomes of religious/spiritual transition differed significantly from one another. However, they did typically include preliminary beliefs, disorienting experiences during transition, and lasting impacts after R/S transition. The beginning points, destinations, and messy middle experiences all differed amongst the six participants, and yet many points of commonality emerged. Through examining the narrative experiences of R/S transition during counselor training, counselor educators could be better prepared to address the nuanced implications of this experience.

Counselors and counselor educators are experts at understanding unique lived experiences of the individuals they encounter. And yet, there appears to be harmful practices present in counselor education programs toward those experiencing R/S transition. As an element of transformational learning, multicultural and social justice competency, ASERVIC competencies, and CACREP standards, recognizing R/S transition is necessary for holistic training. Counselor educators could draw from known understandings of transformational learning and counselor development in addition to outside supports to best provide support to counseling students experiencing religious/spiritual transition during their counselor training.

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APPENDIX A  
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

## DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Have you or are you currently experiencing a religious/spiritual transition. For this study, a religious/spiritual transition includes any personally significant changes to your religious and/or spiritual beliefs, values, or identity.
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. Do/did you attend a public or non-religiously affiliated institution for your graduate counseling program?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
3. Please briefly describe your experience of transition.
4. What is your gender?
5. What is your age in years?
6. What is your race/ethnicity?
7. How would you describe your current religious/spiritual identity?
8. What is your current status in your counseling program?
  - a. Pre-practicum, but have completed at least two semesters
  - b. Practicum
  - c. Internship
  - d. Graduate (within 2 years)
9. What is your program specialty area?
  - a. Clinical Mental Health Counseling
  - b. Addiction Counseling
  - c. Clinical Rehabilitation Counseling
  - d. Career Counseling
  - e. Marriage, Couples and Family Counseling
  - f. School Counseling
  - g. Student Affairs and College Counseling

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT



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### Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

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**Title of Research Study:** Counseling Students' Experiences of Religious/Spiritual Transition: A Narrative Inquiry

**Researcher:**

Lexi Heringer Wimmer, MA, LPC, LAC, NCC, ACS  
Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education  
Phone Number: (xxx) xxx-xxxx  
Email: [lexi.wimmer@unco.edu](mailto:lexi.wimmer@unco.edu)

**Research Advisor:**

Jennifer L. Murdock Bishop, Ph.D., LPC, CO-SSP-SC, NCC, ACS  
Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education  
Phone Number: (970) 351-2544  
Email: [jennifer.murdockbish@unco.edu](mailto:jennifer.murdockbish@unco.edu)

**Procedures:** We would like to ask you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of individuals who have experienced or are currently experiencing religious and/or spiritual transitions during their counseling training. Religious and/or spiritual transition includes any personally significant changes to your religious and/or spiritual beliefs, values, or identity.

You will be asked to complete a brief (less than 5-minute) screening and demographic questionnaire. Then, you will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. You have the right to decline answering questions or end the interview altogether. The interview will be conducted in-person or via Zoom and will be recorded. In addition, you will be asked to contribute a visual artifact via secure OneDrive. This photo may be used in part or in full in presenting research findings. Following initial transcription of the interview, the researcher will send you a copy of the transcript for your review. You will then participate in a brief member-reflection interview discussing any changes or clarifications you would like to make to your transcript, and to discuss the visual artifact you shared. The total amount of time anticipated to participate in this study is less than 2 hours.

You will choose a pseudonym for yourself that will be used in presentation of the findings. Any identifying information will be redacted and de-identified prior to ongoing analysis and reporting. Data collected and analyzed for this study will be kept in a password-protected file to maintain privacy. The only cost associated with participating in this study is that of your time. There is no compensation for your participation. Findings from this study will be used to inform

counselor educators and supervisors about the process of religious/spiritual changes during counseling training with the aim of providing additional supports to these students.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Lexi Heringer Wimmer at [lexi.wimmer@unco.edu](mailto:lexi.wimmer@unco.edu). If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the University of Northern Colorado IRB at [irb@unco.edu](mailto:irb@unco.edu) or 970-351-1910.

**Voluntary Participation:** Please understand that your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Note:** Amazon Mechanical Turk, Qualtrics, and Inquisit have specific privacy policies of their own. You should be aware that these web services may be able to link your responses to your ID in ways that are not bound by this consent form and the data confidentiality procedures used in this study. If you have concerns, you should consult these services directly.

**Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.**

If you decide to participate, your completion of the questionnaire indicates your consent. You may request a copy of this consent form for future reference.

APPENDIX C  
RECRUITMENT EMAIL



Hello!

