

DOING RELIGION: BELIEF AND AGENCY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
FAMILY, AUTHORITY AND BOUNDARIES

by

MICHALLENE GREGGE MCDANIEL

(Under the Direction of David Smilde)

ABSTRACT

In recent decades much sociological thought has been devoted to the relative level of religiosity in the United States, as well as to the types of religions that have gained or lost popularity over the years. Another body of research has undertaken the tasks of describing and analyzing discrete new religious movements. This dissertation serves to bridge the gap between these research literatures by describing the process by which individuals actively engage in choosing among the many religious offerings in today's society. Religion is not only a status that an individual claims. Religion may also be thought of as an activity in which people engage. Individual agents actively "do religion," in that they constantly choose to believe some ideas rather than others. Based on textual analysis of reader reviews of bestselling religious books, this dissertation includes an analysis of the process of meaning construction on the part of spiritually-interested people, particularly regarding the meanings of family and authority, and the relative importance of social and ideological boundary maintenance. From that analysis three distinct groups of readers emerged, each characterized by a distinct cognitive orientation to the world. These orientations, called "Open," "Semi-Permeable," and

“Closed,” are presented in this dissertation as ideal types or models. However, the study also suggests possible applications for these models as they are tested beyond the realm of this project.

INDEX WORDS:     Meaning construction, Metaphor, Reader reviews, Belief, Agency, Family relationships, Authority, Boundaries, New Age, Evangelicalism, Fundamentalism, Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens

DOING RELIGION: BELIEF AND AGENCY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
FAMILY, AUTHORITY AND BOUNDARIES

by

MICHALLENE GREGGE MCDANIEL

B.A., The University of North Florida, 1993

M.A., The University of Georgia, 1996

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2011

© 2011

Michallene Gregge McDaniel

All Rights Reserved

DOING RELIGION: BELIEF AND AGENCY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
FAMILY, AUTHORITY AND BOUNDARIES

by

MICHALLENE GREGGE MCDANIEL

Major Professor: David Smilde

Committee: Mark Cooney  
James Dowd

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
December 2011

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated with my utmost gratitude to Sigrid Ballanfonte, who made it, as well as all good things in my life for the last sixteen years, possible. Your name is as close to the front of this document as I am allowed to place it. However, even our most casual acquaintances know your name deserves to be on the cover. Although I must claim responsibility for the ideas and writing contained within, the project's completion is as much your accomplishment as it is mine. 1-4-3, always.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Having taken as long as I have to complete my Ph.D., I find it a challenge to keep my acknowledgements to fewer pages than the substantive body of this dissertation.

Such academic undertakings take place within a broad social context, as we sociologists say, and I am blessed to have a “social context” that has spilled over with good will as I completed this assignment. While I am not always comfortable being a team player, I eventually relented and acknowledged that completion of this degree was something I needed help to accomplish. I will now recognize the key players on my team.

David Smilde, I must thank you for accepting me as a project during your first weeks in Athens, hanging in there, and helping me guide this dissertation through to its conclusion. Your willingness to share your knowledge, your books, and your encouragement was vital in allowing me to face my fears and write this thing. While some of your suggestions were initially daunting and at times challenging to embrace, they ultimately they led me to produce a dissertation that I learned a great deal from, while maintaining my interest in the topic. I am very grateful for all of your help, your kindness, and your ability to remain safe while travelling internationally.

Mark Cooney and Jim Dowd have been fixtures in my life since the early 1990s. Jim taught me a great deal in many classes, served on my comps committee, and, during my first year of graduate school, wrote the single-best comment I’ve ever received on a paper. I can quote it on demand. I wish I could say it was flattering, but at least it was vivid! Jim has also been extremely supportive of my teaching career, even from my first

efforts at such, and I know I owe my early employment, in large part, to his advocacy. Mark also served on my comps committee, as well as on my thesis committee. He has been providing stellar advice to me for nearly two decades! He also served for a number of years as Graduate Coordinator, and has been instrumental in helping me navigate some of the more nuanced policies of the Graduate School. Thank you both for everything, and I look forward to spending less-fraught time with you at workshops from now on!

Other UGA folks were vital in allowing me to complete this degree. Jody Clay-Warner championed my cause in her extraordinarily effective way, and also cracked me up in class more than once. Seriously, this degree might not have happened had she not gone to bat for me. Her trusty sidekick, my friend Kathy Lou, deserves my thanks and possibly some sort of medal for her service on my behalf. You are great at your job, you gave me great advice (and PODs) on countless occasions, and always did so with good cheer. Thank you for being a constant bright spot during some very cloudy days. William Finlay has been a supportive department head and willing signatory over a good portion of this undertaking, and I thank him for everything he has done to help me over the years.

I must also thank Dr. Maureen Grasso for the understanding she magnanimously extended to me over what must have been a very confusing, idiosyncratic situation. Dean Grasso and the current staff at the Graduate School have shown me many kindnesses, and made it clear that they actually wanted me to graduate. Thanks to you all for allowing it to happen!

I also need to thank some of the people who have allowed me to earn a living while finishing my Ph.D. Thanks to Chuck Karcher for hiring me as a faculty member at



Gainesville State College. Thanks to President Martha Nesbitt, who has been very supportive of my career at GSC. Thank you to Lee Cheek who is off to a fine start as my new Dean. Your early support of my career fills me with optimism regarding my continued tenure at our institution. I would also like to thank ten years' worth of Gainesville students, who have served as constant reminders of why I went to graduate school in the first place. I believe I belong in a college classroom, and you collectively encouraged me to keep working toward completion of the golden ticket that would allow me to stay with you. Thank you for listening to my ideas, for helping me sort things out during our classroom discussions, for allowing me to be a part of your lives, and for serving as inspirations. While it is one of the most challenging ordeals I've ever undertaken, pursuit of this degree is relatively easy, compared to some of the obstacles I see my students deal with on a daily basis.

Two individuals at GSC deserve special thanks. Through some unexpected circumstances, Al Panu and Pamela Elfenbein both shifted positions and ended up as my administrators last year. The two of you will never know the extent of my gratitude that I had you on my team at such a key point. Your kindness and support still overwhelm me, and I am forever grateful to you both.

Other colleagues at GSC have ended up comprising one of the finest cheering sections anyone could ask for. I hope the English faculty don't hold that sentence-ending preposition against me, and just accept my thanks and continued friendship. Patsy Worrall, who always got it, and Anita Turlington, who certainly gets it now, became tireless supporters and very good friends. I shall continue to see you both at the parties! Susan Daniell and Chaudron Gille have supported me throughout the years with good

humor and encouragement. Thank you, Susan, for the stories and the lunches, and thank you Chaudron for the “drop everything and write” sessions, even if I was the only one to take advantage of them. I got a lot done on those lonely afternoons! You have both been great friends, and have made GSC feel like home from my earliest days on campus. Throw in Kristen Kelly and Dean Lieburn, and we’ve got ourselves a book club!

Sue Doyle-Portillo has contributed her quiet, steady support to me through the years. She, along with Patsy and Anita, has written a number of career-advancing letters for me and shared many happy discussions of reality television. Sure, we all know you’re smart, but some of us have the privilege of knowing you’re also fun!

Jill Schultze has been a great friend (and co-TA Mentor!) over the years, and graciously allowed me to use her office during the summer of 2010. I must say that space was magical for me. I wrote some of the foundational parts of this dissertation sitting at your desk. It’s shocking, considering the My Pretty Pony/ beetle carcass/ Hello Kitty distractions that abound in your office, but it worked for me! Thank you for sharing, and thanks for your friendship. Now it’s your turn.

Other sociologists have been very supportive of my degree pursuits. Amy Reeder, my colleague at GSC, led the hiring committee that gave me my job. Since then, you have been extraordinarily restrained in your inquiries regarding my academic progress, and I appreciate that. It couldn’t have been easy for you, but now it’s over! Laurel Holland helped me early on by getting a job I thought I wanted, and freeing me up to get the job I now love. I’m really glad we’ve been able to maintain our friendship through state-conference shenanigans, and I’m thrilled to see you so happy now.

Other friends from graduate school remain in my social realm to this day. In particular, Ivy Ken(nelly), Marybeth Stalp and Cherise Harris have never wavered in their support of my academic progress. Those were genuine squeals of happiness I heard over the phone after my defense! I don't see any of you nearly enough, although I now have one less huge excuse for not getting together. Yea!! Let's play!!

Many of my relatives have been very helpful to me as I worked on my dissertation. My aunt, Frances Rowe, patiently discussed religious matters with me and cooked some really good food. You and Uncle Danny also put up with my mom for many years, and that was a real sacrifice! Thank you both for your support. Both of you represent the large number of believers in our extended family, and it was partially out of a desire to understand your ways of seeing the world that I undertook this particular line of inquiry. I hope my respect for you is reflected in the chapters that follow.

My brother Rex and sister Sherron have been tireless sources of support through my entire educational career. Both of you have shown confidence in my academic abilities since I was in first grade, and I hope I have made you reasonably proud. Only reasonably, though, because I'll never be as cool (or tall) as Rex, nor as earnest and presentable as Sherron. I do believe I'm now as tall as Sherron, though, so there is that. Speaking of tall, my cousin Lucille has also been a delightful presence in my life during my graduate school years. You and my sister make quite a team. An increasingly anti-social team, but I still think you're both funny. I love you all.

I would like to thank my dad, the invisible but very present S.C. McDaniel, and my mom, the very visible (and audible) Bette McDaniel, for raising me in a household that encouraged thought and creativity. See what you caused? I grew up in a home in

which the adults were always well-informed and interested in the world around them, and gave me the notion that reading was fun. Dad still serves as a major inspiration for me when I am otherwise mentally exhausted, and I know he's celebrating right along with the rest of us. I thank him for his genetic contribution to my brain, and for teaching me how to take relatively good care of it. I thank Mom for taking me on as her own project in the first place, and raising me with more friendship than I would have the nerve to do. Also, thanks for the extended use of your bedroom and the proofreading. I love you very much, and I'm happy to have found a useful application for your inherent bossiness.

Two friends of mine really shouldn't be classified as mere friends. They are more like extra sisters who happen to have Ph.D.'s. Diane Cook has been my colleague, my mentor (really!) and friend for a decade now. She has never wavered in her support of me as I finished my degree. She's been vocally supportive when I needed that, and subtly present when I didn't. I apologize for the sleep you've lost over me through the years, but I've appreciated every bit of concern you've shown me. I treasure our friendship, which I think of as a fringe benefit for working at GSC. Now, let's party!

More thanks than I actually have to give must be heaped on my friend Kelly Manley. She has suffered, and I mean suffered, through nearly every step of this dissertation ordeal. From the first day of graduate school orientation, she has filled in the gaps in my skill set. She walked me through the early days of SPSS, shared her QMIII notes, pored over dot-matrix printouts with me, and traded off cat-sitting duties. For years, she made it her mission to get me to the point of graduation. She made me organized decorative folders to inspire me, spent untold hours working across from me in public places, and helped me sort out my thoughts when I had epiphanies. She laughed

when I suggested I call this dissertation *Chinese Democracy* (GNR beat me time-wise, but I'm hoping to get better reviews). Finally, she motivated me with sticky stars. You know what? You're the star, Claudia. Anesthesia is very pleased for to be the extra pea in your pod. Merci beaucoup, beaucoup.

The other person I could not have finished this project without is my brother Raymond. Your frightening knowledge of how my brain works, and how best to get it in gear during our conversations, allowed me, finally, to have the necessary breakthroughs to get this done. Thank you for your patience during the times when my brain was sick and not working up to speed. Also, thanks for putting up with a lifetime of my moods. Despite the fact that I was freaked out during my Ann Arbor visit in June of 2010, the time I spent with you proved to be the catalyst for lining up the ideas I needed to complete my analysis. What a good boy! I love you very much, and I hope you eventually make something of yourself. Comic books and potato chips will only take you so far, Mr. Connie.

Finally, my thanks to the long-suffering Sigrid Ballanfonte, to whom this entire effort is dedicated. I'm sure you had no idea what you were getting into all those years ago, and that's probably to my benefit. Thanks for hanging in there, and for helping me create a home with Sophie, Zorro, Kerry, Maddie, Dr. Melfi, Stitch, Chai, Moonpie, Bose and Buddy (to name a few of the home-team members). You all have provided me with more love, laughter and loyalty than anyone could ever need. Keep it up, and let's go on (guilt-free) vacations!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	xv
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xvi
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Different Times, Different Tools .....	3
Social Change and Religious Revitalization .....	10
General Focus of This Study .....	20
2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY .....	23
Times of Turmoil, Crises of Consciousness .....	23
Popular Forms of Christianity in the United States .....	31
Alternative Spirituality in the United States .....	33
Fundamentalism and New Age Spirituality as Polar Responses to Rapid Social Change .....	39
Religious and Spiritual Ideas and Bestselling Books .....	42
3 DESIGN OF THE STUDY .....	45
Early Steps into the New Age .....	45
Why Books? Why Readers? .....	48
Reader Analysis: Some Methodological Precedents .....	51

	The Design .....	52
	Contributions of the Design .....	62
	Methodological Concerns .....	63
4	CONSTRUCTIONS OF FAMILY .....	68
	Lakoff's Family Metaphor: Two Models .....	69
	Perceptions of Family .....	73
	Perceptions of Parent-Child Relationships .....	88
	Perceptions of Relationships with God.....	94
	Summary .....	106
5	CONSTRUCTIONS OF AUTHORITY .....	107
	Loci of Authority: Internal and External .....	109
	Internal Loci of Authority .....	110
	External Loci of Authority.....	123
	Combined Loci of Authority: External Authority and Personal Experience.....	133
	Summary .....	137
6	CONSTRUCTIONS OF BOUNDARIES.....	141
	Closed Boundaries: Ideological and Social .....	142
	Open Boundaries: Ideological and Social.....	149
	Semi-Permeable Boundaries: Ideological and Social .....	156
	Summary .....	165
7	CONCLUSION.....	167
	A Classroom Vignette.....	169

The Findings: Patterns of Affinity .....	172
Relevance beyond this Study .....	177
Three Cognitive Orientations.....	180
Concluding Thoughts and Suggestions for Further Study.....	187
REFERENCES .....	190



## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1.1: Changes in Identification with Non-Western Religious Traditions, 1990-2000 .....	15
Table 1.2: Changes in Identification with Alternative Religions or Forms of Spirituality, 1990-2000 .....	16
Table 1.3: Relative Stability of Participation in Two Evangelical Denominations in the United States, 1990-2008.....	18
Table 3.1: Comparing Bestselling New Age and Evangelical Books .....	57
Table 7.1: Summary of Findings .....	178

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1: Chaos – Choice Cycle .....	6
Figure 2.1: Riesèbrodt’s Development and Types of Religious Revitalization.....	41
Figure 3.1: Aura Photo # 1 from Whole Life Expo, Atlanta, GA .....	46
Figure 3.2: Aura Photo # 2 from Whole Life Expo, Atlanta, GA .....	46
Figure 3.3: Speaking with Dr. Wayne Dyer at the Whole Life Expo, Atlanta GA .....	47
Figure 3.4: Thumbnail Image of Walsch’s <i>Conversations With God</i> Book Cover .....	55
Figure 3.5: Thumbnail Image of Warren’s <i>The Purpose Driven Life</i> Book Cover .....	55
Figure 7.1: The Open Ideal Type .....	182
Figure 7.2: The Semi-Permeable Ideal Type .....	184
Figure 7.3: The Closed Ideal Type .....	186

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Over the course of two weeks in April 2009, the magazine *Newsweek* offered content to the reading public that, on first glance, appeared contradictory. In the April 13 issue of *Newsweek*, the magazine's cover story, called "The End of Christian America," explored the finding in the just-released *American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS)* that the "number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990" (Meacham 2009). The article also pointed to the falling percentage of Americans identifying themselves as Christians, as well as the increase in the number of people identifying themselves as either atheist or agnostic during the same period. The president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, R. Albert Mohler Jr., is quoted in the article as saying "Clearly there is a new narrative, a post-Christian narrative, that is animating large portions of this society" (Meacham 2009).

In the very next issue of *Newsweek*, dated April 20, the magazine featured a brief interview with John Micklethwait, one of the authors of the just-released book *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (2009). The general thesis of Micklethwait's book is that "as the world grows more modern, it also grows more religious" (Conant 2009). Specifically, his book argues that, for all of the negative outcomes associated with religion, such as violence and war, the American-style idea of people "choosing their own faith," were it to be exported, might help the world-at-large avoid violent conflicts in the future. When asked how his thesis jibes with *Newsweek's*

cover story from the week before, Micklethwait points to the United States as having perhaps “...an even bigger split than before—between a bigger number of people who are not keen on religion, and then a larger core of people who are” (Conant 2009).

The *American Religious Identification Survey* provides evidence for Micklethwait’s assertion of this religious divide, and reveals more details about religious trends in the United States. While the percentage of Americans willing to identify themselves nominally as Christians dropped since 1990, Christianity does not seem to be losing ground to non-Christian or new religious alternatives. Rather, more people seem to be rejecting the idea of organized religion altogether.

A rejection of organized religion does not necessarily indicate an absence of belief, however. In 2008, *ARIS* introduced a new question about the existence of God. Based on the research findings, nearly 70% of Americans believe in a personal God. Another 12.1% believe in some form of higher power. Only 2.3% of the respondents agreed that there is no such thing as God. While mainline denominations in the United States may be losing congregants, God still seems to have plenty of fans.

Another significant finding in the most recent *ARIS* is that more Christians now identify themselves as either “Born Again,” or “Evangelical” than in previous years. In fact, Christians embrace these labels in greater numbers than can be accounted for by the number of those claiming membership in religious groups actually affiliated with the National Evangelical Association. In other words, “millions of Mainliners and Catholics now identify with this trend [of evangelicalism]” (Kosmin 2009: 9). This means that while more Americans than ever are rejecting affiliation with any organized religion,

more Christians in the U.S. than ever are claiming to have an intensely personal relationship with Jesus. As summarized by the authors of the *ARIS*,

...there is a real and growing theological polarization in American society whereby 34 percent of the population believe they are “Born Again” but 25-30 percent reject the idea of a personal divinity. [This study’s] questions on belief reveal the cultural polarization between the pious and non-religious portions of the national population, which are today roughly similar in size (Kosmin 2009:9).

While the overall number of mainline denominational Christians has dropped, more people are attracted to forms of Christianity with evangelistic or charismatic features. Combined with the move away from identification with organized religion in general, and with the acknowledgement from over 80 percent of Americans that they believe in some form of higher power, these data do not suggest that Americans are becoming less religious. What they do suggest, however, is that *Americans are not religious in the same ways that they have been in the past*. It is not that we only have a larger division between believers and non-believers, but more variation may exist among the believers in the way they make sense of their beliefs in light of an increasingly complex social world.

### **DIFFERENT TIMES, DIFFERENT TOOLS**

How do we account for what appears to be a new religious landscape in the United States today? How are individual-level beliefs connected to the larger social

structure? We must explore these questions within the context of a rapidly changing social world. Specifically, we must explore how individuals create and perpetuate identities for themselves within this social context.

In traditional, pre-modern societies, our notions of identity were not really in question. In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor refers to this condition in his discussion of embeddedness. According to Taylor, social embeddedness “means the inability to imagine oneself outside a certain [social] matrix” (2007:149-50).” He states “...in earlier societies this inability to imagine the self outside of a particular context extended to membership in its essential order” (2007:149). We looked to our families, our communities, and the authorities within them to clarify our senses of self. However, we now live under very different social conditions, and find that our lives are increasingly fragmented. We are subjected to numerous, competing sources of authority, none of which carries the same weight as the authority found in traditional societies. Taylor refers to this condition as disembeddedness (2007). This causes unease or a sense of anomie (Durkheim 1997) for some people, and forces them to confront the problem of doubt. According to numerous theorists (Durkheim 1997; Giddens 1991; Bauman 2007), feelings of doubt make humans unhappy. Our experience of doubt suggests the possibility of our exposure to some degree of chaos, and chaos is something we fear.

It is important to note here that not all individuals living in a given society will experience social conditions the same way. Occupying different positions within hierarchical structures like class, race or gender will have an impact on people’s experiences. Even individuals who appear to have many shared social characteristics are likely to have different perspectives on their experiences and on their positions within

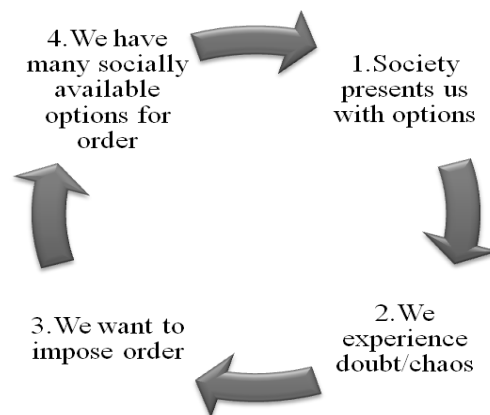
their society. So it would be an overstatement to suggest that all members of a society respond in the same way to the same type of change in social conditions<sup>1</sup>. However, given the sweep of the disembeddedness described by Taylor, and the fact that most individuals in contemporary western societies do not live cloistered lives, we may safely assume that, on some level, many individuals experience some moment of unease over the social changes taking place around them. Even members of society who may benefit financially or in some other way from the changes afoot are likely to experience a temporary state of disequilibrium. Positive anomie is still anomie, and brings with it anomic effects.

How do we cope with such anomie? In an attempt to mitigate this perceived encroaching chaos, many of us try to impose some orderly structure on our own little

---

<sup>1</sup> This point struck me during a discussion of the characteristics of postmodern society that my fellow graduate students and I were engaged in during a class one day. We were in our small seminar room, arguing over the table about the relative effects of depthlessness and the difficulties of representation on our daily lives. About ten minutes into this heated discussion, a man employed as a janitor in our academic building walked by our open classroom door, whistling loudly, and happily, to himself. I then heard him begin to engage (again, loudly) in a discussion of college football with one of his coworkers. It occurred to me that, whatever psychological or cognitive postmodern-induced trauma we were trying to work through in our graduate classroom, the guy out in the hallway seemed wholly unaffected by it. Either he did not know how much his world was being impacted by the effects of Late Capitalism (Jameson 1991), or his world was, in fact, not actually impacted at all.

corners of the world. Specifically, we seek to achieve a certain ordered quality to our own thoughts, beliefs and perspectives. (Just as we distain chaos in our outward environments, we can be completely undone by chaotic conditions within our heads or hearts). However, just as our fragmented contemporary society contributes to this dilemma of chaos, it also presents us with a variety of cognitive structures or ideas we may select from as we attempt to find or impose order (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1: Chaos – Choice Cycle**

We have a wider range of choices of cognitive structures than ever before. This adds an interesting element to our reflexive relationship with society: Society presents us with multiple options, some of us experience doubt/chaos, we want to impose order, and for those individuals who are motivated to restore a sense of personal order, we have many socially available options for doing so. Some individuals utilize consistent organizing structures in their efforts to impose a sense of order onto their thoughts and beliefs. Some may rely on the systematic processes and empirical basis of science as an



organizing principle. Some may rely on the strength that logic and analytical reasoning can bring to bear in cases of decision-making. Others may rely on the tenets of religion to guide them in the process of making choices in their daily lives.