My name is Lexi Wimmer, and I am a doctoral candidate and the University of Northern Colorado. I am seeking participants for my dissertation research entitled **“Counseling students’ experience of religious/spiritual transitions: A narrative inquiry.”** This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at UNC (Protocol #2303048726).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the experiences of individuals who have experienced or are currently experiencing religious and/or spiritual transitions during their counselor training. Religious/spiritual transition includes any personally significant changes to your religious/spiritual beliefs, values, or identity. The information gained from this study will help inform counselor educators and supervisors about the process of these kinds of changes during counselor training.

Characteristics for participation:

- Self-identify as currently experiencing or having experienced religious/spiritual transition during your counselor training.
- Current (completed at least 2 semesters) counseling student or recent graduate (within 2 years) of a CACREP-accredited master’s program in any specialty area.
- Attend(ed) a public or non-religiously affiliated university for master’s in counseling.

Participants will participate in an in-depth interview (lasting approximately 45-60 minutes) via Zoom as well as one brief member-checking follow-up interview (lasting approximately 15-30 minutes). The decision to participate in this study is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

If you’d like to share your experiences, I’d love to hear from you. To express your interest in participating, please complete this demographic questionnaire ([click here!](#)). Following this, I will reach out to interested participants to coordinate interview dates.

Here is the full questionnaire link as well:

[https://unco.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_4Hs3R3W6wrdekW5](https://unco.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4Hs3R3W6wrdekW5)

I would greatly appreciate you sharing information about this study with counseling students or recent graduates who may be interesting in participating.

If you have further questions about this project, please contact me at [Lexi.Wimmer@unco.edu](mailto:Lexi.Wimmer@unco.edu), or my dissertation chair, Dr. Jennifer Murdock-Bishop at [Jennifer.MurdockBish@unco.edu](mailto:Jennifer.MurdockBish@unco.edu). Thank you for your consideration of this project.

Thank you,

Lexi Wimmer

APPENDIX D  
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What does religious/spiritual transition mean to you? What comes to mind? How would you define it?
2. How would you describe your own religious or spiritual journey?
  - a. Would you share about the kind of spirituality you inherited?
  - b. How would you describe your spiritual identity right now?
  - c. How would you characterize your spirituality when you began your master's program?
    - i. Alt. Think of how you felt, believed, acted at the very start of your counseling program. Can you share a story of that time that would characterize your spiritual journey at that point?
3. Could you share about your own spiritual transition?
  - a. When you think about this process, could you choose an image or a metaphor to describe it?
4. What catalysts do you recognize in initiating these spiritual shifts?
5. How did this transition impact your counselor training?
6. As you consider your professional identity development as a counselor, how has your religious/spiritual transition impacted you?
7. What, if anything, has been missing from your counselor education as you navigated your religious/spiritual transition?
8. Debrief: What was it like talking with me about these experiences?

Note: Plan to be intentional about using the participants' language to reflect their experiences of Higher Power and their religious/spiritual transitions.

APPENDIX E

MEMBER REFLECTION PROTOCOL

## MEMBER REFLECTION PROTOCOL

1. After reading the transcript, is there anything you would like to clarify or provide feedback on?
2. What would you like to add or take away from what you shared?
3. From the initial interview, we discussed a metaphor. Can you describe the photo or item that you brought as a representation of that idea?
  - a. How does this artifact represent your experience of religious/spiritual transition during your counselor education program?
4. What have we not discussed that you would like to include in understanding your experience?

APPENDIX F  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Date: 04/14/2023  
 Principal Investigator: Lexi Wimmer  
 Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**  
 Action Date: 04/14/2023  
 Protocol Number: 2303048726  
 Protocol Title: Counseling Students' experiences of religious/spiritual transition: A narrative inquiry  
 Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(703) for research involving

Category 3 (2018): BENIGN BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE COLLECTION OF INFORMATION FROM ADULT SUBJECTS through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection and at least one of the following criteria is met: (A) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (B) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (C) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7). For the purpose of this provision, benign behavioral interventions are brief in duration, harmless, painless, not physically invasive, not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on the subjects, and the investigator has no reason to think the subjects will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing. Provided all such criteria are met, examples of such benign behavioral interventions would include having the subjects play an online game, having them solve puzzles under various noise conditions, or having them decide how to allocate a nominal amount of received cash between themselves and someone else. If the research involves deceiving the subjects regarding the nature or purposes of the research, this exemption is not applicable unless the subject authorizes the deception through a prospective agreement to participate in such research.



You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

**As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:**

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. \*You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Interim IRB Administrator, Chris Saxton, at 970-702-5427 or via e-mail at [chris.saxton@unco.edu](mailto:chris.saxton@unco.edu). Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,  
Nicole Morse  
Interim IRB Administrator

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784