Other individuals may combine seemingly disparate ordering structures into complex, multifaceted (and perhaps inconsistent) organizing principles. For example, someone may attempt to support their *faith* in the creation story from the Old Testament by presenting *scientific* evidence that seems to refute the theory of evolution<sup>2</sup>. Or someone may attempt to explain away the existence of *God* through *logical* arguments or reference to the lack of *empirical* evidence for God's existence. These cases represent complex combinations of various pieces of larger paradigms.

Religion as both an organizing principle and as a general topic is of particular interest in the context of this study. Specifically, how do individuals use or combine organizing principles to make sense of religious ideas? What discursive techniques do they use to either separate from or join with imagined others? Do identifiable discursive

---

<sup>2</sup> In 2001 I attended a lecture at a conservative Baptist church in west Georgia that featured a PowerPoint presentation meant to dispute the theory of evolution. The presenter, calling himself "Dr. Dino," acknowledged that scientific evidence supported the one-time existence of dinosaurs. As dinosaurs are not featured in the Old (or New) Testament, how do people who believe in a strict interpretation of the Bible explain evidence of dinosaurs? According to the presenter, all creatures, including humans, used to enjoy much longer lifespans in biblical times. As the presenter said, reptiles never stop growing, and a centuries-old lizard could easily grow to the proportions of the larger dinosaurs. Essentially, Tyrannosaurus Rex was the Methuselah of the lizard world.

patterns exist that help identify a traditionally-religious person from a non-traditional believer?

This study represents an attempt to elucidate some of the different ways believers of various classifications talk about religion, and also how they use their religious beliefs to talk about elements of everyday social life. I seek to explore how people “do religion.” Specifically, using theories and methods predominantly from cultural sociology, I will explore how people use their beliefs about the supernatural to construct meaning, and in the process reduce their subjective experiences of uncertainty regarding family, authority and boundaries. The construction of meaning and the delineation of boundaries are active processes, and therefore ones of agency. This study explores the intersection of belief and agency in individuals’ constructions of family, authority and boundaries.

As family is the first social structure we encounter and one of the key agents of primary socialization, how individuals talk about family can reveal a great deal about how they view the world. Specifically, when individuals talk about family, they provide insight into how they answer the questions “where do I come from?” and “where do I belong?” Family is the location of our first encounters with authority and boundaries, and thus serves as a logical starting point for the substantive chapters of this study.

The way individuals talk about authority helps illuminate how they answer the questions “who do I trust to guide me?” and “who knows what is right and true?” Beyond our experiences of childhood, who we consider to be real authorities becomes a matter of choice to a great extent. Therefore, any claim to authority must be weighed against many other such claims. We are also often in situations where we must attempt to validate that which we claim to be a legitimate authority to those who might require

convincing. These situations illustrate the fact that discerning “real” authority is an active project of construction humans undertake. This project may well occupy more of our time today than in times past, due to the increased competition between authorities in our “disembedded” times.

When determining who counts as family or who we consider to be authorities, we are essentially determining the positions of boundaries. Boundaries serve to answer the questions “where do I end and others begin?” and “who is one of us, and who is one of them?” To some extent, we draw cognitive lines between “us” and “them,” between “truth” and “fiction,” and between “real” and “fake.” This study will examine where individuals draw some of those lines, and how committed they seem to maintaining boundaries, overall.

My hope is to improve our understanding of some of the cognitive adaptations individuals use to help make sense of our rapidly changing social conditions. The issue of social (and now global) change, and the impact such change has on the way we think and behave, is of interest to academics and the general public, as well. One of the suppositions many people seem to agree on is that things are changing, even if we disagree on the nature or relative value of such change. As an illustration, I recall President Mohler of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and quote from the above-mentioned interview he gave Jon Meacham of *Newsweek*:

“What we are seeing now is the evidence of a pattern that began a very long time ago of intellectual and cultural and political changes in thought and mind. The conditions have changed. Hard to pinpoint where, but whatever came after the

Enlightenment was going to be very different than what came before” (Meacham 2009).

Much has changed since the Enlightenment, as well. Humans within today’s changing societies adapt with their own “changes in thought and mind.” Specifically, the way they construct meaning in a cultural environment where meaning is likely to change at any time tells us about the relative importance to those individuals of different sources of authority and the construction of boundaries to maintain a sense of identity for themselves. Their religious beliefs, in combination with other cultural resources, are likely tools in their efforts to construct meaning and senses of self.

#### **SOCIAL CHANGE AND RELIGIOUS REVITALIZATION**

In the decades just before and after the turn of the twenty-first century the United States experienced a period of revitalization of religious and spiritual matters. While attendance at religious services did not increase appreciably during this time, it also did not decline (Roof 1999:120-1; Kosmin & Keysar 2009). In sum, as Robert Putnam phrases it, “Americans have high rates of religious belonging, behaving, and believing...,” acknowledging that religion is about far more than attendance at services (Putnam 2010:7). During this time period alternative forms of spirituality became a common element of popular culture (Albanese 2007; Chidester 2005; Roof 1999, 1994) and, as mentioned above, many Christians changed their institutional affiliation to more evangelical denominations (Kosmin & Keysar 2009). A basic assumption of sociologists is that the forms religions take is influenced by the social conditions under which those religions develop (Durkheim 1995; Putnam 2010; Weber 1993). Therefore, changes in

the level or form of a society's religiosity may be seen as sharing a close relationship with changes in other elements of the social structure. What follows is a brief overview of some of the changes that have taken place in the macrostructure of western society in recent decades.

### ***Technological Change and the Global Economy***

An ongoing concern of social theorists is the transformation of society over time. In the last two decades, various theorists have presented descriptions of the transformation taking place in wealthy, technologically-advanced societies such as the United States. Referred to variously as postmodern society (Lyotard 1984), post-industrial society (Bell 1978), late or multinational capitalist society (Jameson 1992), high modernity (Giddens 1991), liquid modernity (Bauman 2000, 2007) or the network society (Castells 2000), these different names, each connected to its own highly-nuanced theory, collectively refer to a new form of society now becoming dominant in many sectors of the social structure of the United States and other parts of the highly developed world.

This new form of society is characterized generally by the dissolution of boundaries of all sorts. This dissolution includes the collapse of temporal and geographic space, allowing for such innovations as the ability of someone in Iceland to view the goings-on at Zoo Atlanta live (in "real-time"), courtesy of the internet-based Panda Cam. It allows for a global economy that routes customer service calls from an AT&T account holder in Florida to a company representative in India. It includes a collapse of social space between individuals of different social statuses, allowing for a celebrity and her

fans to chat with each other in the virtual space of the internet. We can keep up with the intimate details of the daily lives of people we have never met by reading their blogs. We also are asked to choose which language we wish to use when conducting bank transactions on the phone.

This dissolution of boundaries extends to traditional relationships of authority as well. A family in which children have to assist their parents in keeping up with technological change is bound to see a shift away from the “Father Knows Best” model of family relationships. New childrearing methods, quite popular in certain parenting circles within our society, emphasize the individuality and viewpoint of the child (Secombe & Warner 2004). This contrasts with the traditional, more authoritarian “because I said so” method of childrearing favored by millions of parents in America’s past (and by a sizeable number today, as well). The authority of political leaders has eroded, as measured by the details of their private lives leaked to the press, and the public outcry for recall, censure, or impeachment of elected officials that we have witnessed on the local, state and national level in the last twenty years. Also in keeping with this dissolution of authority, colleges and universities today are often encouraged to think of enrolled students as “customers” to be satisfied, rather than learners to be instructed and evaluated.

Depending on where we live or work in the United States, we are more or less affected by these changes in our society. Humans living in a society undergoing rapid change are likely to experience discomfort, while trying to orient themselves in a transitional social structure. This discomfort or “crisis consciousness” as Martin Riesebrodt terms it, results from the disorientation an individual feels while trying to find

steady footing on a shifting social landscape. What are the new sources of authority? What happened to the old ones? How should I define, or redefine my relationships with those in my immediate social world? How do I redraw the boundaries that separate me from the rest of the world, or do I do so at all? At stake is the development of a new identity that makes sense in the new social context. Such identity creation, or modification, takes place in the realms of institutional relationships (“What do you mean I can’t talk to my bank teller for free?”), intimate relationships (my cousin in Maryland married a man from Ireland she met in a Celtic chat room online), and the way we imagine our place in the social world around us.

### ***Trends in U.S. Religious Identification***

When sociologists explore the common ways individuals attempt to orient themselves in a new or rapidly-evolving social structure, we frequently turn to an analysis of the way those individuals view the world and their places within it. Traditionally, this includes an analysis of religion. Historically, during periods of rapid social change, societies experience periods of religious revitalization (Cross 2006; Marsden 2001; Thomas 1998). This is to be expected, if we accept that religion, in its most basic social function, provides a means toward establishing group cohesion (Durkheim 1995), a source of comfort during turbulent times. However, religion also serves more internal, less explicitly social functions. Specifically, religious forms often serve as models, templates, or metaphors for an individual’s perception of the way the social world should be, and provides a sense of one’s place in that imagined social world.

When subjected to similar social conditions, or at least those that appear similar to outside observers, different people respond in different ways. Their responses often include the embrace of different religious or spiritual forms. This leads to the question of what lies behind the divergent spiritual paths individuals take in negotiating the same social and psychological challenges brought on by rapid social change.

If we accept as fact the transforming nature of our society today, it would be expected that a certain amount of religious revitalization is occurring throughout the United States. In fact, to the disappointment of the various theorists who predicted an increasingly secularized America, national surveys indicate that the U.S. population is more religiously active, more interested in spiritual matters, and more open to a diversity of beliefs than was the case thirty years ago. According to the 2008 *American Religious Identity Survey*, the percentage of Americans identifying themselves as agnostic fell 20% between 1990 and 2001, but roughly doubled between 2001 and 2008. As mentioned above, the percentage of people in the United States identifying themselves as either nonreligious or secular more than doubled to 15% in 2008, up from 8.2 % in 1990 (Kosmin & Keysar 2009; Mayer, Kosmin and Keysar 2001). While some respondents may indeed be atheists, they may also be believers who feel that their beliefs are not represented by any particular organized religion<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Another attempt to deal with the difficulty of accounting for non-specified religious identification appears in Robert Putnam's *American Grace* (2010). Using data collected in the 2006 and 2007 Faith Matters surveys, Putnam and his colleagues constructed a measure of religious intensity they labeled religiosity. A respondent's religiosity was based on responses to six questions that ran "the gamut of ways that a person might be



The *ARIS* also indicates that the percentage of Americans who identify with non-western or indigenous religious traditions increased markedly between 1990 and 2000.

**Table 1.1: Changes in Identification with Non-Western Religious Traditions, 1990-2000** (Mayer, Kasmin and Keysar 2001)

RELIGION	% of U.S. Population, 2000	% CHANGE 1990-2000
Islam	0.5%	+109%
Buddhism	0.5%	+170%
Hinduism	0.4%	+237%
Native American Religion	0.05%	+119%
Bahai'i	0.04%	+200%
New Age	0.03%	+240%
Sikhism	0.03%	+338%
Taoist	0.02%	+74%

---

religious,” including public and private activities and beliefs (Putnam 2010:18). He acknowledges that “the nature of what it means to be religious is inevitably fraught with ambiguity and controversy...” and notes that the index items used to measure religiosity “are logically distinct, but in practice they are tightly bound together. Nearly all people...who say that religion is important in their lives are also ‘absolutely certain’ they believe in God...and so on” (2010:19).

Other combination religions or non-mainstream American religions also enjoyed increased participation in the 1990s:

**Table 1.2: Changes in Identification with Alternative Religions or Forms of Spirituality, 1990-2000** (Mayer, Kasmin and Keysar 2001)

RELIGION	% of U.S. Population, 2000	% CHANGE 1990-2000
Unitarian Universalist	0.03%	+25%
New Age	0.03%	+240%
Scientology	0.02%	+22%
Humanist	0.02%	+69%
Deist	0.02%	+717%
Eckankar	0.01%	+44%

While the total participation in these eastern or alternative religions only accounts for a very small percentage of the U.S. population, the changes in their numbers over the 1990s reflects immigration from nations with different religions, but also changes in faith among the native population of the U.S.

The latest *ARIS* combines several of the groups in the table above into two umbrella categories: “Eastern Religions,” including Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Baha’i, Zoroastrianism and Sikhism; and “New Religious Movements and Other Religions,” including Unitarian-Universalism, Deism, Scientology, Eckankar, New Age, Spiritual-

ism, Wicca, Paganism, Indian Religions and others. The religions combined into the Eastern Religions category, after more than doubling from .4% to 1% of the U.S population between 1990 and 2001, lost a bit of statistical ground and falling to .9% by 2008. However, the groups constituting the New Religious Movement category continued a trend of modest growth, from .8% of the population in 1990, to .9% in 2001, to 1.2% in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

The largest percentage of believers in the United States remains Christian, making up 76% of the U.S. population (including Catholics). Christianity declined in numbers since 1990, when it claimed 86.2% of the overall population. Older, mainline denominations still comprised the majority of Christians, including Catholics (25.1%), Methodists (5%), Lutherans (3.8%), Presbyterians (2.1%), and Episcopalians (1.1%). Each of these groups fell in terms of percentages and actual membership numbers between 1990 and 2008. The largest Protestant denomination, the Baptists, comprised 15.8% of Americans in 2008, and although this group, like the Protestant denominations listed above, lost percentage points (down from 19.3% in 1990), Baptists added to their

---

<sup>4</sup> According to the *ARIS* authors, Buddhism's surge in popularity among white converts in the 1990s has receded, but respondents who identified themselves as belonging to the New Religious Movement/Other category "revealed marked increase in preferences for personalized and idiosyncratic responses as well as increases in the New-Pagan groups" (Kasmin and Keysar 2009:7).

actual membership during the same time period, from an estimated 33,964,000 in 1990 to an estimated 36,148,000 in 2008.<sup>5</sup>

While the biggest gains in membership proportion among protestant denominations during the 1990s were enjoyed by the Evangelical Christian denominations, those proportions declined by 2008. However, as mentioned above, more Americans identify themselves as either “Born Again” or “Evangelical” now, without necessarily claiming affiliation with an established or recognized evangelical institution. While more individuals are claiming to enjoy a personal relationship with God, more are also refusing involvement with organized religion the way it has existed for decades.

**Table 1.3: Relative Stability of Participation in Two Evangelical Denominations in the United States, 1990-2008** (Kasmin and Keysar 2009)

DENOMINATION	% of U.S. Population, 1990	% of U.S. Population, 2001	% U.S. Population 2008
Pentacostal/Charismatic	3.2%	3.8%	3.5%
Assemblies of God	0.4%	0.5%	0.4%

---

<sup>5</sup> The ARIS summary suggests the growing number of Baptists may be accounted for by a “measured reassertion of a Baptist identity among the population” and a greater variety of detailed Baptist varieties from which respondents could choose in the 2008 survey. (Kasmin and Keysar 2001:6)

So, there is strong evidence that more people living in the United States<sup>6</sup> at the turn of the twenty-first century were drawn to eastern religions, alternative religions, or livelier, more personal forms of Protestantism than in the past. It is also clear from the latest *ARIS* and Putnam's Faith Matters survey that, even among believers, there is less agreement over how best to express one's relationship with God. Fewer are choosing affiliation with traditional organized religion, and more Christians are choosing non-denominational churches for their institutional needs. More Christians claim to have a relatively intense relationship with God than in the past. Also, among believers who do not identify specifically as Christian, more confess to not really knowing exactly what they believe, but feel certain they believe in *something*.

In sum, Americans are overwhelmingly believers in some form of "higher power," which for 69.5% of believers is definitely a personal God, and for the other 12.1% of believers is some other form of power. Another 10% of Americans express uncertainty over the existence of God, but only 2.3% of Americans absolutely deny the existence of God or any form of higher power (Kosmin and Keysar 2009:8). We are generally a nation of believers, even if we do not agree upon what we believe in. We are also rejecting traditional organized religions in greater numbers than in the past,

---

<sup>6</sup> The *ARIS* data is representative of the United States population, so some change in religious identification noted in the findings may reflect, in part, immigration trends as well. However, because one of the primary interests of the current study is religious and spiritual belief within a particular societal context, inclusion of immigrants to the United States is not problematic methodologically.

and are more likely to claim personal experience with some incarnation of God, whether with Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or some other spiritual form.

How do we make sense of this increase in belief, but decrease in participation in mainline, organized religion? What sort of differences can we find between the worldviews of people who identify themselves as Christians, and those who identify themselves as non-Christian believers in God? What different cognitive techniques do believers use to understand their place in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world? When people are “doing religion,” *how* are they doing religion? These are some of the issues that make up the focus of this study.

#### **GENERAL FOCUS OF THIS STUDY**

While a number of studies have explored particular Christian denominations (Frykholm 2004; Gallagher 2003; Smith 1998; Griffin 1997) , or compared different types of Christian communities to one another (Howard 2011; Ammerman 2005), this study looks beyond nominal religious group identification to focus on *the ways* believers incorporate their beliefs into discussions of the issues of family, authority and boundaries as a means of establishing a personal sense of identity. As a point of ingress into individuals’ thoughts on these matters, and into the issue of belief itself, I use reader reviews of two religious/spiritual self-help books that have been popular among those searching for an understanding of spirit and the meaning of human existence. As posted on the Amazon.com website, the reviews represent the thoughts of a group of individuals who 1) have enough interest in issues of spirituality to explore one of these books; 2) formulated an opinion on the ideas within the book(s) they read or the manner in which

the ideas are presented; and 3) cared enough about these issues to compose a review of the book for the benefit of other readers. In some cases the reviewers mention not having finished the books, and in a few cases they admit to not having read them at all.

However, the focus of this study is on the way people discuss ideas, and not specifically the ideas contained within the two books. The books provide a type of idea-fed “campfire” around which individuals gather (in a virtual sense) to discuss spiritual and religious ideas they find important.

The two books that serve as points of entry into spiritual discussions for this study are Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life* and Neale Donald Walsch’s *Conversations with God*. Both of these books topped the best-selling book lists for unusually long periods of time, and drew in readers with various levels of interest in spiritual or religious matters<sup>7</sup>.

A sociological perspective on the ideological differences among people of faith can add to our understanding of our seemingly “divided” society by looking at the larger cultural context within which the divide exists. Using Griswold’s cultural diamond model (Griswold 1994), this study is an attempt to explore the relationships between (1) a diverse cultural audience of readers, (2) two cultural objects or products (one Evangelical Christian book, one spiritual book), (3) two cultural producers (Pastor Rick Warren and Neale Donald Walsch), and (4) the social environment (post-industrial, late capitalist United States) in which they exist. The multiple audiences, products and producers in this model provide an opportunity to examine very different reactions to the same cultural

---

<sup>7</sup> More detail on the selection of these two books as the entry point for spiritual discussion follows in the Methodology chapter.

products, to the producers, and to the society in which they live. At a fundamental, symbolic level, different audience members for these books may inhabit very different social worlds.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

This dissertation draws from a number of literatures within the academic field of sociology. This literature review encompasses research from cultural sociology, and the sociology of religion, with a generous sprinkling of classical sociological theory throughout.

The first part of this chapter reviews some of the prominent social theorists who have written on the changing nature of western society and the effects of this change on identity development and cognitive processes. The next part focuses on research from sociologists of religion, and specifically describes some of the most prominent forms of religion found in the United States today. Particular attention is paid to two extremely different religious forms that, historically, tend to enjoy renewed popularity under conditions of rapid social change.

### **TIMES OF TURMOIL, CRISES OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

An enduring project of social theorists has been to describe the contours of social change as it happens in various societies. Sociologists are also particularly interested in the impact such change has on the daily lives of individuals. Of particular interest is the influence of social change on the religious or spiritual beliefs and practices of individuals adjusting to or resisting such change. Courtney Bender states toward the beginning of her new book that

American spirituality is a religious condition that emerges in a new way in the crucible of late twentieth-century social dislocations. New levels of religious seeking and increasing numbers of unaffiliated individuals are indicative of (or the consequence of) ongoing social fragmentation and weakening social ties, increased social mobility, and growing education levels (Bender 2010:3).

While there is no lack of writing describing the recent rapid changes taking place in the United States and other complex societies (Taylor 2007; Castells 2000; Gergen 1992; Lasch 1991; Harvey 2010, 1991), I have selected the works of two sociologists who place particular emphasis on the effects of rapid social change on identity development.

In his 1991 book *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* Anthony Giddens states that in “a post- traditional social universe, reflexively organized, permeated by abstract systems, and in which the reordering of time and space realigns the local with the global, the self undergoes massive change” (Giddens 1991:80). One of the main causes of such change is that today individuals are confronted with more choices than ever before, in areas of our lives that were previously immune to choice. For example, the early American colonists generally were not confronted with what they wanted to “be” when they “grew up.” It was clear that most of them would follow in the gender- and class-appropriate paths travelled by their parents. Today, a teenager in our society is confronted by an array of options in terms of education, vocational training, career paths or family structures he or she might choose to pursue. Realistically, individuals do have to deal with structural constraints that limit their options. However,

it may be argued that even the least fortunate individual in our society, in terms of access to opportunities for economic advancement, still faces more daily choices than his or her counterparts would have faced in 1750.

According to Giddens, in societies of the past “tradition or established habit [ordered] life within relatively set channels. Modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices and, because it is non-foundational, at the same time offers little help as to which options should be selected” (1991:80). One way of coping with such a diversity of choices is to adopt a *lifestyle*. Giddens defines a lifestyle as “a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (p.81).

A lifestyle, thus defined, is consciously chosen and actively followed, modified or rejected. But as in other matters of choice in today’s society, our choice of lifestyles is also constrained to some degree by social and structural forces. According to Giddens, “the selection or creation of lifestyles is influenced by group pressures and the visibility of role models, as well as by socioeconomic circumstances” (p.82). However, by choosing a particular lifestyle to follow, we may limit the number of other daily choices we might otherwise have to make.

A lifestyle involves a cluster of habits and orientations, and hence has a certain unity – important to a continuing sense of ontological security – that connects options in a more or less ordered pattern. Someone who is committed to a given lifestyle would necessarily see various options as ‘out of

character' with it, as would others with whom she was in interaction (Giddens 1991:82).

A lifestyle serves as a template with predetermined selections of some of the choices we would otherwise confront. Therefore, a lifestyle is an important tool in the day-to-day construction of self in a complex social world. In fact, "[t]he more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking" (p.81). Further, Giddens states that "...in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so—we have no choice but to choose" (p.81).

This problem of choice is also a concern in the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman has written extensively and in great detail about the changes impacting humanity living under conditions of postmodernity (Bauman 2007; 2000; 1999; 1998; 1997; 1994). As explained by Barbara A. Strassberg, Bauman "believes that in the rapidly globalizing postmodern world, on a daily basis people experience what he calls *Unsicherheit*," a German term that has no direct translation into English, but can be approximated by blending the meanings of the words "uncertainty, insecurity, and unsafety" (Strassberg 2005:311). The experience of such unsettling emotions is in contrast with experiences of individuals living in more traditional societies. While humans have always experienced a range of emotions throughout their lives, both Giddens and Bauman suggest that humans of the past at least knew who they were, and had clear direction about why they were here. This is what Giddens means by "ontological security:" a feeling of security or safety stemming from our experience of continuity and order in our daily lives. We feel safe if we derive some sense of purpose

and meaning in our own existence. A more predictable life, lived in a more predictable social milieu, would lead to a higher degree of ontological security.

What happens when a disruption occurs in our day-to-day sense of meaning?

Bauman agrees with Giddens

... that most of the time we live in a state of *ontological security*, with a sense of the reliability of persons and things and the apparent predictability of our daily routines. However, once the routine's ability to self-perpetuate is discontinued, we suffer *existential anxiety* (Strassberg 2005:311).

Bauman believes we are generally too busy with the tasks of our daily lives to worry about "ultimate concerns" like the meaning of existence. As he puts it, "[b]efore one has had time to think of eternity, bedtime is coming, and then another day filled to the brim with things to be done or undone" (Bauman 1998: 57). Because we do not have the luxury of time to sit and ponder the ultimate questions, but are still unsettled by them anyway, we cope by *controlling what we can*. We focus on the minutia of everyday life, and in doing so are compelled to make a daily series of decisions about how to handle the tasks at hand (or which tasks to tackle in the first place). This situation compels us to face what Bauman refers to as the cause of our highest level of uncertainty: "that of *missing an opportunity* by not seeing clearly enough which of the existing options to choose at the time of making a decision" (Strassberg 2005: 311). We suffer great stress when the responsibility falls on us to make decisions, and to make the best decision out of many options.

What can serve as comfort to humans grappling with these issues of control and decision-making? Bauman suggests that “[m]en and women haunted by uncertainty postmodern-style do not need preachers telling them about the weakness of man and the insufficiency of human resources. They need reassurance that they *can* do it—and a brief as to *how* to do it” (1998: 68-69). Some individuals seem better equipped to handle the responsibility of decision-making that now falls on them. According to Bauman,

...the postmodern mind is altogether less excited than its Modern adversary by the prospect (let alone moved by the urge) to enclose the world into a grid of neat categories and clear-cut divisions. We are somewhat less horrified today by the nasty habit things have of spilling over their definitional boundaries, or even by the premonition that the drawing of such boundaries with any degree of lasting reliability defies human resources (Bauman 1998:55).

In theory, people who are more comfortable with this world of indistinct and permeable boundaries probably do adapt to social change in different ways than their less-flexible counterparts. These different groups would look to different sources of authority to bolster their senses of ontological security. Even those who turn to religion as a grounding principle may be attracted to very different forms of religion.

For instance, fundamentalist religion may be seen as “a specifically postmodern form of religion, born of the internal contradictions of postmodern life...—that is, fundamentalism” (Strassberg 1998:312). If our greatest fear today involves our personal

responsibility in making choices and decisions, then fundamentalism as described by Bauman presents as a rational alternative to living with this fear.

Fundamentalism is a thoroughly contemporary, postmodern phenomenon embracing fully the “rationalizing” reforms and technological developments of modernity, and attempting not so much to “roll back” modern departures as to “have the cake while eating it.” It makes possible a full enjoyment of modern attractions without having to pay the price they demand. The price in question is the agony of the individual condemned to self-sufficiency, self-reliance and a life of never fully-satisfying and trustworthy choice (Bauman 1998:72)

By referencing “having the cake while eating it,” Bauman points to one of the more contradictory elements of fundamentalist religion in complex societies today.

Fundamentalists want to experience the ontological security of having an overriding authority guiding their lives (the cake) which absolves them of making all of their own daily, difficult decisions. However, at the same time they may enjoy (or eat) all of the informed advantages and technological conveniences produced by the same changed social conditions they find so threatening.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> I have two examples to illustrate this contradiction. Some Christian relatives of mine enjoy watching nature shows on television, until the narration states anything about any evidence that the earth is any older than about 6,000 years. They will dismiss this information with statements such as “Oh, how can they know that?” However, these same relatives are happy to use the microwave and take prescription drugs, which are two

In that postmodern conditions have thrust upon us responsibility for our own lives, bombarded us with information and options, and left us to suffer or celebrate the consequences of our choices, fundamentalism represents a partial retreat into a more prescribed way of thinking (if not living).

The allure of fundamentalism stems from its promise to emancipate the converted from the agonies of choice. Here one finds, finally, the indubitably *supreme* authority, an authority to end all other authorities. One knows where to look when life-decisions are to be made, in matters big and small, and one knows that looking there does the right thing and so is spared the dread of risk-taking (Bauman 1998:74).

---

other results of the modern scientific method. It is pick-and-choose acceptance of science as it does not threaten a particular worldview.

In another instance, I heard a friend of mine “arguing” with Pope John Paul II when he appeared on television giving a speech in which he reiterated his stance on the prohibition of modern birth control methods for Catholics. My friend suggested that, if the Pope wanted to restrict contemporary families to the use of 15<sup>th</sup> Century medicine, he should be willing to live with such restrictions himself. It should be noted that, at the time of this incident, John Paul II was enduring the late stages of Parkinson’s disease (Judd 2001).



While times of rapid social change may provoke a larger percent of a population to turn to fundamentalism as a means of coping, fundamentalism is not the only form of religion that may provide comfort and help individuals chase away existential anxiety. Religion is yet another choice individuals in a postmodern society must make, including the choice to claim a religious identity or not. In fact, “[i]t appears that postmodernity not only has room for religion but also provides conditions favorable for the development of ‘new’ forms of religious expression capable of incorporating the use of available technology and also of modern science” (Strassberg 2005:312). Some of the common elements of many of these new religious forms will be discussed at length later in this chapter. However, first will be a review of literature that serves to fine-tune what is meant by fundamentalist and other forms of Christianity in the United States today.

### **POPULAR FORMS OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE UNITED STATES**

As someone who was, for the most part, raised outside the structure of organized religious in the United States, I spent many years assuming that fundamentalist Christians were all quite similar. In fact, this is not the case. Many Americans, and particularly academics, may not be aware of the distinctions that separate various Christian forms, and get lost in the various labels applied to them.

Christian Smith effectively addresses this confusion in *Evangelicalism in America: Embattled and Thriving*. For example, he draws a distinction between evangelical Christians and fundamentalist Christians. Evangelicals, while committed to their Christian beliefs in salvation, actively reach out to others in an effort to spread the word, or “...working to cross the boundary out of the world of faith to have an effect on

the world outside” (Smith 1998:242). Evangelicals also place value on a personal relationship with God, and are open to discussing their own salvation stories. According to Smith,

... “evangelical” as an identity label typically suggested a particular orientation of religious practice, an activist faith that tries to influence the surrounding world. For evangelicals themselves, this involves a heartfelt, personal commitment to and experiential relationship with God, from which springs a readiness to take a stand and speak out for faith” (242-3).

While sharing some points of commonalities with evangelicals, fundamentalist Christians take a more defensive stance of their beliefs against the perceived threat from the secular world. Theirs is a more “boundary-maintaining orientation”, and one that emphasizes “separation from the world, the primacy of the King James Bible, and the defense of the faith against modern, liberal thought. Their commitment [is] to preserving truth and purity, not to influencing the secular world” (Smith 1998:243). Rather than reaching out to those outside their circle of fellow believers, fundamentalists close ranks and perceive outsiders as threatening to their faith project.

Unlike evangelicals or fundamentalists, mainline Protestants are members of the “...older, more established, well-known, larger denominations,” such as Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians (Smith 1998:243). While structured in their religious organization, they are neither as committed to drawing others into their fold or defending themselves from the perceived threat from outsiders.

Finally, Smith identifies Christian liberals who, while still identifying themselves as believers in Jesus as Savior, are “open-minded and accepting of diversity” (Smith 1998:244), especially as compared to their evangelical and fundamentalist neighbors. The implication is that “acceptance” of diversity is distinct from “acknowledgement and subsequent attempt to reduce” diversity. These liberal Christians are the ones most likely to combine new or imported ideas or practices with their Christian faith. Some mainline Protestants may demonstrate an interest in some ideas or practices of eastern or metaphysical spirituality, evangelicals and particularly fundamentalists reject these forms of spirituality. In many cases they present new religious movements or alternative spirituality as phenomena to be feared.

#### **ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES**

As the *ARIS* indicated, more Americans identified themselves as followers of new or alternative religions during the 1990s. Not only were the 1990s characterized by an increase in subjective identification with alternative spirituality, but this spirituality also became ingrained in the popular culture of the United States during this time. The most common (although not all-encompassing) term used to identify this particular type of spirituality in the 1990s was “New Age” (Drury 1999). What follows is a description of New Age spirituality, and a discussion of the problematic nature of that term.

#### ***Spirituality vs. Religion; or, The Problem That Will Not Be Solved Here***

As stated by Courtney Bender, “[d]efining spirituality and locating it within social life is notoriously difficult...[and] is bedeviled not by a lack of definitions but by an

almost endless proliferation of them” (2010:5). While I do not anticipate being able to settle this matter of definitions within the scope of this study, having some working definitions for these terms is necessary because they are terms used by the respondents who supply my data. Therefore, some rudimentary distinctions must be made before the analytical portions of this study are attempted.

Recent studies have examined the features that distinguish “spirituality” from “religion” (Guest 2007). One particular study, based on the input from respondents, suggested that “the difference between spirituality and religion tends to be that religion is linked with specific beliefs and actions, whereas spirituality is more about a frame of mind, or a way of looking at the world” (Hunt 2003:161). Perhaps the simplest and most useful distinction is that religion is something that begins as external to an individual, while spirituality begins internally (Heelas 2008). An established religion may certainly influence beliefs within individuals, and a spirituality which originates within may find expression outside an individual. Many of the reader reviews that serve as data for this study contain mentions of the distinctions between religion and spirituality, and this external origin/internal origin distinction seems to fit what individuals describe as their experiences of these phenomena.

Also important to note is that many respondents use the term “New Age” in their reviews, in both disparaging and complementary ways. Some of these references are probably due to the time period in which data was collected, when the term “New Age” had become a very common term in U.S. popular culture.<sup>9</sup> While New Age spirituality

---

<sup>9</sup> “New Age” is still a popular term. A Google search in early August 2010 produced 66,200,000 results (in an impressive 1.10 seconds).

does seem to fit within the general guidelines of the external/ internal distinction, the outward expressions of this spirituality took consistent enough shape externally to be seen by advocates and critics alike as something of a quasi-religion.

### ***What is New Age Spirituality?***

One of the first comments found in any academic writing on New Age phenomena is something to the effect that New Age is nearly impossible to define (Bloch 1998). Therefore, in order to settle on a working definition of New Age spirituality for the purposes of this study, it may be helpful to discuss what it *is not*.

New Age spirituality is not best understood in terms of traditional religion. While sociologists and anthropologists have defined religion in various ways, most acknowledge that a religion has some form of recognizable structure. Certainly religion operates at the personal level, providing psychological and spiritual comfort to individuals, but sociologists also are concerned with the social, shared aspect of religion. Recent studies indicate that New Age spirituality lacks the recognizable structure or unified system of beliefs which usually characterize a religion (Heelas 1996:16).

Another problem with defining New Age spirituality as a religion is that elements of this spirituality are often incorporated into an individual's existing belief system that may or may not be part of an organized religion. For example, an observant Presbyterian may hold a belief in reincarnation (not a belief traditionally sanctioned by the Presbyterians), but still continue to attend church and have a persistent belief in the major tenets of this Christian denomination. This seems to be the way many New Age followers negotiate this different spirituality: it exists alongside other spiritual (and more

traditionally religious) forms. According to one survey, “[w]hile two-thirds of all adults maintain a relatively traditional concept of God, one out of four adults have moved closer to a ‘new age’ interpretation of a supreme being” (Barna 1996:28)

### *New Age as Popular Religion*

In that New Age spirituality became “externalized” enough in the 1990s in the United States to become a marketing term, this spiritual form may be considered a type of popular religion. According to Williams, popular religion is usually

- (1) found outside formal church structures
- (2) transmitted outside the established channels of religious instruction and communication employed by these structures, and
- (3) preoccupied with concrete manifestations of the supernatural in the midst of the secular world (Williams 1989: xi).

An example of popular religion is the persistent interest in the daily horoscope many Americans share.<sup>10</sup> Hooking one's daily fate to astrological constellations is certainly outside the traditional Judeo-Christian religious foundation basic to many people in the United States. However, even the more conservative daily newspapers print strangers' predictions about our daily lives, based on something other than God, Jesus, Mohammed,

---

<sup>10</sup> A 2005 Gallup Poll found that twenty-five percent of respondents in the United States believed “that the position of the stars and planets can affect people's lives” (Rosenbloom 2005:1).

the Pope, Billy Graham, or any other religious figure.<sup>11</sup> The horoscope remains in the realm of popular religion because, while many people may read their horoscopes, and even discuss them with others, they do not en masse abandon their previous beliefs and join a Church of the Divine Horoscope. If this were to happen, astrology would move into the realm of religion, rather than being relegated to the "popular religion" division.

According to Hudson and Corrigan in *Religion in America*, popular religious ideas

are always somewhat ambiguous. They are a topic of conversation, passed from person to person by word of mouth, and they are sometimes sketched in novels or in general non-fiction writing, or now in cyberspace through the Internet.

They only rarely manifest the precise definition, careful ordering, and complex expression that characterize elite religions. They flourish in the interstices, in the cracks, between formal institutional structures. People adopt them as they need them, and discard them if and when they no longer need them. The appeal of popular religious ideas to individuals is stronger at some times than at others, as when a loved one dies, or during a personal crisis. But none of these characteristics makes popular religion any less meaningful for

---

<sup>11</sup> Or on science (Spencer 2003).

individuals who are attracted to them, or any less significant within the religious landscape (Hudson & Corrigan 1999: 420-1).

Such is also the case with New Age spirituality. Although this spirituality consists of beliefs from a variety of long-existing religions (see below), such as Buddhism and ancient Jewish mysticism, these religions are not accepted in their entirety. Rather, various elements of these belief systems are adopted and, in many cases, spliced together in a manner not unlike the bricolage described by Levi-Strauss (1968). Therefore, despite the fact that common references exist to the New Age Movement or New Age religion, a more accurate way of thinking about New Age spirituality is as a popular religion.

### ***New Age Spirituality: A Working Definition***

For the purposes of this study, I define New Age spirituality as *a collection of spiritual beliefs and practices; adopted from other diverse religious and cultural traditions; characterized by an emphasis on holism and a dissolution of ideological and practical boundaries; and practiced as a popular religion in contemporary United States culture*. New Age is spiritual, in that it deals with transcendent subjects and universal concerns such as life and death. New Age spirituality is holistic, in that it focuses not only on spiritual matters, but on mind, body and spirit, and on the interconnected relationships between these three elements. New Age is also holistic in its emphasis on the interconnectedness between the earthly and spiritual realms, and the world of humans and the world of nature. New Age is also characterized by permeable boundaries



between traditionally separated ideological and practical elements. For example, most mainstream religions draw a sharp distinction between the sacred (that which inspires awe) and the profane (that which is part of everyday life). New Age spirituality effectively dissolves this boundary between the sacred and the profane by asserting the sacredness of everything in life.

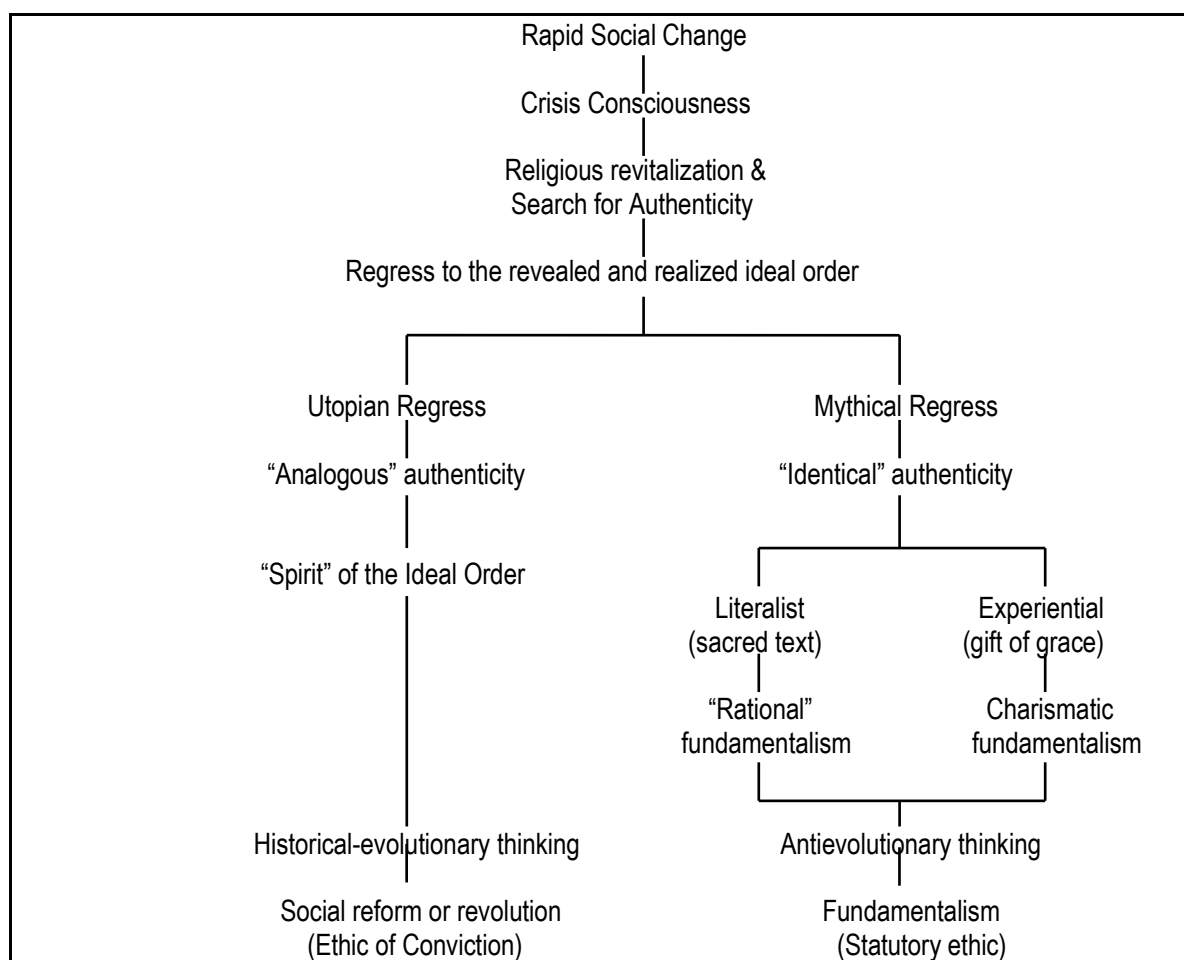
### **FUNDAMENTALISM AND NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY AS POLAR RESPONSES TO RAPID SOCIAL CHANGE**

The relationship between New Age spirituality and fundamentalist Christianity is interesting to explore because these forms of belief stand in near diametrical opposition to one another in terms of ideology. One of the most intriguing ideas brought up in the literature on New Age suggests a somewhat counterintuitive relationship between this alternative spirituality and fundamentalism. For example, Catherine L. Albanese looks at New Age in comparison to its earlier manifestations in the United States. Although she considers this spirituality from a number of different angles, perhaps most compelling is her assertion that New Age spirituality may appear in U.S. popular culture as a reaction against the rise of (conservative) evangelical movements. She suggests that, when a large portion of popular culture adopts a rather pessimistic view of humans as innately sinful, the essential split between God and the individual, and attempts to downplay the importance of nature (whether in the form of the environment or sexual expression), an opposition movement may form. If New Age is a cultural turn, it is one that “is incomprehensible without seeing what was turned from” (Albanese 1993:140). Albanese asserts that it is fundamentalism from which New Age turns away.

Exploring this relationship between New Age and fundamentalism is Tadeusz Doktòr's study of the beliefs of these two forms of spirituality. Unlike earlier quantitative studies that collected data on the beliefs of these two groups by asking them different questions, Doktòr asked the New Agers and the fundamentalists the same questions, having to do with the diversity of their friends' religions, their personal beliefs in the afterlife, and related questions (Doktòr 2003). In summary, this study provides support for the idea that New Agers and fundamentalists both have strong beliefs regarding many of the same topics, and that those beliefs tend to be opposed to those of the other group.

While this supports Albanese's idea that New Age is a cultural turn, and that, when it has appeared before in U.S. history, it has seemingly turned away from fundamentalism, this may be only part of the explanation for the relationship between these two forms of faith. Martin Riesebrodt, in his analysis of modern fundamentalism, provides a lucid model of the "development and types of religious revitalization" (Riesebrodt 1993:17). As noted above, he joins other sociologists in suggesting that humans often experience a profound crisis as a result of rapid social change. While Riesebrodt's study specifically explores one common response to such crisis, the turn toward fundamentalist religion, he also suggests another adaptation: the turn toward new or revolutionary thinking. Such new ideas may include progressive Protestant or Catholic forms (like Smith's liberals), or may include non-religious ideas. However, New Age certainly typifies new, and in some cases, revolutionary thought (see Figure 2.1).

So we may take interest in New Age spirituality as a reaction to rapid social change, as a means of coping with whatever crisis of self such change brings with it, and as an alternative to the reaction that is fundamentalism. Certainly, fundamentalism and New Age do not appear as equally attractive reactions to all people in crisis. I would contend that few people consciously puzzle over which of these spiritual paths to take. Because the basic assertions of these belief systems, as well as the assumptions upon which they are based, are so radically different, if one of them appeals to you, the other will most likely repel you.



**Figure 2.1: Riesebrodt's Development and Types of Religious Revitalization (1993)**

Riesèbrodt's typology lays out a possible distinction between New Age believers and fundamentalist Christians as one between those in pursuit of "utopian regress" and those in pursuit of "mythical regress." This suggests that New Agers hold as their ideal a concept of human existence as it could be, or the ideal type of utopia, and that fundamentalists follow as their model for social improvement a return to the world as described in the Bible. Of course, Riesèbrodt's use of the phrase "mythical regress" is an etic one, since no fundamentalist worthy of the label would identify the bible as mythical. However, this typology also allows for a distinction to be made between evangelicals and fundamentalists described by Christian Smith. Within the mythical regress path of response to social change, Riesèbrodt distinguishes between a "rational" fundamentalism, based on literal interpretation of a sacred text, and "charismatic" fundamentalism, based on an experiential perception of God's love. Riesèbrodt's "rationals" are the equivalent of Smith's "fundamentalists," while Riesèbrodt's "charismatics" are the equivalent of Smith's "evangelicals."

For the purposes of this study, the selection of best-selling books that elicited online reader review postings is informed by the assertion that fundamentalist Christianity and New Age spirituality are competing responses to rapid social change in the United States. Books that provoked strong responses from readers of various faiths are discussed in the next section.

## **RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL IDEAS AND BESTSELLING BOOKS**

Not only does the scientific evidence support the rise of interest in religion and spirituality in the U.S., but a quick glance at the *Publisher's Weekly* bestsellers list at any

point over the last twenty years provides support for this rise as it is manifested in our popular culture. During the decade of the 1990s in particular, books of a spiritual, metaphysical, or more traditionally religious nature remained in the top fifteen spots on the non-fiction bestsellers lists, and very often dominated them.

There are two specific trends that should be noted within this larger literary one. In the 1990s, the bestsellers lists were absolutely dominated by titles best characterized (and at the time marketed) as “New Age” products. Such books as *The Celestine Prophecy*, *The Seat of the Soul*, and *Conversations With God* embodied such new age ideas as the interconnectedness of all humanity, humanity’s connection to nature, the presence of spirit within all living things, and the occurring transformation of the consciousness of individuals and, eventually, society. The idea is that humanity is good, it is wise, and it is more powerful than it knows. By casting aside the blinders of difference, fear, and hatred of those beings or institutions we do not understand, we will be able to focus on manifesting positive change in the world by manipulating the energy around us.

Beginning around 2001, the U.S. bestsellers lists started shifting away from such dominance by New Age books, toward books on geopolitics (some of these academic and journalistic, and others of them reactionary screeds), which undoubtedly reflects our newfound concerns about security brought about by the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. While these types of books still dominate the non-fiction hardback bestsellers list, another general category of books which has enjoyed consistently strong performance in the marketplace is that of Christian self-help books. This category, including works by Max Lucado, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer and Rick Warren, has not absolutely dominated the marketplace in the same way as the New Age books of the 1990s, but several of these

books have enjoyed appearances on the bestsellers lists over a number of simultaneous weeks that rival the records of many of the earlier New Age literary hits.

The prevalence of religious or spiritual books, from both the New Age and Christian genres, indicates the existence of an audience for the messages within them. The reactions of books' audience members to the written content provides insight into what the readers are looking for, and whether or not they believe they have found it. A closer examination of reader-written reviews of religious or spiritual books reveals much more about these audience members, and makes possible a deeper understanding of the process by which they actively construct identities and senses of belonging in a rapidly changing society. While the study is informed by an understanding of popular types of religion and spirituality in the United States today, it sidesteps these *types* to focus on religious and spiritual *styles*.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

One of the earliest, ongoing challenges of this study proved to be the difficulty in finding a practical manner in which to explore believers' responses to various books with spiritual themes. Some of these early challenges are recounted below. However, each frustrating turn my research process took eventually culminated in a greater understanding of the variety of respondents featured in this work.

#### **EARLY STEPS INTO THE NEW AGE**

At the beginning of this project, my initial focus was on the attraction of many people to New Age bestselling books. In order to gain an understanding of the subculture that was to be the center of my analysis, I conducted extensive exploration of the field by attending four annual New Age expositions over four years. While in attendance at these events, I took advantage of the opportunities to participate in a range of New Age spiritual activities. I participated in a group age-regression hypnosis experience that was supposed to provide insight into a past life (Weiss 1988). I met people who described their near-death experiences. I had numerous personal sessions with psychic mediums, had my personal aura photographed several times, chanted with Tibetan monks, and heard a few interesting things about my past lives (of which I have had many, allegedly). On two separate occasions I visited Cassadaga, a small town in central Florida established as a spiritualist community in 1893 and now known as the "South's Oldest

Spiritualist Community” (Guthrie, et al 2000). I also had opportunities to attend lectures by many of the leading New Age authors of the 1990s, including Neale Donald Walsch (*Conversations with God* series), James Redfield (*The Celestine Prophecy* series), Marianne Williamson (*A Return to Love*), Raymond Moody (*Life After Life*), Bernie Seigel (*Love, Medicine and Miracles*), Brian Weiss (*Many Lives, Many Masters*) and Wayne Dyer (*Manifest Your Destiny* and others).



**Figures 3.1 and 3.2: Aura photos from successive years, taken during the Whole Life Expo in Atlanta, GA.<sup>12</sup>**

---

<sup>12</sup> These aura photos are made using a process known as “Kirlian photography.” The “aura” effect is “produced by the ionization of the gases surrounding the object through which the current is passing,” and, despite claims that such photos indicate health conditions or emotional states, at least one source states that “the most important variable determining the image is the amount of moisture on the object’s surface” (George 1995:25). What may be claimed, based on these photos, is that Atlanta is a humid place.





**Figure 3.3: Speaking with Dr. Wayne Dyer at the Whole Life Expo, Atlanta Georgia.**

While at these events and becoming oriented within New Age culture, I had opportunities to speak with fellow attendees. It became clear to me that, given the wide range of demographics and life experiences these crowds represented, any manageable qualitative research project would necessitate a narrowing of my focus. Specifically, I wanted to speak with individuals who had read popular New Age books, and was interested in their responses to these books. At that time (the mid-1990s), I had difficulty deciding on a practical way in which to find readers of these books, short of stalking them in local bookstores. However, I was pleased to find the responses I was looking for provided by the then-new resource of Amazon.com reader reviews. At the time I first collected reviews from the internet for use as data, there was a relative dearth of information available about research techniques utilizing the World Wide Web as a

resource. I eventually decided to treat the online reviews as texts suitable for content analysis.

After a change of dissertation advisors in the early 2000s, I was encouraged to develop a comparative study that would examine the reviews of New Age readers and readers of the newer emerging Christian inspirational bestsellers. This redirection resulted in entirely new research questions, and eventually led to a dramatically different focus than my initial piloting fieldwork would have suggested. I believe the new, comparative focus allows for a more analytical study, rather than the mostly descriptive study it once was. Other benefits of this comparative approach, and the use of analogous spiritual books, are discussed below.

### **WHY BOOKS? WHY READERS?**

I believe that an exploration of the relationship between spiritual or religious books and their readers is important for at least two reasons. First, the desire to conduct any type of analysis involving religious ideology suggests that we have some means of apprehending an ephemeral variable: ideology. New Age and Christian bestsellers literally contain the ideology attractive to their respective audiences. It is through these books, written by popular authors explicitly identified as either New Age (or alternative spiritual thinkers) or Christian, that the main beliefs and description of practices of these spiritual forms are most directly disseminated into the wider culture.

Second, books differ from other popular cultural objects in the way they are approached and consumed by the public. Books must be deliberately consumed. Unlike wandering into a room while someone else is watching Dr. Wayne Dyer during a PBS

pledge drive, or hearing Christian music playing in the background in a hair salon, or in some other way being exposed to bits of spiritual or religious ideas, individuals do not, as a rule, accidentally read a book. While not all books that are purchased are read, a book's staying power on the bestsellers list is an indication that someone is reading them, and influencing others to read them. Books are not advertised on television or even in magazines or newspapers in the same eye-grabbing way that movies are. Books are a more deliberately-consumed cultural product, requiring a bit more investigation and attention on the part of the consumer. Also, the consumption of a book requires more of a time commitment on the part of the audience than would the consumption of a film or television show. For these reasons, the persistently strong sales of spiritual books in the United States indicates a real interest in spiritual ideas on the part of cultural consumers in the last twenty years, and may be a more accurate indicator of thoughtful consumption, rather than transient or accidental consumption. Reading a New Age book requires a greater allocation of mental and temporal resources on the part of consumer than does a fifteen-minute psychic reading. Likewise, most church-going Christians are exposed to parts of the Bible each Sunday, but actually reading a popular book about Christian ideas is a much more individualistic, deliberate form of consumption. To put a stronger emphasis on the intention behind much spiritual consumption in contemporary society, Kelly Besecke states that such consumption and the ensuing reaction of consumers to these spiritual works amounts to a "societal conversation about transcendent meanings" (Besecke 2005: 181).

New Age and Christian books (fiction and non-fiction) are embedded within the wider society of the United States. According to Griswold's "cultural diamond" model,

cultural producers, their products, and their audiences “are not floating freely, but are anchored in a particular context. We can call that the social world, by which we mean the economic, political, social, and cultural patterns and exigencies that occur at any particular point in time” (Griswold 1994:14-15). Therefore, a book is never just a book. It is a cultural object which can be understood as reflecting, and perhaps helping to shape, the society which produced it. A book concerning religious or spiritual matters is a vessel for beliefs and feelings that individuals drawn to these works may be unable to articulate for themselves. In this regard, consumption (reading) of these books serves as a type of operationalization for the concept of religious or spiritual interest.

The goal of this study is not to focus on spiritual books themselves, but on those individuals responsible for the ultimate success or failure of any cultural object: the audience.

Brilliant ideas fall on deaf ears. The ultimate success of a cultural object depends on its listeners and viewers, its audiences, its consumers— in other words, on the cultural recipients who make their own meaning from it. For although the meaning of a cultural object may be initially suggested by the intentions or period eye of its creators, the receivers of culture have the last word (Griswold 1994:81).

By the end of this research project, some of the ideas of readers of New Age and Christian books themselves will be considered within the broader cultural context in which they exist. This will provide greater sociological understanding of the different

ways these readers view the world, themselves, and each other. Rather than an in-depth analysis of the books themselves, the primary subjects here are the reader-written reviews.

### **READER ANALYSIS: SOME METHODOLOGICAL PRECEDENTS**

Several well-known studies in the social sciences and humanities have utilized as data the responses of readers to various published works. In her book *Reading The Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Romance* (1984, 1991), literary scholar Janice Radway discusses the results of her structured interviews with readers of romance novels. This research provides insight not only into the reading preferences and habits of a particular group of cultural consumers, but also enables Radway to discover patterns in the way readers think about novels and the themes contained within. Radway's analysis reveals the complex, relatively hidden, and previously unquestioned relationship between romance readers and novels.

On the sociological front, one research project involving reader analysis stands out as particularly illuminating to the present study. Wendy Griswold's *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (2000) presents a rich exploration of the Nigerian "fiction complex." Using her concept of the cultural diamond as a tool, Griswold analyzes the novels, the publishing industry, the readers, the larger cultural context of Nigerian society, and the relationships between each of these elements. The result is a sophisticated description of Nigeria's incipient reading culture. Notably, one of Griswold's methods for gauging the reactions of Nigerian readers was to post messages on the electronic "Naijanet," where Nigerians outside their country could post

their thoughts on novels. She then followed up on these postings by asking certain respondents a more in-depth series of questions. My method is a variation on Griswold's, although the scope of my study is certainly narrower.

## THE DESIGN

The first step I took toward finding New Age and Christian readers was to examine the *Publishers Weekly* Bestsellers lists since 1991<sup>13</sup>. If a book with New Age themes appeared in the top-15 non-fiction or fiction lists<sup>14</sup>, I noted it and tracked its history on the list over time. This analysis also allowed me to chart the overall rise in popularity of New Age books over time. During some of the weeks under consideration, five or six New Age titles appeared in the lists of top-15 bestsellers.

Once I identified the titles with the highest sales volume, I noted overall trends in the popularity of several key New Age authors. Having reviewed the titles in question

---

<sup>13</sup>After considering which publishing list or lists to use as the main source of best-selling book titles, I settled on the *Publishers Weekly* list. *PW* is the primary trade magazine for the publishing industry, and its weekly data on book sales seems to be the actual source for most of the other best-sellers lists available.

<sup>14</sup> Most best-selling New Age titles are classified as non-fiction. This publishing category was the source of nearly all the New Age books mentioned in this study, with one very notable exception: *The Celestine Prophecy*. This book is subtitled "An Adventure," and is categorized as a work of fiction. Close reading of fans' reactions to this work, however, reveal that *Prophecy* is not always experienced as fiction.

and attended lectures by many of the authors, I knew that multiple works by the same author tended to maintain the same basic themes. In fact, many of the ideas remain consistent across the works of different authors. I selected a New Age bestseller that I believe to be representative of the genre as a whole, and then identified its thematic and popular equivalent from the bestselling Christian books.

The representative New Age bestseller selected for this study is Neale Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God, Book 1* (1995). This book was enormously popular, and I had the benefit of hearing the author speak a number of years ago. Also, this work explicitly addresses God, and makes comparison to Christian books somewhat easier. By way of summary, Amazon.com's product description of Walsch's book states

[s]uppose you could ask God the most puzzling questions about existence, and God would provide clear, understandable answers? It happened to Neale Donald Walsch. *Conversations with God* is Neale Donald Walsch's account of his direct conversations with God, beginning in 1992 while Walsch was immersed in a period of deep depression. He composed a letter to God in which he vented his frustrations, and much to his surprise—even shock—God answered him.

Walsch's *Conversation* is written as a series of questions and answers, simulating dialog. The conversation concerns the purpose of existence, the nature of extraterrestrial life, and the steps humans must take to become fully evolved. In his personal appearances, Walsch discusses how his original “dark night of the soul” led him to a peace of mind and greater understanding of why he is on the planet.

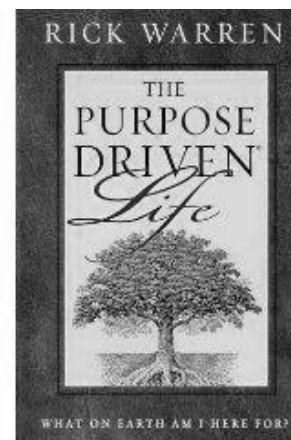
Based on the sheer volume of response in both the popular media and on the part of readers, Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* (2002) was the best candidate to compare with a similarly-sensational New Age book. Warren's book is summarized on the back cover of his work as follows:

You are not an accident. Even before the universe was created, God had you in mind, and he planned you for his purposes. These purposes will extend far beyond the few years you will spend on earth. You were made to last forever! Self-help books often suggest that you try to discover the meaning and purpose of your life by looking within yourself, but Rick Warren says that is the wrong place to start. You must begin with God, your Creator, and his reasons for creating you. You were made by God and for God, and until you understand that, life will never make sense. This book will help you understand why you are alive and God's amazing plan for you—both here and now, and for eternity. Rick Warren will guide you through a personal 40-day spiritual journey that will transform your answer to life's most important question: What on earth am I here for? Knowing God's purpose for creating you will reduce your stress, focus your energy, simplify your decisions, give meaning to your life, and, most importantly, prepare you for eternity. *The Purpose-Driven Life* is a blue-print for



Christian living in the 21st century—a lifestyle based on God’s eternal purposes, not cultural values (Warren 2002).

In terms of comparable numbers of responses, as well as addressing many of the same spiritual concerns, Walsch’s *Conversations With God: An Uncommon Dialogue* (*Book 1*) serves as a great comparison to Warren’s book (see Table 3.1). Both books also have franchises attached to them, included sequels, companion books and websites.



**Figures 3.4 and 3.5: Thumbnail Images of Walsch’s *Conversations with God* and Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life* Book Covers** (G.P. Putnam’s Sons 1995; Zondervan 2002)

Having identified the books to be used for this study, I searched for reader comments posted on various book-related internet sites. The greatest number of reader

reviews of New Age books are posted on retail sites which specialize in book sales. Both Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble (bn.com) provide electronic forums in which readers may post commentary about books, and sometimes about other readers' commentaries. Amazon, the older of these two web-sites, contains the greatest volume of reader commentary, so I drew reviews from that site primarily. The earliest comments on Amazon.com were posted in 1995.<sup>15</sup> For the sake of feasibility, I ended data collection at the end of February 2006.

After finding these reader reviews online, I downloaded them onto disk and reformatted them. These were converted into a format compatible with computer-based analytical applications, and for this study, Ethnograph v.5.07 was used in the primary coding stage. The software itself facilitated coding and memo storage, and made data retrieval more efficient.

For purposes of data management, and also in order to facilitate the discovery of similarities and differences between reader reviews of Walsch's and Warren's books, I limited my analysis to include only the most positive and negative reviews of each book. In other words, only the 5-star (most positive) and 1-star (most negative) reviews are included in the final analysis. While many of the more moderate reviews contained interesting passages, for comparative purposes the analysis of the "fans" and "critics" of each book throws into clear relief the outlines of the ideas contained within them.

---

<sup>15</sup>Occasionally, a reader will post multiple comments about a book, or comment on the posted views of other readers.

**Table 3.1: Comparing Bestselling New Age and Evangelical Books**

<b>TITLE</b>	<i>Conversations with God : An Uncommon Dialogue (Book 1)</i>	<i>The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?</i>
<b>ABBREVIATION</b>	CWG	PDL
<b>AUTHOR</b>	Neale Donald Walsch	Rick Warren
<b>COPYRIGHT</b>	©1995	©2002
<b># REVIEWS<sup>16</sup> (Amazon.com)</b>	963	950
<b># 5-STARS</b>	640 (.67)	488 (.51)
<b># 4-STARS</b>	74 (.08)	112 (.12)
<b># 3-STARS</b>	39 (.04)	66 (.07)
<b># 2-STARS</b>	32 (.03)	90 (.10)
<b># 1-STAR</b>	178 (.19)	194 (.20)

### ***The Research Population***

This dissertation is concerned primarily with responses of United States-based readers of popular New Age and Christian books. This readership consists predominantly of adults, although older teenagers are also of interest. The popularity of

---

<sup>16</sup> On the Amazon.com website, readers who choose to review books are asked to assign one to five stars in correspondence with their opinion of the book. A five-star rating is the most positive rating available, while a one-star rating is the lowest allowed. Often, reader/reviewers complain that they are restricted to five stars. Others complain about the lack of a “zero-star” option. Obviously these reviewers extremely dislike the book they are reviewing.

these books is not unique to the United States, but is found in many parts of the English-speaking world. When available, some readers from other nations are included in the study. No intentional restrictions have been placed on reviewers in terms of sex, race or socioeconomic class.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Sampling Issues***

This dissertation will utilize *purposive sampling*, in that it will take into consideration my judgment in selecting cases for the purpose of the study. According to Neuman (1997:206), a purposive sample is appropriate in three situations:

- (1) to select unique cases that are especially informative,
- (2) to select members of a difficult-to-reach, specialized population, and
- (3) to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation.

Each of these situations is a factor in the present study. Readers of New Age bestsellers in particular qualify as a “difficult-to-reach, specialized population.” Unlike Christians, they are not reliably found in one place each week on Sunday morning or Wednesday night. Nor, for that matter, are all readers of Christian books. To recall the opening pages of this study, while religious belief within the United States has waxed in recent years, institutional affiliation has waned, overall. As I am particularly interested in individuals who are not affiliated with religious or spiritual institutions, the possibility of drawing a true, random sample from this population would be an exercise in futility. It

---

<sup>17</sup> As the reader/reviewers in this study were not interviewed in person, their self-reported demographic characteristics may not be accurate. This issue is addressed in an upcoming section of this chapter.

would also be unnecessary. In this type of analysis of discourse, wide-scale representation is not the most important consideration. The questions of interest in this study are best explored through thick, rather than broad, description (Geertz 1973).

***Primary Coding: Concepts and Taxonomy***

Coding of the data is based on Spradley's domain analysis (Spradley 1980). Through the process of coding, I looked for recurring ideas in the reader-written reviews. I assigned particular codes to these recurring ideas. I organized these different coded data into categories, and where possible, subcategories. Essentially, this process should form a taxonomic structure in which all smaller categories are related to, or included within, larger categories. This method of analysis lends itself to my study of language-based data, and assisted me in finding themes within and relationships between the comments of readers of New Age and Christian books.

For example, below is an example of a taxonomic relationship between some codes from my early analysis:

**DICHOTOMOUS THINKING**

↳ EXAMPLES OF

↳ RIGHTWRONG

↳ HEAVENHELL

↳ GOODNEVIL

↳ REJECTION OF

↳ BLURRYLINE

↳ RELATIVITY

↳ POSTMODERN

↳ CONSTRUCT

Codes like RIGHTWRONG, HEAVENHELL, and GOODNEVIL cover instances within reader reviews when these dichotomous relationships are actually mentioned. The codes BLURRYLINE, RELATIVITY, POSTMODERN, and CONSTRUCT cover instances of readers discussing a rejection of such dichotomous thinking. This type of coding relationship indicated the importance of boundary-maintenance or boundary-erosion among the readers.

The following taxonomic relationship emerged in regard to truth claims:

### **TRUTH CLAIMS**

#### **└ TRUTHS**

- └ BIBLETRUE
- └ GODSWORD
- └ HONESTY
- └ TRUE PATH
- └ BIBLEQUOTE
- └ LOOK2BIBLE
- └ BIBLE1
- └ TRUTH1
- └ QURAN

#### **└ FALSEHOODS**

- └ FALSECLAIM
- └ SATAN LIES
- └ BLASPHEMY
- └ LIES
- └ CONTRADICT

This is a portion of the coding taxonomy that led me to focus on issues of authority and legitimacy among the reader reviews.

### ***Secondary Coding: Semantic Analysis and Discursive Positioning Analysis***

After identifying the major concerns discussed by readers in their book reviews, I began focusing on the language they use in their discussions. Following the method of semantic analysis found in works by Lamont (1992), Hunt (1997), and Cerulo (2006; 1998), it is possible to reveal meaning construction among the readers of the books. The language they use to discuss themselves and others, including word choice and sequence, revealed underlying cognitive structures and illuminated the way individuals whose reviews serve as data in this study perceive various aspects of the world. According to Cerulo, focusing on the way words are arranged into statements can reveal information beyond “issues of content and substance [that] have attracted scholars’ primary attentions.” She suggests “the need to extend our intellectual focus...to draw message structure into the intellectual spotlight” (Cerulo 1998:143).

This study is informed further by discursive positioning analysis. The following three chapters are the result of discourse analysis, but the chapters on authority and boundaries rely heavily on an analysis of positioning within the discourse of reader reviews.

A discourse is a system of signs that organizes and regulates specific social and institutional practices; it provides resources for participants to construct meanings and identities, experience emotions, and account for actions. Discourses specify what

objects and concepts are significant and what *positions* are available to participants in the practice – the various roles that may be adopted, together with their possibilities for action and relationships with other participants. They also provide standards of evaluation. These form the basis of social relations of power which regulate how the *positioning* of participants come about – how individuals come to *take particular* discursive positions from those available [italics in original] (Evans et al. 2006:210).

As a method of text analysis, discursive positioning analysis seems particularly compatible with some basic assumptions shared by sociologists. Specifically, this type of analysis allows an examination of the interplay between structure and agency. According to Evans, “[p]ositioning is not permanent; neither is it completely determined, not freely chosen; participants are constrained and enabled by their personal histories and the discursive resources available to them” (Evans et al. 2006:210). Through the use of discursive positioning analysis, this study allows for an analysis of the construction of identity that takes place in the intersection of belief and agency.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DESIGN**

The design of this dissertation is advantageous in a number of ways. The use of the Internet to access the written comments of readers allows for a far greater number and broader range of respondents than I could ever achieve through in-person interviews. Internet research is also useful in expanding the scope of the sample while keeping



printing and postage costs to a minimum. The electronic format of the data also reduces the need for transcription, saving a great deal of time and money.

Finally, analyzing the voluntarily posted comments of readers helps ensure a sample with a high level of interest in the topic of this study. Posting such comments is strictly voluntary, and time-consuming enough to suggest a certain level of reader commitment to their opinions. This study will be based, then, on a self-selected group of individuals we may assume to have been fairly unequivocal, at least at the time of their posting activity, in their attitudes toward the books under consideration for this study, as well as toward any other topic they include in their reviews.

#### **METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS**

This study uses as data reader reviews collected from an existing commercial website. I chose to use this data because of a number of limitations and obstacles, as discussed above. However, due to the nature of the text used as data in this study, two important and interrelated issues must be addressed. The first issue is one of possible uncertainty: because I use reader reviews as data, without having interviewed these readers, how can I be sure what they report about themselves is accurate? The second issue, subsumed within the first, is one of classification: how do I make claims about some of the reviewers' religious or spiritual beliefs as fitting into particular categories, unless they explicitly make such claims themselves?

***The Challenge of Internet-Based Research I: Are They Who They Say They Are?***

When I first began looking at online reader reviews as possible data suitable for text analysis, the internet was still a new addition in most Americans' homes. There was very little written yet on the methodological challenges facing researchers who wished to use this source of data. Fortunately, I have more methodological precedents to inform my research today than existed in 1998.

Two areas within academic discussions of analyses of internet-based text are particularly informative regarding this study. These two areas are analysis of online customer reviews and analysis of online ethnographies. Because reader reviews are certainly a form of customer reviews of the books under consideration, academic literature dealing with this topic addresses some of issues with regard to the trustworthiness of online posted materials. On the positive side, online customer reviews "are a venue where individuals may share their experiences with and reactions to goods and services ranging from consumer electronics to home interior design," (Lee 2007:1) to books about God. We must acknowledge, though, that "[f]abricated comments...can skew results much like packing a ballot box" (Lee 2007:6). However, given the several hundred individual reviews that form the foundation of this study, certain elements of the reader reviews form consistent patterns that indicate either an acceptable degree of reliability that the reviewers in fact do hold the views which they espouse, or an extraordinarily well-orchestrated effort to fabricate book reviews en masse.

The fact that so many book reviewers include additional information within their reviews, often of an extraordinarily personal nature, places such reviews in an interesting area formed by the overlapping of product review and ethnography. In many cases, the

individuals who care enough to post an online book review also go to the trouble of telling a number of details about themselves and their worldviews. Of course, this is the content of their reviews of greatest interest to me as a sociologist (and not a publisher), and I treat the reviews as bits of ethnographies.

Is it reasonable to take reader reviews as valid representations of the individuals who write them? Are these useful data, even in the absence of any face-to-face or even electronic interchange between me and these individuals? Some of the same concerns about truthfulness and representation in online postings about the self also are present in face-to-face interviews (Markham 2003:1). Beyond relatively reliable observations researchers can make when in the presence of our subjects (age, sex, race, general state of health), our subjects may very well mislead us (intentionally or not) regarding every other aspect of their lives. Text-based research opportunities are really not so different. In both research environments, the researcher must attempt to discern truth from potential mendacity among the responses provided by a subject.

Given the extraordinary consistency of patterns of responses to Walsch's and Warren's books, it seems likely that readers really are writing in response to either the books or other people who read the books. The reviews remain centered on or circle around the main topics and themes of the books, and the recurrence of certain opinions lend credence to the idea that online reader reviews may be used as legitimate data in the exploration of certain aspects of belief and agency. Within the context of the cultural discussion of these books, the reader reviews posted online ring true.

Perhaps most importantly, though, is the fact that the present analysis does not rely on the accuracy or dependability of the reader reviews. The interests and rhetorical

strategies used by the review authors of *Conversations with God* and *The Purpose Driven Life* are distinctly patterned. In other words, fans of the New Age book express many similar opinions and views within their reviews. Fans of the evangelical book, based on their reviews, express very different ideas from the New Age fans. Both groups' reviews share a high level of internal consistency: the New Age fans tend to say similar things, as do the evangelical fans, but the two groups are very different from one another in terms of their views and opinions. Based on these distinctions, it is possible to explore the different concerns the two authors bring out in readers in a meaningful way.

### ***The Challenge of Internet-Based Research II: What Religion Are They?***

Because the data for this study comes from reader reviews posted online, I am not in a position to identify with absolute certainty what religious affiliation many of the reviewers claim. In some cases the reviewers do proclaim membership in a particular faith, and I take them at their word (much as I would need to in face-to-face interviews). In many cases, though, I would be guessing at best, and miscategorizing at worst in my attempts to place a respondent under a particular religious banner.

However, New Age and Christian believers do hold certain consistent beliefs, or they cease to be classifiable within these faith traditions. In fact, many of the reader reviews of Walsch's and Warren's books include statements and assertions consistent with the doctrine and/or beliefs of well-established faith traditions. With a judicious eye on consistency within the reviews, and examination of the reviews within the larger context of the discussion about books and ideas, I believe it is reasonable to classify certain reviews as using language consistent with certain faiths. Although I generally

avoid labeling the reviewers as members of any religious groups or adherents to any particular set of beliefs (unless they claim such membership within their reviews), I will refer to particular reviews as classifiable into specific categories of faith based on the words and phrases found within them.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONSTRUCTIONS OF FAMILY

Family is usually referred to as one of the primary institutions in society and in the lives of individuals. The way people conceptualize family, the institution in which we form our first and most intimate connections with other people, may serve as a template for later relationships in our lives. Family is also the site of much of the work of identity formation, whether it takes place when we as small children in our families of origin, in our years of education with an extended family of friends and peers, or in other settings of secondary socialization in which we may form familial bonds (in some cases) with colleagues in our places of work<sup>18</sup>. Family may also serve as a “conceptual metaphor” for some of our perspectives on the supernatural world. According to George Lakoff, a conceptual metaphor is a “conventional way of conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another, often unconsciously” (2002:4). So, we may use family relationships as metaphors for our relationships with supernatural beings, like God.

Conceptual metaphors for God and the supernatural may be particularly attractive, given the very abstract quality of the supernatural domain. How do people connect to a

---

<sup>18</sup> The fact that many people today refer to individuals with whom they work very closely as their “work-wives” or “work-husbands” provides support for the notion that family-approximate relationships often develop within the workplace. This may be true especially when individuals spend more waking time with coworkers than they do with their families.

supernatural world they cannot experience in a sensory manner? Some individuals do so by recasting the supernatural world in terms of familiar, earthly relationships. While those people who are particularly comfortable with abstractions may get through life quite happily by maintaining God as a concept, there are others who clearly express a desire for a more familiar, more definite relationship with their deity. Recasting the supernatural world in the familiar terms of family relationships is a strategy that some believers use to express their views of God, their perceived relationship with God, and their beliefs about the role of parents and children within a family structure.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of Lakoff's family metaphors, and examines how closely different reader reviews of Walsch's and Warren's books reflect these family metaphors. Where do they draw the boundaries that distinguish family from the outside world? What is the importance of family in their lives? How do they view the roles of mothers and fathers? What is the ideal relationship between parents and children? Finally, how do they conceive of their relationships with God?

### **LAKOFF'S FAMILY METAPHORS: TWO MODELS**

In his 2002 book *Moral Politics*, linguist George Lakoff presents two opposing conceptions of family relationships that he suggests serve as models for the way individuals are likely to view relationships in the political realm. These two models, one expressing a conservative worldview and the other a liberal worldview, are built upon the word choices most commonly found in the political discourse of each of these philosophies.

The conservative worldview provides the philosophical underpinnings of what Lakoff refers to as the “Strict Father Model” of family relationships. According to Lakoff,

[t]his model posits a traditional nuclear family, with the father having primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family as well as the authority to set overall policy, to set strict rules for the behavior of children, and to enforce the rules (2002:33).

In this top-down authority structure, the father inhabits the superior status, and serves as the primary rule-maker and enforcer. He must be respected and obeyed, and is in turn charged with the task of protecting and providing for his family. This very patriarchal model of family conceives of the mother in a secondary parental role, with “the day-to-day responsibility for the care of the house, raising the children, and upholding the father’s authority” (2002:33).

In the Strict Father Model, children are required to submit to their parents’ (but mostly father’s) authority. The main purpose of this strict environment is to foster a particular character within the children. Specifically, children must develop self-discipline and self-reliance. While love and nurturance are components of this parenting model, they can “never outweigh parental authority, which is itself an expression of love and nurturance—tough love. Self-discipline, self-reliance, and respect for legitimate authority are the crucial things that children must learn” (2002:33).

What is the purpose of these tough lessons? According to this model of family, it is nothing less than ensuring the future adult survival of the children who endure them. Lakoff says that, in this perspective, once children are mature, “they are on their own and



must depend on their acquired self-discipline to survive. Their self-reliance gives them authority over their own destinies, and parents are not to meddle in their lives” (2002:33).

Standing in dramatic opposition to the Strict Father Model is the “Nurturant Parent Model” of family relationships, based on what Lakoff acknowledges is a liberal worldview. Rather than emphasizing the primacy of the father role within the family, this model presents a gender-neutral “parent” as responsible for raising children. Parents must help children develop the qualities of love, empathy and nurturance. Additionally, children must learn to be “responsible, self-disciplined and self-reliant through being cared for, respected, and caring for others, both in their family and in their community” (2002:33). This model promotes support and protection as parts of nurturance, and parents must demonstrate “strength and courage” in providing these.

In the Nurturant Parent Model, children are meant to obey their parents, but their obedience “comes out of their love and respect for their parents and their community, not out of fear of punishment” (Lakoff 2002:33). Unlike the more intimidating, traditional form of parental authority in the Strict Father Model, nurturant parents’ authority derives from effective communication.

Good communication is crucial. If their authority is to be legitimate, parents must explain why their decisions serve the cause of protection and nurturance. Questioning by children is seen as positive, since children need to learn why their parents do what they do and since children often have good ideas that should be taken seriously. Ultimately, of course, responsible parents have to make the decisions, and that must be clear (2002:33).

Also breaking from the Strict Father Model is the Nurturant Parent Model's emphasis on producing happy, fulfilled children. This model assumes a less rigid form of parental authority, in that

[r]aising a child to be fulfilled also requires helping that child develop his or her potential for achievement and enjoyment. That requires respecting the child's own values and allowing the child to explore the range of ideas and options that the world offers (2002:33).

The acknowledgement of children having their own values, separate from those of their parents, is a concept completely outside the scope of the Strict Father Model. In that model, if Father does his job, his children will have values identical to his own.

Finally, the primary objective of child-raising in the Nurturant model is the development of empathy in children.

What children need to learn most is empathy for others, the capacity for nurturance, and the maintenance of social ties, which cannot be done without the strength, respect, self-discipline, and self-reliance that comes through being cared for (2002:33-34).

The emphasis on raising children through caring and respect also produces a very different relationship between parents and children, which the Nurturant model suggests lasts well after a child has grown.

When children are respected, nurtured, and communicated with from birth, they gradually enter into a lifetime relationship of mutual respect, communication, and caring with their parents (2002:34).

While this model suggests a life-long relationship of closeness and caring based on mutual respect and open communication, the Strict Father model does not suggest a specific form for a continuing relationship between parents and their grown children. The emphasis in that model is on the self-reliance of the grown-up child, and presumes that, having been raised properly, he or she will not require a mutually-dependent relationship with anyone in adulthood. This lack of dependence must extend to his or her parents, as well.

The rest of this chapter will examine statements about family from reader reviews of *The Purpose-Driven Life* and *Conversations with God* in light of these two parenting models. The analysis will extend to the way different reviewers talk about their relationship with God.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY**

Who counts as family? This question is one that people within our society continually grapple with. Does a family only consist of people who are blood-related to one another? Does marriage define a family? If so, what type of marriage is considered legitimate? Who determines such legitimacy?

Individuals in this study discuss family in ways that suggest divergent definitions of the term. While the respondents do not actually define family in their statements, they

talk about family in ways that provide insight into the way they think about the concept. Generally, the more conservative a reviewer's written religious views, the narrower his or her definition of family appears to be.

### ***Family as Exclusive***

The most conservative-seeming, negative reviewers of both the New Age book and the evangelical book in this study refer to family members less than do other reviewers. In fact, when discussing relationships at all, they tend to talk about their relationships with God. When they do mention family, they tend to refer to members of a monolithic, nuclear family.

In the few mentions these very conservative reviews<sup>19</sup> explicitly do make in regard to family members, they refer to children and parents. For example, one reader titles her negative review of *Conversations with God* "Warning to parents." The entirety of her actual review is as follows:

---

<sup>19</sup> In this chapter, and in the following chapters, "review," "reviewer" and "respondent" are used, and meant to be taken, as interchangeable. This is deliberate, in that the particular language used in specific reviews tends to follow the rhetorical norms of specific religious or spiritual groups. Although I can only make direct claims in regard to the reviews, the reviews are the products of human beings, and assumed to be representative of their thoughts, concerns and beliefs. For a discussion of the soundness of this claim, please see the last section of the previous chapter.

This book has nothing to do with God. It's a travesty and full of lies. The author is not serving God, so you figure out whose side he's on, whether knowingly or not.

Three other reviews explicitly mention children and grandchildren. A reviewer states in part of his denouncement of the evangelical book *The Purpose-Driven Life* that [a]s far as there being no hope beyond our brief years here on earth without God, our children and grandchildren provide hope and reason for acting ethically and morally with regard to future generations.

Another negative review of *Conversations with God* refers to a hypothetical interaction between a father and son. The reviewer implores others to

[p]ray daily asking for help to Jesus without [losing] your patience, and say don't do my will but yours, if it's good for you, god will give it to you, if not he will not give it to you, or do you think that if a son is yelling to his father so that he can give him a gun a father will hand it to him?, no way, only god knows what [is] best for you.

Out of all the reviews that use the language of Fundamentalist Christianity<sup>20</sup> in this study, these are the only few instances in which family is mentioned. In terms of earthly relationships, there are only mentions of blood relations. Spouses are not

---

<sup>20</sup> Because the term “New Age” is typically capitalized in popular use, the terms “Fundamentalist” and “Evangelical” are also capitalized when used in reference to a respondent in this study or to the language used within a review. This is for purposes of consistency and parity.

mentioned, nor are siblings. None of the Fundamentalist-sounding reviews mention friends, either. So, while we can assume family relationships are important to religious conservatives (especially given the involvement of this constituency in “family values”-based political campaigns), they actually seem to talk about their own families less than other respondents in this study, within the same written context. When they do write of family, they do so exclusively in regard to parents and children.

### *Family as Inclusive*

Unlike reviews that feature the rhetoric of Fundamentalist Christianity, those which feature language typical of Evangelical Christianity and New Age spirituality mention family comparatively often. Also, individuals whose writing reflects the ideology of these two groups seem to think about the concept of “family” in broader ways. Both groups discuss not only parental relationships, but other familial relationships as well. Both Evangelical- and New Age-friendly reviews also tend to include mention of “family and friends” consistently. Generally, there are many similarities between the ways in which these two groups talk about family, although some subtle differences exist.

A few Evangelical-sounding respondents explicitly mention the importance of human relationships, overall. A woman from Massachusetts writes that

[r]elationships are what life is all about. Working like mad now so as to be, perhaps, lazy in retirement ought not be one's mission, because the "best expression of love is time;" because "your time IS your life"..., & to [sacrifice] it for some hoped

for retirement is but a fool's gamble. You ought instead---and such advice is spelled out on individual days of the 40 [lessons in Warren's book]---cultivate community & commit yourself to others.

Similarly, another woman from North Carolina begins her positive review of *The Purpose-Driven Life* as follows:

This book is so pertinent to the Christian walk. There are so many valuable insights into our daily walk and our relationships with others as Jesus expects us to live. I found the book to be life-changing, opening up my heart to deal with issues that I had pushed aside, some for months, some for years. I would highly recommend this book for every Christian who desires to walk closer to the Lord and enjoy His peace in their everyday life.

New Age-friendly respondents do not mention the overall importance of relationships in quite this way, but they tend to discuss specific interactions and relationships with people in their lives. Evangelical-friendly respondents do this as well.

Respondents whose reviews evoke Evangelical ideology are also likely to refer to themselves in terms of their familial status. A reviewer from Washington identifies himself by the nickname "proudgrandparent" and writes about *The Purpose-Driven Life*:

This book has made a profound impact on my life. For years I wallowed in self-pity about the horrors throughout my life and reacted by desperately seeking approval, only to get angry when it didn't come exactly as I wanted it. Mr. Warren's insights

and wisdom from the bible hit me like a ton of bricks. Let it all go, don't take offense, realize I am a child of a loving God and move on with His purpose for me.

Another nicknames herself “Homeschool Mom,” and titles her positive review of Warren’s book “Great Book for Christian Moms Considering Career Change.” She writes

I am one of the many whose life was changed by Rick Warren's excellent book. I will admit that I read this book out of desperation- I was a physician who found myself wanting to leave medicine after my son was born and I did not know what to do or where to turn. I must say that I did not think of looking to my Christianity to help me in my decision.

A woman from Texas begins her positive review of *The Purpose-Driven Life* with the qualifier “[a]s a working mother of four...” and continues to include mentions of relationships with God and her children:

... my purpose in reading this book, was to allow myself some time to connect with God. I do read the bible, but doing that for me takes quiet time and that's something I don't have a lot of. I longed to have time with God and do everything else I needed to do also. After reading the first chapter, I realized that I don't have to have a regimented time that I focus on God. I can spend the day with Him! I need to take Him with me and ask His advice throughout my day, Not to mention that I can praise Him



continually for all the blessings that he has bestowed upon me.

My four children all of whom drive me batty some of the time

are the greatest gifts from Heaven.

Another woman from Connecticut titles her review “Christian Parents...The Perfect Read!” and writes “[a]s a Christian Mom, I have gained so much from this book. It has actually changed me as a person. I see life differently now. Buy this book. ” The primary position the mention of these respondents’ statuses take in the heading or the beginning of their reviews suggests the relative importance of these statuses to their senses of identity. Respondents whose reviews use New Age rhetoric refer to themselves within the context of relationships, but do not primarily identify themselves in their reviews based on familial statuses.

Evangelical and New Age respondents both write of parent-child relationships within the body of their reviews. The above-mentioned Evangelical “Homeschool Mom” is one example. A New Age respondent from Georgia begins his positive review of *Conversations with God* by stating “I received this book when I was 17 from my mother and openly mocked her at the suggestion of reading it. One bored day six months later I picked it up and my life began.” A woman from Ontario, Canada begins her positive review of the New Age book by stating “This is probably the best book I have ever read. My father gave it to me on Epiphany a few years ago, and I have read it over and over since then.” An Evangelical man in China, who titled his review “*Purpose Driven Life -- The book and why it matters,*” includes in his positive take on Warren’s book

First of all, I did not want to read this book. I am not, and have

never been, a fan of pop Christian literature. I had seen this book

and heard much about it, but I had pretty much decided not to read it. I changed my mind for a couple of reasons. First, my daughter gave it to me for Christmas. Second, it was encouraged strongly by the international church I have been involved with here in Beijing, China. So I decided to give it a try. I found the book to be very impressive in a few respects....

Another female reviewer with positive views of *Conversations with God* describes a personal incident involving family members, both parental and extended.

I have been [searching] all my life for the truth about God, and all the what if's that includes. On a day in August a terrible accident [occurred] which also included a miracle. I was playing golf with my little grandson and before I knew it he ran up and I hit him in the eye with a golf club. My life as I knew it ended that day, but a new life emerged. To make this miracle understood, I was in hopeless [despair] and my Uncle [suggested] I read this book, for comfort...

Both Evangelical- and New Age-sounding respondents also refer to spousal or romantic relationships of other types. An Evangelical respondent from Wisconsin, in the beginning of his positive review of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, states "My wife and I read it together at five am daily so that we could discuss it before our three young sons woke up. It drew us closer to each other, too." A female Evangelical reviewer of the same book writes "My husband and I started reading this book to help him with AA and

develop a better relationship with Jesus and God (his higher power).” Another female Evangelical reviewer of this book wrote

[t]his book has been such a blessing in my life. It is thought provoking and has brought a whole new point of view to the way I look at worshipping and praising God, and the reason why I'm here. The best thing about it is that because the chapters are short, my husband agreed to read along with me. Up until now he has believed in God but never really prayed much, and since reading this book he has really grown in his faith and changed so much about his lifestyle and attitude..

Yet another Evangelical-sounding female admirer of Warren's book, in a review posted from Italy, references a romantic relationship using less conventional language:

I read *The Purpose-Driven Life* with my partner of 2 years over 40 days (and boy was that hard!) because we had just come out of a hard and rocky place and it was make or break for our relationship. Two of my friends had been reading the book last year and I decided, whilst he was away, to buy the book. I waited six weeks for him to come home and by waiting, had shown him unconditional love. Just what he needed. Only God gave me the strength, but I was doing it also for our new baby, who was only 7 1/2 months old when he came home. (No he hadn't abandoned us.) As flawed as this book may be (as commented in other reviews), it helped to strengthen our relationship beyond measure.

New Age respondents also talk about romantic relationships. A man in Ireland who positively reviews *Conversations with God* mentions the following serious spiritual discussion he shared with the woman in his life:

If you're reading this review then know that I've been where you are now. I had heard time and time again in church that we are sinners, we are born into sin and must accept that we are unworthy before God. On top of that we must obey the laws in the Bible. Now I have always been God loving rather than God fearing. What is there to fear? I had this very same discussion with my girlfriend, she just couldn't understand why I don't fear God!

A woman from California who uses the language of New Age spirituality mentions marital relationships (although initially not in an affirmative way) within her positive review of *Conversations with God*:

I am open minded and how I don't know. I was raised by Baptists (in the Bible belt) who never went to church, never read the Bible, yet told me that God would punish me if I did wrong. I grew up married 2 Catholics (not at the same time) and currently [am] exploring Buddhism. This book made perfect sense to me. It was many concepts that I had already thought. (I always felt God had blessed me with an open heart and mind)... I constantly wanted a husband and great amounts of money. When I finally did NOT want a husband, my soul mate came. That made me extremely happy... .

While this respondent demonstrates an irreverent attitude toward her past marriages, she nevertheless emphasizes the importance of a happy, intimate relationship. This is a concern expressed in many of the reviews of New Age and Evangelicals fans alike.

A marked difference in the way these two groups mention “family,” specifically, may point to a different way of thinking about this concept. In many instances, evangelicals in this study make reference to their families in positive ways. For example, one anonymous, positive reviewer of *The Purpose-Driven Life* writes “Next to The Holy Bible itself, I cannot think of a better book that teaches the word of God. Rick Warren has done a tremendous job with this book. Thank you Rick...our family loves this book.” This reader positions herself within the context of her family, and seems to do so happily. A male reviewer from Oklahoma echoes this sentiment: “Today's Christian-lite books are embarrassing. You and your family will be changed if you read and follow this jewel for a few weeks.”

Some writers of Evangelical-sounding reviews emphasize the importance they ascribe to being part of a close family. An anonymous respondent bases a positive review of *The Purpose-Driven Life* on this idea:

My entire family was transformed by reading this book together.

We are closer to each other than I ever imagined possible. It would be impossible for me to overstate the importance of this book to us.

Prior to reading this, I had no idea why we were put on earth. It is clear and it is life changing. You will never be the same after reading it.

Another Evangelical-sounding reviewer from California emphasizes the importance of shared activities and growth within the family, when beginning a review “This was a well written book. If it did nothing else, it got my family focused on reading God’s Word, [p]raying and [f]ocusing on how to be better [Christians].” Another anonymous respondent explicitly mentions the importance of devotion to a family:

*The Purpose-Driven Life* inspired me to make several changes in my personal and business life. For one, I am now more active in my church and in regard to family, I am now spending more time with family where previously I was a workaholic going for the money, spending way too much time at work and giving whatever was left (which wasn't much) to my family.

This echoes the overall positive feelings Evangelical-friendly respondents express about the importance of being part of a close-knit family.

Generally, New Age respondents explicitly mention “family” less frequently than their Evangelical counterparts. Significantly, when New Age respondents do use the term “family” they tend to place it within a negative context. For instance, one female reviewer of *Conversations with God* titled her positive review “What I’ve Waited to Hear for Years!” She begins her review by pointing out that the book was contradictory to the religious ideology with which she was raised:

When I first started reading this book, I could not believe the information I was receiving! Being raised in a strict Catholic family we were always told we were sinners and that we were bad; normal, human feelings and desires were wrong! This

book helped me to realize that God loves us no matter what we do, and even the things we do "do" aren't as bad as we had been led to believe!

Another New Age-sounding respondent from Northern Europe also discusses “family” in terms of something from which he moved away:

... after reading this book, I could for the first time in my adult life use the word "God" with a good feeling! I grew up in an Atheist family, and although I enjoyed hearing about Jesus in School, I grew up as a convinced Atheist.

While Evangelical-sounding reviewers seem to be drawn toward the idea of a close, traditional family, New Agers may view “family,” as it is traditionally defined, as repellent, or something to be rejected and moved beyond.

Respondents who employ the rhetoric of New Age do use the term “family” in a positive way when they use it in combination with the term “friends.” For example, a reviewer from the United Kingdom calls *Conversations with God* “a blessing,” and writes “I am eager to read the next two books in this series, eventually own them all, and share their wisdom with my family and friends.” More frequently, though, this combination of “family and friends” appears in the reviews of Evangelical fans. These Evangelicals fans, though, are also eager to share what they deem a positive spiritual message with these groups of intimates. A woman from Ohio states that “[w]ithin the last year, I have purchased approximately 25 copies of [*The Purpose Driven Life*] for friends and family...” A woman from Oregon says she “....can’t wait to order a bunch of [copies of *The Purpose-Driven Life*] in Romanian, German and English and hand them out to all my

relatives and friends,” presumably because her family members and friends read these languages.

As opposed to their Fundamentalist-sounding fellow Christians, Evangelical reviewers demonstrate a broader definition of important social relationships. This is evident in their mentioning of “family and friends,” but also in the way they discuss specific relatives and non-relatives with seemingly equal familiarity. This is evident in the review of *The Purpose-Driven Life* from an anonymous reviewer who deems it a “Powerful Book”. After describing various problems she had with close family members, she writes

About this time a good friend suggested that I read The Bible for inspiration and guidance and I took his advice. I also started going back to church, in fact I started going every day. Then a fellow parishioner suggested this book by Rick Warren to me.

This reviewer was aggrieved at the loss of loved ones and with the painful end of a marriage, but found support and comfort in the extended social networks of friends and fellow churchgoers. This indicates an openness to social intimacy that extends beyond the nuclear family.

Several Evangelical-sounding reviews of *The Purpose-Driven Life* specifically mention Christian friends. One respondent from Atlanta writes about the book encouraging him to “[s]erve God in an amazing way,” and that he read “this book in a small group of about 7-8 of my closest friends.” Another addresses a perceived community of Christians. In his review titled “Christians – love thy neighbor,” a man



from Tampa implores others to “[s]tand strong Christian brothers and sisters.” This review represents an instance of Evangelicals identifying with a social group outside their own households. In fact, this statement suggests a family-like relationship believed to exist between fellow Christians. Not only do Evangelical-sounding reviewers in this study appear open to including friends within their closest social groups, but they extend the definition of family to include fellow believers not personally known by them. This type of language does not appear in the book reviews using the rhetoric of Fundamentalist Christians in this study.

Another significant difference between the Fundamentalist- and Evangelical-sounding reviewers in this study is that the latter group specifically identifies some non-Christians as friends. For example, a man from Los Angeles, in reference to *The Purpose Driven Life*, says that he “started reading it at the recommendation of a friend.” Later in his review he states

A (non-Christian) friend I've known for over 10 years saw I was reading it, bought it, started reading it, and told me the other day "this book makes me want to be a Christian [parentheses in original].

While this Christian respondent mentions that his non-Christian friend may be growing closer to his own religious views, he also acknowledges that he has considered himself friends with a non-Christian for over a decade. This suggests that, for Evangelicals in this study, not only does the definition of family extend beyond their blood relations, but their definition of friendship extends to those who may not view the world in the exact same way they do.

### *Summary*

Based on the reader reviews in this study, respondents who use the rhetoric of Fundamentalism seem to define family more narrowly than do those using Evangelical or New Age language. In general, Fundamentalist reviews do not include mention of intimate social relationships as frequently as do the other reviews, but when they do so they tend to focus on parent-child relationships. Evangelical-sounding reviews also include mention of parental relationships, but these relationships are discussed alongside spousal/romantic relationships and relationships with friends. Reviews that seem in line with New Age spiritual beliefs discuss family and friends interchangeably, but those reviewers are more likely than the others to suggest that they have deliberately moved away from some aspect of their family of origin.

### **PERCEPTIONS OF PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS**

Given the importance of parent-child relationships expressed by many of the respondents in this study, it is useful to examine some of the common ways in which readers assert a notion of the ideal relationship between parents and their children. This examination would be particularly interesting if it were informed by Lakoff's family models.

As noted earlier, reader reviews using the language of Fundamentalism in this study tend to mention family less than do those using the rhetoric of Evangelicalism or New Age. When these reviews do mention family, they do so in reference to parents and children. Within this narrow range of family discussion, one theme takes prominence: the importance of parents as protectors of children.

### *Parents as Protectors*

Writers of Fundamentalist reviews seem particularly concerned with protecting the young people in their families from the dangers they perceive to lie within the pages of *Conversations with God*. Specifically, they discuss the parental responsibility to protect children from dangerous or false teachings. An anonymous reader writes

[if] anyone thinks this book is an inspiration of God, just read the version for teens that tells them to have as much sex as they want because “showing love is never wrong.” What about AIDS? STDs? Pregnancy? Those things that responsible parents teach their kids about sex because they love them.

Another anonymous reviewer, in a review titled “warning...not based on the Bible,” implores “parents, grandparents, ... please pay attention not only to what your kids watch on TV and in movie theaters and the music they listen to...but we must also be alert regarding the books they read.”

A number of Evangelical-sounding reviews echo this concern for parental responsibility and the protection of children. Parents are seen as the last line of defense against the intrusive values of the outside world. One previously-mentioned reviewer from Arizona describes the incipient threat presented by *Conversations with God*:

The main problem with this book is that [it] is being marketed/sold to our children in public schools as a "Christian" book, further confusing the values that we are trying to teach them in a more and more evil world. Trust me, if you are a real Christian, [you] should run and not walk as far as you can from this book. This

book isn't God breathed, it is obviously another ploy of The Evil

One to steer us away from The Most High!

This review poses Walsch's book as the work of the devil, and something from which a responsible parent should shield children.

Another Evangelical- sounding review, in discussing the devilish threat posed to children by *Conversations with God*, quotes James Dobson, the founder of the ultra-conservative organization Focus on the Family. The reviewer, from Kentucky, writes

I have a really hard time believing this guy [Walsch] was "talking" to God. His books are not Biblically based, that's for sure. [His books] are on the Scholastic Book Club list and are being sold to our children in their schools. Did anyone from this book club read these books first before putting them on the list??? Dr. James Dobson advises against getting these books...Not only that, this man is targeting our children. Dr. Dobson also had this to say: Our children are under attack, so I pray that you be sober and vigilant about teaching your kids the true Word of God and guarding their exposure to worldly media because our adversary, the devil, "roams about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). And how many of us know that lions usually hunt for the slowest, weakest and YOUNGEST of its prey.

In this review, children are described as relatively slow, weak and young in comparison to parents. Parents, from their faster, stronger, more mature vantage point, naturally have

the responsibility of protecting their children from a threat that deliberately targets the weak.

It is noteworthy that these concerned parents do not suggest discussing the ideas in these books with children, or providing their interpretation of the ideas they contain. They do not suggest that parents have the responsibility to teach their children to review a variety of ideas critically. Rather, they are to provide a sheltered environment in which children are not exposed to ideas contrary to those of their authority figures. This view reflects Lakoff's Strict Parent model, in that these parents view themselves as the protectors of their children. Their particular variety of protection involves setting strict rules, enforcing those rules, and punishing children who break the rules.

None of the respondents in the study mentions what course of action they might take if their children were to be caught reading unauthorized spiritual books, but if the children did so in blatant violation of their parents' wishes, Lakoff would predict that these parents would not take a permissive attitude. After all, based on the dire warnings some of the Fundamentalist and Evangelical reviews contain about the dangers of the messages contained in whichever book they were panning, the threats they perceive are very real to them. The eternal souls of their children may be at stake. It would follow that these parents would not take a permissive approach to their children's spiritual questionings and explorations. There is simply too much at risk for these parents to encourage their children to "do their own thing."

Although issues of boundaries and authenticity will be addressed in later chapters, it is helpful at present to acknowledge that, for Fundamentalist and Evangelical parents, some of their concern about protecting their children from the wrong messages

undoubtedly lies within their belief in an absolute, objective existence of right and wrong. A respondent who reviews *The Purpose Driven Life* positively states that it is “an inspirational book for people who care about teaching America's young generation the difference between right and wrong.” This echoes the respondent from North Carolina who, in a review titled “To Parents and Those Who Will Be,” says that Warren’s book “is the religious based explanation of what life is all about from the belief and revelation perspective. It's a great, inspiring book for parents and others who want to ‘teach kids right’.”

### ***Parents as Respecters***

New Age reviews put forth a more subjective view of the concepts of right and wrong. More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, though, is the acknowledgement of the fallibility of parents and the conditional acceptance of parental authority when that authority is not earned. For example, in his positive review of *Conversations with God* a man from Minnesota makes reference to the Commandment about honoring “thy Father and Mother.” He asks

[i]s a person supposed to honor such a [parent] if the mom or dad is a liar, a criminal, etc?... I think it would be more accurate to say ‘Honor thy father and mother’ IF THEY ARE HONORABLE!  
[Emphasis in original].

The attitude expressed in this review hews more closely to Lakoff’s Nurturant Parent model than others have. Here, honor and respect are not automatically attached to the status of parent. Rather, even a parent must prove worthy of respect. If a child is to be

obedient to parents, those parents must demonstrate worthiness of obedience by caring for their children and, as emphasized by Lakoff, *respecting their children*. In this model, successful communication is the key to establishing parental authority. New Age-sounding reviews in this study do not appear to consider simply a parent's conveyance of rules and threats of punishment to be forms of communication adequate to elicit the respect and obedience of children.

### ***Summary***

The reader-written reviews of the New Age *Conversations with God* and the Evangelical *Purpose Driven Life* contain some illuminating discussions regarding parent-child relationships. Generally, readers who positively review the New Age book seem to reflect Lakoff's Nurturant Parent ideal. Lakoff's other parental ideal, the Strict Father model, is found most frequently in the negative reviews of both books, which also happen to be the most likely to use the language of Fundamentalism.

There are also some reviews that do not fit into either of Lakoff's parenting models perfectly. They reside in between, and usually feature some combination of Nurturing Parent, along with an element of "Strict Father" discipline. These reviews suggest the possibility of a strict yet openly-loving parenting style, and this model of the parent-child relationship is most frequently found in very positive reviews of the Evangelical *Purpose-Driven Life*.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD**

Lakoff constructed the two models of parenting discussed in this chapter to serve as robust metaphors for groups with different political outlooks. These metaphors do not directly address religious issues, but the way individuals think about family relationships may provide insight into the way they think about supernatural relationships as well. The following section of this chapter explores different conceptions of the relationship between God and humanity.

### ***God as Father***

It is not surprising to learn that many respondents in this study refer to God in terms ascribed to a father figure. God as Father is a metaphor found throughout popular culture, in language such as the prayer opener “Oh, Heavenly Father,” or the funereal language of going home to one’s “Father’s house” in heaven.

Many of the respondents in this study who use language that is characteristically Fundamentalist and/or Evangelical refer to God either explicitly as Father, or in less direct ways that suggest God plays a parental role in their lives. Perhaps the most obvious expression used to convey the idea that God is a parental figure is through the description of God as the creator of humanity. An anonymous reader, in a positive review of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, says

I sometimes wonder if God sits in heaven and just shakes His head at the nonsense human beings throw at each other. There is no "right" way of worshipping God. What works for one person may not for another. That is the glory of God creating



humans ... we are all different but we are all made in the image of Him.

In this statement, God is portrayed as a resigned or disappointed father watching his children argue about him.

Another respondent, a man from Arizona, posits God as a creator, and also suggests an additional parental role for God: that of planner or director of his children's lives. In his positive review of *The Purpose Driven Life*, he states

Warren reinforces that God created us as if we were the only person in the entire world. Before we were born, even in the womb, God had our plan mapped out and... HE already knew our personal journey. He expressed that God was joyful in our creation and that we should be reminded that we are as vital to the Earth as anyone else-our place is exactly where we are [emphasis in original].

The theme of God as the planner behind the scenes of human lives appears frequently in the writings of respondents who use the rhetoric of Evangelicals and Fundamentalists in this study. Another woman from Texas writes of Warren's book

[t]his by far is the most needed book for the Christian Church today. So many in the world today are confused and doubt that they were Created for any real purpose, much less by a loving Creator who is still very actively bringing His plan about for each of us.

Another woman from Minnesota writes that *The Purpose-Driven Life* is

based upon the truth that God created each of us individually, and that he established a purpose for each of us, long before we were conceived. The book explains how much God loves each of his creations and what he has done for us... I would highly recommend this book to anyone who needs to know God loves and cares about them and anyone who is interested in getting their life on track with God's purpose for them.

A man from Kentucky writes of the book's "transforming power that allows the reader to see their own life through the lens of God's master plan." A woman from Wisconsin notes that her Bible study group spent over six months discussing Warren's book. She says

I went into the study thinking, "okay, now I'll be able to be told what my purpose is." Boy was I wrong! No book can tell you your purpose in life. Only God knows the true extent of your purpose and He has it all planned out. What you need to do is seek Him and ask Him to help you see what that purpose is. This book gives you guidance in understanding why.

With God in the role of a father who creates, plans and directs the lives of humans, what are the expectations for his "children?" Evangelical-sounding respondents emphasize the duty of "God's children" to serve and obey their father. A female respondent from San Diego praises *The Purpose-Driven Life* and its author Rick Warren

by saying “I am so grateful for a man of God who repeatedly conveys to us that we are here for God's purpose, and not the other way around.” This same respondent goes on to quote a passage from Warren’s book that serves as an illustration of one of the key ideas from Lakoff’s Strict Father model of family relationships: “God's ultimate goal for your life on earth is not comfort, but character development.” Another Evangelical-sounding reviewer from Seattle makes a case for an even more powerful, dependent and obedient relationship between herself and God:

This book has transformed me. The Lord has used it to draw me toward Him, to surrender myself in obedience to His Word. Each page has confirmed for me my need to truly trust in the Lord and set aside my flesh in order to give myself totally to His purpose. And make no mistake; I am a serious student of Scripture. I have never approached God as a "seeker"; my deepest desire is to know and be known by Him as well as be obedient to Him without question.

The above passage suggests a relationship beyond simple obedience to an authority figure. It suggests self-sacrifice on the part of the “child,” a high level of trust in the father figure, and an abiding need for acknowledgement from the father.

This discussion of the emotional connections to God as a father figure leads into another idea found in the writings of respondents using Evangelical rhetoric in this study: the love God the father has for his children on earth. As a man from Tennessee describes in a positive review of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, “You were made by God for God. No matter what your situation, no matter how hard your life has been, no matter how

unimportant...you think your life is, God knows you, loves you and paid a price to be with you.” Another male respondent from Texas summarizes the common themes of God as father figure, God as creator, God as planner and director, and God as lover of his creations in the following excerpt from his review:

While it is certainly not a substitute for the Bible, Warren's book captures the simplicity of our relationship with our Creator, and communicates God's plan and purposes for His creation - You were created to be loved by God, not judged by Him as some would have you believe.

Another anonymous reviewer from Washington (quoted in an earlier section of this chapter) expresses appreciation for Warren's book by stating that it made him “realize I am a child of a loving God and move on with His purpose for me.”

A point of commonality between respondents using the rhetoric of Evangelicals and New Agers in this study is that both groups describe God as loving. A New Age-friendly respondent from Switzerland titles his positive review of *Conversations with God* “A Sane and Loving God?! What a Concept!” He goes on to write “the author clearly knows that those [who] love and need an angry and insane god like the one created and maintained in most religions, will call this book the work of their much loved satan figure.” Another New Age-sounding respondent from Belfast emphasizes his love for, rather than his fear of, God.

I had heard time and time again in church that we are sinners, we are born into sin and must accept that we are unworthy before God. On top of that we must obey the laws in the

Bible. Now I have always been God loving rather than God fearing. What is there to fear?

### ***God as Friend***

One of the primary distinctions between the Evangelical- and New Age-sounding reviews included in this study concerns the idea of God as a father figure. Generally, New Age-sounding respondents identify their relationship with God as one of friendship. A respondent from Mumbai writes in a positive review of *Conversations with God* that

[m]y perception of ‘God’ is changed for good. I no longer think of him as a[n] old man with white beard sitting above watching over me, ready to catch me [red-handed] and punish me. [My] relationship with god is more friendly and comfortable.

Not only do New Age-friendly respondents tend to view God as a friend, but they embrace the idea of God having personal characteristics they are more comfortable with than the angry, punishing God of the Old Testament. For example, a man from England, in a positive review of Walsch’s book, proclaims that God as portrayed by Walsch is “the sanest, most honest, most credible God I have ever come across by a long way.” This respondent also titles his review “A truly relevant and intelligent God for the 21st century.”

Another female respondent from Missouri, in a positive review of *Conversations with God*, describes the new view she has of God as follows:

It is nice to know that GOD is not a judgmental mean God;  
 that is man's interpretation of making us go to church;  
 something I have been in turmoil with for over 40 years.  
 I recommend this book for all to see God in another view,  
 sorta like the George Burns movie. God is humorous and  
 wants us to liven [sic] up and enjoy life in the here and now, and  
 let to know why we are here... I believe that this book really  
 speaks from GOD. If learning of a loving GOD is your  
 goal, I hope that you will pick up this book and enjoy the  
 reading as much as I am [emphases in original].

In this review, the respondent suggests a version of God who is a fun buddy who wants us to enjoy life. Another female respondent from California offers one more view of God as a friend in the following praise for *Conversations with God*:

We are always told to “fear God” and until I read this book  
 I kind of did. Now, thanks to Neale, I talk to God daily as a  
 loving friend who loves me no matter what I do! ... God  
 doesn’t have to “punish” me. The results of my actions will  
 do that....I love the relationship I now have with God, and  
 feel that the teachings in this book are only about one thing,  
 love, which is what God is. Thank you, Neale. I hope many  
 people are able to befriend God from your writings as I have  
 and it brings peace of mind to their lives as it has mine.

In this review the respondent not only discusses God in terms of being her friend, but also uses references that could fit into Lakoff's Nurturant Parent model as well. God does not punish (or is not strict), but rather allows his friends to learn from their own mistakes.

Although perceptions of God as a father and God as a friend are quite different from one another, they do share one important characteristic. Both of these perceptions conceptualize a personal God, in terms of having a personality, having thoughts, behaving in characteristic ways and responding to the actions of his children/friends. However, the notion of a personal God does not appear uniformly in the writings of all New Age respondents. In some cases, God is conceptualized to be suprapersonal, and in other cases to be intrapersonal. These distinctive conceptualizations are explored in the next sections.

### ***God as Suprapersonal***

Many of the respondents who write very positive reviews of the New Age book in this study do not talk about God in personal terms at all. Rather, they discuss God as being beyond the personal realm, or outside the boundaries of any one being. This suprapersonal God is characterized in a number of ways. For example, a woman from Sydney who identifies herself as "Human Being," writes in her positive review of *Conversations with God* :

I don't think I have ever read a book that has had such a profound impact on my life. From day one of reading the book, I felt in touch with the universe again and could feel the presence of "god" or the "universe" or whatever

you want to call it. It was like the book was speaking to me personally. Brilliant. I'm just about to read the whole series again.

This respondent's use of the term "it" in reference to God may seem impersonal, but her equating God with the universe really casts God as something bigger than the personal. She also seems comfortable with the ambiguity of the terms she uses, which may indicate a comfort level with a certain fuzziness to the concept of God. At any rate, she expresses great satisfaction in her newfound understanding of her relationship with God.

Other New Age-positive respondents indicate a perception of God as a concept by referring to "God" in quotation marks. For example, a man from Florida writes of

*Conversations with God*

A fundamentalist of any religion will most likely not appreciate this book because it calls every individual to use their God-given minds to try to understand the reality that we live in and in that develop a new personal relationship with God (given an invigorating revival to our understanding of what "God" truly is).

In this review, the respondent refers to the nebulous characteristic of "God," but at the same time somewhat reifies the concept of a personal God who endows individuals with their minds. However, his emphasis seems to be on the value of questioning the nature of God. This respondent tellingly titles his review "Life-altering-inspiring-engaging." He seems to find value in the questioning process itself.



Another respondent uses the “God” notation, but spells out more explicitly the perception of a suprapersonal God. This male respondent from California, in his review of *Conversations with God*, writes

I've just finished this book and I really feel that it sums up a lot of questions about the whole "God" issue. Yes there is a God but I think that all of these religious extremist types are missing the whole concept. All this book is really trying to get across is that the path to "God", or this body of energy, is ultimately through love, compassion and the power of positive thinking or prayer, if you will.

Here God is equated with an impersonal body of energy. This is not an uncommon conceptualization of God among New Age-friendly respondents. God is bigger than a human-type body. Rather, here God is characterized as encompassing an entire type of force. This respondent also hints at his general comfort with ambiguous definitions by suggesting that the “power of positive thinking” is synonymous with “prayer.”

While these references to God as suprapersonal generally contain language that suggests a high comfort level with ambiguity of definition on the part of the respondents, the last characterization of God is quite specific. While not personal in conception, God does reside in a known places within us.

### ***God as Intrapersonal***

Many of the New Age-friendly respondents in this study refer to God in terms of having an intrapersonal nature. In other words, God is in everyone. A woman from

North Carolina writes that *Conversations with God* “shows how God is in all of us. God hears us all, and we are never alone. For those that doubt this, see if you ever felt an inner peace when you prayed. That is God, in your heart.” Another male reviewer of the book states

As I was reading, I felt as if the words were my own. These are the truths I have known as a child and which were literally beaten out of me by a condemning and negative society. God is love. There really isn't much more that need be said. If we are all of God, that is, if we are all God...what then stands between us and being Love? Nothing but our choice. Choose NOW to be that which you know deep in your soul to be true. Be the Love!

Another reviewer from Kentucky writes that “[o]nce we learn that everyone is God... then we will learn true love, tolerance and peace. It's only when we embrace a judgmental intolerant ugly God will we continue to be an ugly intolerant judgmental people.”

A man in the Netherlands who identifies himself as having been raised Muslim, in his positive review of Walsch's New Age book, implores others to

[f]ind the Truth within yourself (that's where it is!) and do what feels good to YOU. That inner-voice (your intuition) is God speaking to you, not an old man with a long beard on a cloud somewhere...and this book is for me the best book ever written, [be]cause I connected to the life-energy around me and within me, something people also call The Universe, God, or whatever

you [want to] call it. There is only one thing that's real: and that's Unconditional Love and [acceptance] of EVERYONE [emphasis in original].

In this review we find the recurring theme of love as a quality of God, the rejection of the specific personal conception of God as an old man in the clouds, and an equating of God to the universe, as in the examples of the suprapersonal God in the previous section.

However, the overriding emphasis in this review is on God as an internal quality, or the intuitive voice within.

In another positive review of *Conversations with God*, a respondent who identifies himself as “I am God, you are God, we are all God!!! Don’t forget that!,” and identifies his present location as “I am everywhere,” also posits the notion that God exists within all people. However, this respondent also returns to the concept of God the father/creator: “Do you really believe that God is so malevolent as to cast his own children, his own creations, into hell for all of eternity? The Bible clearly states that we are one in God. How much [clearer] do you need to see it?” While this reviewer seems to mix the conceptualizations of God as personal (“his own children”), suprapersonal (“I am everywhere”), and intrapersonal (“We are all God!!!) in the space of a few lines of text, he reveals a certain comfort level with conceptual inconsistency, indistinct conceptual boundaries, or both. At any rate, the New Age-friendly conceptualization of God as existing beyond the level of the personal is one of the key distinguishing features between this group’s commonly-expressed perspective on God and that of their Fundamentalist-friendly and Evangelical-friendly counterparts.

## SUMMARY

The way we conceive of family is in part influenced by the way we are socialized to think about family, and ideas of what constitutes family varies across societies and, within a given society, across time. However, within socially- (and, in some cases, legally-) determined parameters, individuals are free to select family based on their own definitions. Individuals use different criteria for determining where to draw the boundary lines between family and non-family, and the process for doing so is one that involves agency on the part of the individuals making these distinctions. Further, the expectations we have of family members based on their statuses within the family varies, as well.

A variety of differences between individuals' ways of constructing definitions of family and family roles emerged in the data that is the foundation of this study. Building on Lakoff's family models, certain patterns emerged in terms of the likely family model that particular groups of reviewers are likely to articulate. Generally, respondents who wrote highly positive reviews of the New Age book *Conversations with God* tended to discuss family as a chosen, rather than imposed, group of people based on affinity, rather than blood or legal relations. These respondents used terminology that mirrors Lakoff's Nurturant Parent ideal when discussing family dynamics. They are also more likely than other respondents to include friends within discussions of family. In terms of the way the New Age fans discuss God, God is most often described as a friend or as a non-personal energy.

Another group of respondents who clearly articulate a particular conception of family are those who negatively review the Evangelical book *The Purpose-Driven Life* on the basis that it does not contain or promote Christianity in the way they believe it really

is. These conservative individuals are the least likely in this study to discuss actual family members in their book reviews, but are very likely to describe God as a strict, punishing Father/Creator. They discuss discipline and protection as the most important parental roles, which locates them within Lakoff's Strict Father ideal.

The group of respondents who positively reviewed the Evangelical book *The Purpose Driven Life* did not fall as easily into either of Lakoff's models of family. While these respondents are likely to mention individual family members within their book reviews, they also frequently discuss friends in loving terms. In terms of parental relationships, these Evangelical fans talk about parents (mothers and fathers) as needing to be strict and protective, but they also frequently mention the loving nature of parent-child relationships. This view carries over into the way they typically discuss God, which is as a strict but very loving father and creator.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONSTRUCTIONS OF AUTHORITY

As discussed in the introduction, the concept of authority has to do with how individuals answer the questions “who do I trust to guide me?” and “who knows what is right and true?” Beyond our experiences of childhood, who we consider to be real authorities becomes a matter of choice to a great extent. Therefore, any claim to authority must be weighed against many other such claims. We are also often in situations where we must attempt to validate that which we claim to be a legitimate authority to those who might require convincing. These situations illustrate the fact that discerning “real” authority is an active project of construction adults undertake.

Some authority figures may be experienced as imposed on us, such as the school principal, the police officer, the Internal Revenue Service. However, throughout life we make choices in whom or what we believe to be legitimate sources of authority to us. At times the process of selecting authority sources may not feel like an active process, but in fact deciding to believe in something or someone—the choosing of authority—is an activity in which the individual is a responsive agent. Even the seeming authority of the I.R.S. is turned on its head in the old joking response to the cliché “The only sure things in this world are death and taxes” which acknowledges that we do not *have* to pay taxes, but we can certainly anticipate a consequence to that choice.

Moving back to the respondents in this study, the reviews they write for the spiritual books include a great deal of language referencing ideas of authority. They

discuss who they trust, and why they do so. They discuss issues of truth and falsehood. In some cases they adopt voices of persuasion, in seeming attempts to either win over others to their perspectives or beliefs, or in some cases to warn those who choose different authority sources of the dire consequences of their perceived judgment errors. Because of the topics of the reviewed books, including God, the nature of the human condition, and the cosmic purpose of our lives, discussions of authority in the reader reviews take on a serious tone. For some respondents, they are discussing the fate of their eternal souls.

My analysis reveals some clear patterns in the way different respondents discuss what they consider to be sources of authority. The primary pattern involves the differential locus of authority as experienced by the individual: as either internal or external. Some respondents very clearly discuss authority as something that either emanates from or resonates with something from within them. Others describe authority as something that exists external to them. In a few cases, the same respondent may acknowledge both external and internal sources of authority. These different loci of authority and the significance of these differences will be discussed in the next section.

#### **LOCI OF AUTHORITY: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL**

Respondents in this study often refer to various sources of authority, keeping in line with the general issues of the Warren and Walsch books they reviewed: God, humankind's relationship with God, and the overall purpose of human lives. An individual's perspective on these issues would be related to how much legitimacy they attribute to various sources of authority. One of the clearest distinctions found within the

data for this study regards loci of authority. Some respondents primarily identify authority sources located outside themselves, while others place primary legitimacy on authority that they experience as either emanating from themselves or creating resonance with something within. A discussion of this distinction follows, as well as an exploration of respondents who are drawn to a combination of internal and external loci of authority.

### **INTERNAL LOCI OF AUTHORITY**

The concept of an internal locus of authority refers to sources of authority or truth that are experienced as residing within the self. Authority is not experienced primarily as something outside one's self that must be discovered and acquired, nor is it experienced as something handed down to or imposed upon the self. Respondents in this study discuss two different internally-located sources of authority or truth: inner wisdom and personal experience.

#### ***The Authority of Inner Wisdom***

Respondents who emphasized the primacy of the authority of their internal thoughts and feelings did so over external sources of authority. These respondents trust their senses of "inner wisdom" above the accepted religious traditions of their societies.

In this study the group of respondents most likely to claim inner wisdom as the primary source of authority is those who gave five-star reviews to Walsch's *Conversations with God*. Not only do they emphasize the authority of their inner wisdom, but some explicitly denigrate external authority sources. For example, a New



Age-positive reviewer from Texas contrasts the Bible's contents with those found in *Conversations with God*:

Most people believe [the Bible] to be infallible simply because they've been raised all their life to think of it that way. It's naturally God's only unquestionable "manual" for humanity, so to most fundamentalists anything ever contradicting it is automatically always the work of Satan... So, I suggest you really read this book with an open mind and heart, and think for yourself whether this book contains truth.

The same reviewer also expresses doubt about the external authority of the Bible, which ...has been translated many times throughout history, in many editions; it is filled with contradictions, inconsistencies, and, if taken literally, absurdities (Noah's ark, the world created in a week a few thousand years ago). While there is much in the Bible that is truly inspired, perhaps things were lost or changed in translation.

Another reviewer discusses the discomfort he or she felt living under the weight of an external authority that did not ring true. In a review titled "You will know if this book holds truth for you...", the respondent writes in a positive review of the New Age book

I personally was more than ready for the message in its pages. I was raised in a strict Christian home. My entire life I felt different from my family. What I was being taught just didn't add up to me. I lived my life in fear of a hell that I couldn't

make myself believe in. I have been angry and depressed my whole life. I felt I had ANSWERS. FINALLY. I gave it to my mom to read and she freaked out and called it blasphemy.... I understand that she is stuck in her beliefs with no room for growth, as are many, and also that eventually she will remember the truth, as we all do....If you feel pulled to this book, read it.

A positive review of Walsch's book, from a reviewer in the Netherlands, makes a more explicit argument against following external authority on the basis of tradition. He implores others to "...re-think everything that is being brainwashed into your head since you were a little kid till now, by your parents, family, culture, friends, society, TV, media, etc, etc..." The same reviewer goes on to share that he

...was raised with a religion called...Islam, but I never believed any of it, cause I was always connected with myself and my intuition and it just didn't feel "right" what they were saying and believing (and preaching). The same goes for ALL religions. Find the Truth within yourself (that's where it is!) and do what feels good to YOU, that inner-voice (your intuition) is God speaking to you....

Another positive reviewer of *Conversations with God* summarizes the importance of trusting the authority of inner wisdom over external authorities, and implores others to do the same:

I find the content of this book to be very thought provoking.

I have found it a stepping stone as I seek to find my own truth. This book has helped me move from believing in a God who loves me but expects certain things from me, to "KNOWING" a God who loves "unconditionally." It has brought me closer to understanding, "Made in the image and likeness of God". So seek your own truth, not someone else's.

A more commonly-occurring theme found in very positive reviews of *Conversations with God* is the attraction to external ideas that resonate with an individual's sense of inner wisdom. A reviewer from Belfast expresses a general distrust of traditional, externally-imposed authority, combined with the appeal of inner wisdom, when he writes

If any of you have thought that maybe the bible doesn't have all the answers, and that mainstream religion hasn't gotten it quite right then you will have your suspicions confirmed by this book! Whether or not you believe that Mr. Walsch did indeed have a conversation with God, there will be something for you in this book. Everything just seemed to fall into place... .

Generally, respondents who placed the most emphasis on the authority of inner wisdom, were those who gave the highest-possible ratings to the New Age book

*Conversations with God*. These respondents were also the only ones in this study who were likely to claim inner wisdom as their *only* source of authority. Not all of them did so, but of all of the reviews included in the sample for this study, if a respondent mentioned inner wisdom as their single source of authority, he or she invariably came from the group of five-star reviewers for *Conversations with God*. Some respondents from another group also claimed the importance of inner wisdom (to be discussed later in this chapter), but those respondents combined the authority of inner wisdom with other authority sources to guide their daily lives.

### ***The Authority of Personal Experience***

Many of the very positive reviewers of *Conversations with God* also emphasized another form of authority, either individually or in concert with inner wisdom. They discussed the authority located within their own personal life experiences. I consider personal experience to be an internally-located authority source because of its very subjective nature. While many people may live through a common event, such as a family divorce, a shared vacation, or a terrorist attack, each individual will experience such events in a very personal, highly subjective way.

The very individual, essentially internal power of personal experience comes through in some of the positive reviews of *Conversations with God*. One reviewer of the New Age book begins by mentioning the book, but then moves on to discuss her

experience at a Burning Man<sup>21</sup> event. In her review titled “My personal experience with... God” [ellipsis in original], she writes

I was recommended this book by my friend before, but I just didn't like anything related with God. So I didn't pay any attention at that time. Until less than a month ago I went to burningman, and something happened to me. It was the most intense and unreal experience in my life. And my life has been changed since then. I am much more outgoing and happy. It was the major transformation in my life.

The reviewer goes on to describe her willingness to revisit Walsch's book, based on her changed perception following her experience of Burning Man. Another reviewer from California writes explicitly of the experience he had reading *Conversations with God*. His review, titled “An astonishing, life changing piece of work,” states

I'm going to be blunt and say that this book has done more for me [than] the Bible ever did. The bible may have some

---

<sup>21</sup> Burning Man is a week-long festival held in late summer each year in the Nevada Desert. According to the mission statement on the main organization's website, “ Our intention is to generate society that connects each individual to his or her creative powers, to participation in community, to the larger realm of civic life, and to the even greater world of nature that exists beyond society. We believe that the experience of Burning Man can produce positive spiritual change in the world” (Black Rock City LLC 2010).

great stuff in It (God's love, Love is the way to heaven), but  
it's full of errors and contradictions.

I've been applying this book and its follow ups in my daily  
life for over a year. And you know what? I've had nothing  
but good things come my way. I now feel more alive, more  
open [than] ever before. I am truly free to see the world  
with a new view<sup>22</sup>.

In this case, the reviewer not only describes his experience of reading the book, but also the ways in which his later experiences were altered by his exposure to the ideas within the book.

Another group of respondents in this study who write at length about the importance of their personal experiences is that of the highly positive reviewers of the Evangelical bestseller *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Even more frequently than the fans of the New Age book, fans of the Evangelical Christian book describe at length their personal experiences, usually in light of a change or affirmation of religious belief. One common rhetorical strategy is to describe an experience of suffering, or of a period of life

---

<sup>22</sup> The extra line between passages in this review excerpt replicates the paragraph breaks that appear in the Amazon.com review format. When these breaks appear in the original reviewers in a segment selected for inclusion here, I left the extra space to preserve the integrity of the original text.

seen from the current perspective as undesirable. One positive reviewer of Rick Warren's book shares that

[for] years I wallowed in self-pity about the horrors  
throughout my life and reacted by desperately seeking  
approval, only to get angry when it didn't come exactly  
as I wanted it.

The same review goes on to describe the role Warren's book played in what he experienced as the improvements in his life.

In addition to sharing personal experiences from their pasts, a number of positive reviewers of the Evangelical book describe their experiences with the book, and the resulting impact on their lives. A man from Wisconsin writes in his review of *The Purpose-Driven Life* that the book

stirred my mind, heart and soul. It transformed my life,  
changing the way I talk with God, and changing the ways  
I spend my money and my time. It helped me to see  
opportunities to practice and learn true Christian love in  
what I saw previously only as annoying and irritating  
people.

Other reviewers suggest the change other readers may expect if they read Warren's book.

A reviewer from Atlanta writes that the book

will change your life and help you look at it in a way you  
never did before. I know I was always a self-centered person,  
but this book explains that living for God and not yourself

will make your life so much worthwhile. The book outlines specific ways to serve God. It explains how to approach certain things like worship and even missions. I now feel like I really know how to worship God in a way that is pleasing to him and not just me.

A few five-star reviews of Warren's book include quite a bit of personal detail regarding the respondents' self-reported spiritual growth. A man from Las Vegas writes [t]his is the type of book I needed. I was baptized at the age of 12, didn't have any idea of what was going on. I have been an Elder in our Church, took part in all of the goings on, including Budget meetings, Pastor selection, still didn't know what the meaning of it was.

Then I found Pastor Rick's book, and it was water to a dying man, Eureka!!! There is a purpose for all of this. This book has changed my life and also my [family's], we enjoy this book every day, I take my copy to work and read my 1 page<sup>23</sup> before I do anything else at work.

---

<sup>23</sup> Rick Warren recommends that *The Purpose-Driven Life* be read in small sections at a time, preferably over a period of forty days.



In the same vein, another positive reviewer of *The Purpose-Driven Life* writes

I had fallen away from the church and from God. I was a heavy drinker. My problems started with the death of several loved ones ----8 close relatives died in a space of 2 months. Then my spouse of 17 years walked out on me shortly after hearing that I had been downsized (laid off, fired, re-engineered or whatever) due to a hostile takeover of my company that I worked for. Shortly after, just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, my car was repossessed and my ex-spouse was able to take claim of our house...

The reviewer goes on to discuss his good fortune at finding Warren's book, and recounts the beneficial change he has seen in his life since that time:

Just like my life had been like a snowball going downhill at high speed before, now it had all turned around for me. I found a job, met a really nice lady and even started volunteering my time in the evenings for United Way.

One other theme which appears in a few of the positive reviews of the Evangelical book concerns testimony about the positive impact Warren's ideas have had on other people with whom the respondents have familiarity. For instance, in a review titled "Wonderful, Life-Changing Book," a respondent from Minneapolis writes "... I can testify that the 2 people I have recommended [*The Purpose-Driven Life*] to have become

Christians. What greater testimony to the book's effectiveness and purpose can there be?"

Taking the use of other people's experience with the book even further, one reviewer uses as evidence of Warren's book's value the widely-reported involvement of *The Purpose-Driven Life* in the case of convicted murderer Brian Nichols in 2005<sup>24</sup>. In response to some negative reviews posted about Warren's book, the respondent writes

How bad can a book be when God uses it to soften the heart of a rapist, murder and kidnapper such as this book did for Brian Nichols who, while on trial for rape and kidnapping, overpowered a courthouse deputy escorting him to his trial and took the deputy's gun, then entered the courtroom where his trial was being held and killed the presiding judge, a court reporter, a deputy who tried to stop him outside the courthouse and a federal agent??? Then this lost man held Ashley Smith hostage in her home where she shared this powerful book with him! He let her go and gave

---

<sup>24</sup> Brian Nichols escaped from the Fulton County, Georgia courthouse during his rape trial in March 2005, shooting and killing four people in the process. The ensuing manhunt for Nichols ended in nearby Gwinnett County several days after the shootings, when he surrendered to authorities. Nichols was taken into custody at the apartment complex of Ashley Smith, a young woman he had initially held at gunpoint and forced into her home. Smith and Nichols had a number of spiritual conversations during her captivity, and one of the more well-publicized aspects of their interaction involved Smith reading a section of *The Purpose-Driven Life* to Nichols (Roig-Franzia 2005).

himself up with no more bloodshed! Why be so irate  
over a book that God used to do this mighty work?

In each of the above examples, respondents use personal experience, whether their own or those of others, to establish the legitimacy and worth of the ideas contained within the books they review. However, some reviewers use a combination of personal experience and inner wisdom to develop a case for their valued books.

***Combined Internal Loci of Authority: Inner Wisdom and Personal Experience***

Several of the positive reviews of *Conversations with God* cite both inner wisdom and personal experience as important sources of authority. One review, titled “This book actually deserves 10 stars” begins

[t]his is the book that changed my life. It articulated for me  
everything I believed but didn't have the words for. It freed  
me from the fear of God that smothered me since childhood.

The book just makes sense.

Here the respondent describes the experience of reading the book, and also the experience of feeling the ideas within the book resonate with inner beliefs he had been unable to articulate before. The same reviewer also reaches out to others who may have shared similar experiences as a further endorsement of the book:

I think that anyone on a spiritual quest with an open mind  
will become enlightened by meditation on the conversations  
contained [within the book]. A must read for recovering  
fundamentalists.

Another five-star reviewer of *Conversations with God* more explicitly reaches out to other potential readers by addressing them directly. The review begins

If you're reading this review then know that I've been  
where you are now. I had heard time and time again in  
church that we are sinners, we are born into sin and must  
accept that we are unworthy before God. On top of that  
we must obey the laws in the Bible.

The reviewer goes on to explain that these ideas never rang true for him, and that the ideas articulated in the Walsch book seemed to correspond with his inner sense of truth:

If any of you have thought that maybe the bible doesn't  
have all the answers, and that mainstream religion hasn't  
gotten it quite right then you will have your suspicions  
confirmed by this book! Whether or not you believe  
that Mr. Walsch did indeed have a conversation with  
God, there will be something for you in this book.

Everything just seemed to fall into place. If you want to  
better your understanding of God then read this book. If  
you want to believe that God will send you to hell if you  
eat meat on a friday or worship him in an inappropriate  
way, then continue going to church!

## **EXTERNAL LOCI OF AUTHORITY**

The concept of an external locus of authority refers to sources of authority or truth that are experienced as residing outside the self. Authority is not experienced primarily as something emanating from within, as in an individual's thoughts, feelings or beliefs. Rather, authority is experienced as coming at an individual from various outside sources. The extent to which externally-located authority is imposed or not varies among the respondents, as does the degree to which they distrust or dismiss internally-located authority sources.

### ***Specific Rejection of Inner Wisdom***

Among respondents who express a preference for externally-located authority sources, several specifically reject inner wisdom as a source of authority. This rejection appears in very negative reviews of the New Age book *Conversations with God*. One respondent from Ohio, in a review titled "This is a dangerous book," writes

Many people have said they like this book because "it feels right" or it "makes me feel good." The Bible warns us in Proverbs 16:25 that "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." Those who choose to embrace this man's teachings instead of that of God clearly stated in His Word are choosing the ways of death and eternity apart from God.

In this particular review, the respondent not only rejects the legitimacy of “going with one’s feelings,” but asserts the authority of the Bible and of God. This demonstrates a clear preference for externally-located sources of authority.

In another negative review of the New Age book, the respondent not only rejects the authority of inner wisdom, but also warns readers of the danger inherent in trusting inner wisdom. In a review titled “Tickles your ears with what you want to hear,” a reviewer notes that *Conversations with God* suggests that “God is loving,” but the review goes on to suggest that

...because He is also perfect He also demands justice. He is too fond of us, too loving and merciful, to give us the justice we deserve, so he allowed Jesus to accept justice ("The wages of sin is death") on our behalf. God is not angry and wrathful in general, but he also is not soft on sin! And woe be to the man (or woman) who decides for him/herself what "sin" is, as is so common in today's culture and perpetuated by this book.

As in the previous review, this respondent uses language borrowed from the Bible. This language from a traditional, external source of authority underscores the points the reviewer makes about the relative lack of legitimacy of inner wisdom, as well as the potential danger of trusting such wisdom.

The inherent danger of trusting inner wisdom is asserted more strongly in a review titled “New Age – Christians beware!” The writer, from South Africa, warns that *Conversations with God* includes passages that undermine the Bible.

[*Conversations with God*] also proposes that the Word of God (the Bible) is out of date, and not at all relevant anymore. Also, that the devil (Satan) is a figment of our imagination, and that Jesus was equal to Mohammed and some of the other prophets. In fact, you will not find the word Christ in this book. Basically the author denies that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, sent as the ONLY way to salvation. Eventually, the theory is very subtly put that you are God on the inside – what a load of rubbish!

This review, and those like it underscore the inherent distrust in any experience of inner wisdom individuals may have. There is an implication that, if an idea seems to emanate from within you, there is no way you can trust it. These respondents clearly do not view authority as inherently located within the self.

***External Authority: The Authority of the Bible***

Many of the positive reviewers for the Evangelical book *The Purpose Driven Life* note their own approval at the perceived close correspondence between Warren's book and the Bible. For example, a reviewer from San Diego, in a five-star review for Warren's book, writes

*The Purpose-Driven Life* is an excellent book, allowing the reader to see the power of the Holy Spirit and how with God's blessing, everything is possible. As an Christian author myself, I have a critical eye for accurate writing and accurate

Biblical citation. Although not every quoted scriptural reference is cited, the desirous Bible student can use a concordance and look it up, if need be. I am so excited that Rick's 40 Days of Purpose Campaigns are lighting (Holy) fire in so many congregations! The focus on surrender is particularly close to my heart, for without our total Free-Will surrender to God-Will, very little is possible!

In this review, Warren's book is given legitimacy due to its perceived close relationship to the contents of the Bible.

The importance of the Bible as an external authority source is emphasized in another positive review of Warren's book. The review, titled "Powerful book!," states that "[n]ext to The Holy Bible itself, I cannot think of a better book that teaches the word of God. Rick Warren has done a tremendous job with this book. Thank you Rick...our family loves this book." Another reviewer from North Carolina refers to Warren's book in the title of his review as an "Excellent Supplement to the Bible for Direction and Purpose!" The reviewer states that Warren's book "is helpful in that it validates what the Bible already said thousands of years ago." Another positive review of Warren's book also mentions the primacy of the Bible as a source of authority:

I think that most people got to admit that a lot of the answers dished out by the Bible are more complete and



more satisfactory than any others can offer. Maybe that's why, its one of the reasons that the Bible continues to be a best seller.

### ***God as the Ultimate External Authority***

Underlying the importance many respondents place on the authority of the Bible is the assumption that the Bible contains the words of God, the ultimate external authority for many. The supremacy of God's authority is emphasized in many of the five-star reviews of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. One respondent writes about Warren's book that it "... is not a 'guide' book. This book explains the core faiths we all must stick to and keep. Not explanatory. But declarative....[God] is the One, and we must believe in Him." Similar sentiments are expressed by a respondent from Oregon who writes about Warren's book "If you are already a believer, you can benefit from the well written, heartfelt insights from a man who has seen the benefits of a life and ministry lived in accordance with the directions given by the Creator."

Another respondent from California praises Warren's book in a review titled "Outstanding Starting Point for Growth and Study," writing that it "...was a well written book. If it did nothing else, it got my family focused on reading God's Word, [p]raying and [f]ocusing on how to be better Christians." A man from Texas writes in his positive review of *The Purpose-Driven Life*,

Rick Warren has captured the heart of Christianity in this book! If you want another book of Greek Theological terms and judgemental doctrine, DO NOT buy this book!

If you are looking for the essence of Christianity, and the answer to the question, "Why In the World Am I Here?", purchase this book now! While it is certainly not a substitute for the Bible, Warren's book captures the simplicity of our relationship with our Creator, and communicates God's plan and purposes for His creation – You were created to be loved by God, not judged by Him as some would have you believe.

Another reviewer from Minneapolis also emphasizes the ultimate authority of God by writing positively of Warren's book that it

will change your entire outlook of life. It is based upon the truth that God created each of us individually, and that he established a purpose for each of us, long before we were conceived. The book explains how much God loves each of his creations and what he has done for us.

... Scripture backs up all that is said. It is an easy to read and understand book, which gives the truth about God.

While the previous respondents spoke of the authority of God, and praise Warren's book for what they perceive as his faithful representation of God's words, there are also a number of highly negative reviews of *Conversations with God* based on the same criteria. In the book, Walsch claims to have transcribed a conversation he had with God during a "dark night of the soul." He poses that the title of his book is meant to be

taken literally, and while not all of the positive reviewers necessarily believe that God and Neale Donald Walsch had a midnight chat, many still appreciate the messages contained within the book. However, the majority of negative reviewers of Walsch's book take his claim of speaking to and for God as a moral affront. In expressing this view, these negative reviewers of the New Age book reassert their belief in the ultimate authority of God.

One such review begins "Actually I wouldn't even give this book 1 star as it contradicts the bible - God's true words to us. Therefore it is false and not what I want my children filling their mind[s] with and getting confused." This concern with warning other potential readers away from the perceived harmful content of Walsch's book is echoed in another review from a New Jersey man, who titles his review of *Conversations with God* "BOLD FACED LIES FEEDING OFF HIS READERS." The review states

This book was the most grotesque attack on religions I have ever witnessed. The author's frustration with his own lack of morals and will power are obvious. People like Mr. Walsh are the reason today's society is in such disarray. He's looking for a candy coated religion that will justify his own bad habits. He claims to have searched them all and was sadly disappointed. So the only alternative was to create his own that would suit his needs. Sorry folks, read your scripture. This book comes straight from hell and will lead many toward it. So why would our God create us imperfect and then punish us for our imperfections? Simple, he didn't. We made the choice

ourselves as he gave us freewill. But there's good news,  
 he did provide us with a way out! Jesus Christ our Lord!  
 - AMEN!

Another review by a respondent in Washington contains the warning tone of many negative reviews of *Conversations with God*. His review, titled “Wrongly claiming to speak for God is destructive,” states

An author has the right to share his or her opinion on anything. But claiming to speak for God is destructive, in that it can lead those unknowledgeable about our Creator to wrong assumptions.

The reason this book is so popular is that it says what people want to hear (even if it's a lie). With statements like, "There is nothing to forgive," this book tries to eliminate the concept of sin and what is right or wrong.

A similar concern about the lack of legitimate (Biblical) authority in Walsch's book appears in a review titled “Garbage!!” The respondent from Kentucky writes

I have a really hard time believing this guy was "talking" to God. His books are not Biblically based, that's for sure.

The above goes directly against what the Bible teaches us and the same themes run through both [of Walsch's] books,

and if the author managed to get so much wrong in those two,  
 what about the rest of them? How can a man get what the  
 Bible teaches so wrong, and claim it comes from God??

I won't buy anything this author writes because most of it is  
 false doctrine.

Another reviewer summarizes these concerns, and reasserts the ultimate authority of God,  
 by writing that the answers Walsch claims God provided for his questions “are not  
 biblically-based and in fact go against the very infallible Word of God.”

Another very strong assertion of God as the ultimate authority comes in a review  
 titled “A Contradiction to the real God!” In it, the respondent writes

As a believer, I was not fooled. Professing Christians will  
 know this book does not line up with the Word of God. He  
 claims there is no hell, no devil, and nothing to address the  
 claims of Christ as God incarnate...Lump this with the works  
 of self-promoters like D[eepek] Chopra<sup>25</sup> and call them  
 new-age if you will, but these are not works that help mankind  
 understand God -- but only the foolishness of life when we  
 do not acknowledge the real Truth. Jesus said I am THE Way,  
 THE TRUTH, and THE Life -- and no one comes to the

---

<sup>25</sup> Deepak Chopra is another bestselling author in the New Age publishing world. His  
 works focus on issues of healing, spirituality, success, personal relationships, and the  
 mind-body-spirit connection.

FATHER (GOD) but through HIM! May God open your eyes to this TRUTH as you read this.

Another respondent combines a tone of warning with one of anger at Neale Donald Walsch. He writes

The more I read of this book, the more my spirit became enraged at the blasphemy that was being said. Why would God say these things about Himself, contradicting everything that the Bible (HIS WORD!) says. I don't believe that this is from God, quite on the contrary, I believe Satan very cleverly weaved this tangled web for so many unsuspecting people to get caught up in. I pray God will give anyone reading this book the discernment to disregard it's lies.

This review also represents another idea very common among the most negative reviews of *Conversations with God*: that if the voice in Walsch's book is not that of God, it must be from Satan.

Several negative reviews of *Conversations with God* assert that Walsch is probably channeling Satan. A respondent writes that Walsch's "book has nothing to do with God. It's a travesty and full of lies. The author is not serving God, so you figure out whose side he's on, whether knowingly or not." Another review, titled "Someone has their own agenda here!," writes

"What if you believe a FALSE PROPHET? Your SOUL could be the cost. How does eternity sound? Hell is real. Hell is painful because you are away from the light and love

of God. He does not send you there, you send you there by the poor choices you make with your free will. God knows that we will suffer and have pain if we continue to make poor life choices, that is why we can ask for his guidance and repent. All sin is forgivable. If you continue to live by making your decisions alone and believing that you are your own God and that anything you do is just fine, [you're] kidding yourself! Come on people, you know this is absurd.

These reviews are particularly interesting, because while questioning the veracity of Walsch's conversations with God, many respondents immediately assume the conversations must be with Satan. These reviews point to highly dualistic thinking, in ways that are not evident in the positive reviews for *Conversations with God*.

#### **COMBINED LOCI OF AUTHORITY: EXTERNAL AUTHORITY AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

In the majority of reader reviews included in the data set for this study, a clear line exists between respondents who locate authority primarily within themselves and those who locate authority primarily external to themselves. However, a few interesting cases acknowledge a combination of internal and external sources of authority, mostly as combinations of the external authority of the Bible and/or God, and the internal authority of personal experience. In one negative review of *Conversations with God* titled "Ex-Poster Girl for Post-Modernism will tell it to you straight...", a respondent writes

Look, I've done it all in search of joy, inner peace, and communion with God: Buddhism, astrology, tarot, Taoism, numerology, palmistry, séances, reiki, Hinduism, crystals, shamanism, spirit guides, paganism, neo-paganism, Wicca, and transcendental meditation (and this doesn't even include the list of controlled substances I used!) But this is the truth: (1) God is the only one who can give us joy and inner peace; and (2) Jesus is the only way to God.

This respondent is explaining that, through her personal experiences in trying to connect to inner sources of wisdom, she never found the “truth” she desired until she turned to the external authority of God.

Similar experiences of internal seeking leaving individuals unfulfilled, followed by an eventual turn toward external authority are found throughout the data. In a variation of this theme, some reviews contain cautionary tales about people other than the authors of the reviews. For example, in another negative review of *Conversations with God*, a man from Texas, whose review is titled “Dangerous and Wrong,” writes

I saw the power of the seductive untruths in this book destroy a woman I loved. I pray that no more of you succumb. This book is New Age nonsense inspired by a mishmash of eastern mysticism and godless universalism. It is inspired, I'll admit. Inspired by the thief that wants only to kill, to steal and destroy.

The combination of personal experience and eventual turn to external authority also appears frequently in positive reviews of the Evangelical bestseller *The Purpose-*



*Driven Life*. From a woman in Washington, a review titled “From a wandering Christian...” states

I've been struggling with God for three years since my husband died at the age of 41. I didn't feel sorry for myself (not for long anyway), but I couldn't understand the concept of trust anymore. I'd been heading farther away from faith and unwilling to attend Bible studies until my church began a "Forty days of Purpose" campaign, using this book. I knew right after the first service that something big was about to happen in my life. When I reached the chapter on surrender, I finally gave the controls of my life back to God.

In another positive review of Warren's book, combining elements of personal experience with an emphasis on external authority, a man from Arizona writes

By the 40th day in my own personal journey, I was resolved to know that God really is an unconditionally loving God, a great and good God, and that I was following His wishes but also that I was slightly off my path. I learned, through the steps that were outlined beautifully in *The Purpose-Driven Life*, that my failure was that I was not always listening to my heart...

This review is most unusual, in that the respondent combines a discussion of his experience with Warren's book, an emphasis on the authority of God's wishes, and the importance of “listening” to an inner source of authority: “my heart.” In this particular

case, the respondent seems to be drawing a connection between the authority of God and the resonance of that authority within the self.

Another respondent from Italy relates a variation of these combined loci of authority in a review titled “Do you know what YOUR purpose is yet?” In this positive review of Warren’s book, the respondent writes

Now, I'm reading the book again for a second time, and I decided to take it slower (see, you can make up your own rules) and instead of pushing myself to get one chapter done every day, I'm focusing instead on what is being said, and making sure that I follow up with each Bible reference that I'm seriously thinking about. I allow it to open up more Bible readings to me and just let God take me for a walk in His Perfect Book, His Unflawed Book .

Finally, a respondent from Texas implores others to have a spiritual experience with the external authority of God, through “spiritual eyes,” in order to save the United States from the ramifications of doing otherwise. In the review titled “Americans, Wake Up,” the respondent writes

It is time for this once Christian Nation to return to its roots. This is a blessed nation because of the faith of our forefathers, but we are turning our backs upon what our founding fathers based the formation of this great nation, faith in God. Ask the

Creator of the Universe to open your mind and your spiritual eyes as you read *The Purpose-Driven Life*.... Please don't wait until it's too late.

## SUMMARY

The respondents in this study are concerned with issues of authority, as evidenced by their selection of books about spirituality and God to read, and then to review online. Their constructions of authority, or truth sources, are significant, because our sources of truth and guidance help form our senses of place in a larger social world. This is true if we are discussing which second-grade teacher we have been assigned to, which nation's laws we feel obliged to follow, or which religious ideals, if any, we feel compelled to follow. Our choice of authority sources, like our constructions of family, involves the drawing and maintenance of symbolic boundaries.

At the most basic level, respondents in this study can be divided into those who primarily identify authority sources located within themselves, and those who primarily identify authority sources located external to them. Internal sources of authority may include inner wisdom, personal experience, or both. Externally-located authority, in the context of the data for this study, tends to be identified by respondents as residing with a religious teacher, a holy book, or with a Supreme Being.

Most respondents who wrote very positive reviews for the New Age book *Conversations with God* cited internally-located sources of authority. They often wrote of trusting their own senses of inner wisdom above all other authority sources, and expressed attraction to external ideas or truths that corresponded with what they

described as that which they already knew or believed. This same group of respondents, the fans of the New Age book, also frequently cited their own personal experiences as sources of authority or truth. If they had lived through it, they knew it to be true. The fans of the New Age book also explicitly rejected external, imposed sources of authority more so than any other group.

Fans of the Evangelical book *The Purpose-Driven Life* also frequently mentioned personal experience as a source of authority, but they discussed it in a different way. They tended to connect personal experience with the external authority of the Bible or of God. The external authority was given primacy, and the respondents personal experiences were discussed in light of the external authority. Several of these respondents also explicitly condemned the reliance on inner wisdom as an authority source.

Respondents who wrote negative reviews of either the New Age book or the Evangelical book on the basis of perceived misinterpretation of Christian ideas or of outright blasphemy spoke almost exclusively of the primacy of external authority sources with which no negotiation was possible. In other words, Bible passages are not seen as writings that are open to interpretation, and to try to interpret or pick-and-choose particular passages were actions described as foolish and dangerous. This group of respondents also specifically derided any appeal of inner wisdom, and frequently expressed suspicion that any inner voice anyone might experience was probably that of Satan.

In a sense, we can think of this last group of respondents as subjecting themselves to what at times they describe a fairly restrictive, repressive external authority. Not only

do they not request negotiating power with authority, but they appear highly suspicious of it. The group of respondents most opposed to this construction of the individual's relationship with authority is that of the New Age fans. This group trusts inner wisdom, backed up by personal experience, above all external authority sources. An externally-located authority such as a spiritual idea may be considered legitimate only if it resonates with the individual's inner thoughts or beliefs. In fact, if an idea or truth initially encountered outside the individual, and it shares a perceived correspondence with some internal authority in that individual, that idea or truth is described as being subsumed within the individual's worldview. A resonant external idea does not remain external, but becomes included in the sense of inner wisdom of the individual. In this sense, no idea which is perceived as "truth" to a New Age fan can remain external to that individual. Rather, it is internalized and becomes part of the individual's internally-located source of authority.

The group of respondents most likely to combine internal and external sources of authority are the fans of the Evangelical book. These individuals talk at length about their personal experiences and the experiences of others they have known. Often these experiences concern a change of heart, a spiritual lesson learned, or an element of having hit some personal rock-bottom before changing lifestyles or beliefs. These Evangelical fans are also very interested in external authority sources such as a Bible or some religious philosophy, and they express being drawn to the ideas that shed light on their personal experiences. Unlike the New Age fans, fans of the Evangelical book did not describe themselves as internalizing attractive external ideas so much as aligning

themselves to them. In this regard, the prime authority source remains located outside the self, but with attachments to the self.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONSTRUCTIONS OF BOUNDARIES**

When determining who counts as family or who we consider to be authorities, we are essentially determining the positions of boundaries. Boundaries serve to answer the questions “where do I end and others begin?” and “who is one of us, and who is one of them?” To some extent, we draw cognitive lines between “us” and “them,” between “truth” and “fiction,” and between “real” and “fake.” First, this chapter explores the significance of boundary construction in the context of this study, and then examines patterns that emerged from the data in terms of the location of some of the boundaries drawn, and how committed individuals seem to maintaining boundaries, overall.

#### ***Boundary Realms: Ideological and Social***

As previously mentioned, we construct and maintain various types of boundaries throughout our lives. One category of boundary we construct is the type that provides a separation between different ideas. One of the hallmarks of a healthy, socialized human mind is the ability to distinguish differences between things, categorize the things based upon perceived differences, and thereby establish mental order to help us function in our daily lives. The mental process of imposing some sort of order onto chaos, one of the predominant concerns of this study, is only possible through the construction and use of boundaries.

We also build and maintain social boundaries. While we often require a certain degree of order in our minds, we also have a human habit of establishing forms of social order, as well. Social order implies the employment of categories, and therefore also requires the development of social boundaries. This chapter will examine the way respondents in this study talk about boundaries, and in some cases how they actively construct or maintain both ideological and social boundaries in their written book reviews. It will also include an examination of the relative levels of permeability of ideological and social boundaries for different groups of respondents.

In light of the subject matter of *Conversations with God* and *The Purpose-Driven Life*, most of the ideology discussed by respondents in this study concerns religious and spiritual matters. One of the patterns that appeared earliest in my analysis of reader reviews was the distinction between respondents who generally had fairly open or permeable boundaries, and those who had rather closed or non-permeable boundaries. While some respondents revealed consistency in the types of boundaries they constructed (e.g. closed ideological and social boundaries or open ideological and social boundaries), a few respondents revealed having various levels of permeability in different types of boundaries. Those cases will be discussed toward the end of this chapter.

### **CLOSED BOUNDARIES: IDEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL**

The groups of respondents in this study most likely to have non-permeable ideological boundaries were those who wrote very negative reviews of either the New Age book or the Evangelical book on the basis of disapproval of the ideologies contained within those books. For example, in a very negative review of the New Age book



*Conversations with God*, a woman from Ohio quotes Bible verses to refute the very existence of Walsch's book:

God's Word warns us about those who will try to add to or change what God has already said in His Word. (Galatians 1:8 "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." Revelations 22:18-19 "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.").

Not only does this respondent point out the ideological wrongness in claiming to have a conversation with God, but it is an important enough point for her to make that she uses scriptural language to do so. She clearly rejects challenges to her view of truth (in this case, an external authority), thus maintaining solid ideological boundaries. She also implies a fairly extreme outcome (plagues) for anyone who does not follow Biblical guidelines in the same way she does.

In another very negative review of Walsch's New Age book, a reader from Arizona refers directly to the content of the book:

I don't know who Mr. Walsch was talking to, but it certainly wasn't the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Jesus, Peter & Paul. Mr. Walsch expounds on the same New Age nonsense that seems to be oh so prevalent these days. When asked whether Adolph Hitler is in heaven, Mr. Walsch's answer is "Yes". This about one of the 20th century's most evil men who certainly is having a wonderful time burning in Hell.

In the preceding excerpt, the reviewer begins in a polite, potentially inclusive manner, but quickly begins drawing distinctions between his beliefs and those espoused by "Mr. Walsch." Walsch's ideas are dismissed as common, nonsensical, and, perhaps most condemnably as "New Age." The names of Biblical figures are invoked as clear signs of legitimate authority, opposed to Walsch's interpretation of Biblical wisdom. The reviewer also clarifies with a tone of certainty that Adolph Hitler is burning in Hell, and does so with a type of rhetorical cavelierness ("having a wonderful time") that suggests an assumption that anyone reading this review will certainly agree with the reviewer.

The same review continues:

When asked if it is sin to be a lesbian, Mr. Walsch answers "No, go out and enjoy your lifestyle." Whatever you think about homosexuality, I think everyone would agree (even the gay & lesbian crowd) that God is most definitely against it. This does not mean that Christians should go out of their

way to denounce these people, as we are told by Jesus Christ to love everyone no matter what their sin is, but a Christian should come out and call a sin a sin .

Even after supplying the disclaimer “whatever you think about homosexuality,” which might suggest a sense of open-mindedness or ideological inclusion, this respondent immediately closes that ideological door by suggesting that God is “most definitely” against homosexuality. The respondent even includes “the gay & lesbian crowd” in the group of people who must know that God is definitely against homosexuality. The rhetorical choices used here suggest a certain level of rationality and possible social inclusion, but only initially. This reviewer also provides a somewhat weak, Christ-like salvo of tolerance regarding “these people,” but immediately undermines that tolerance by calling gays and lesbians “these people.” After all, a “Christian” (used here as a boundary-maintaining term) “should call a sin a sin,” (pointing to a rigid ideological boundary). The same review concludes:

Mr. Walsch should have printed a caveat in the forward that he is most definitely not a Christian and that any Christian should not waste his/her time on this nonsense. And let me define a word for you, "Christian" means follower of JESUS CHRIST. It does not mean a person who "thinks that s/he is a good person, believes in 'a' god, and thinks that there may be a heaven." The main problem with this book is that is being marketed/sold to our children in public schools as a "Christian" book, further confusing the values that we are trying to teach

them in a more and more evil world. Trust me, if you are a real Christian, you should run and not walk as far as you can from this book. This book isn't God breathed, it is obviously another ploy of The Evil One to steer us away from The Most High!

Continuing with the polite reference to “Mr. Walsch,” who obviously is being used as a tool of “The Evil One,” this reviewer continues to draw boundaries between his group, which includes himself and other “real” Christians (based on the definition he provides) and his outgroup, the non-real Christians who fall for Walsch’s nonsense. This review is also interesting, in that it clearly contains ideas about authority (and Walsch’s lack thereof) and protection of children in a “more and more evil world.” This review combines elements of George Lakoff’s Strict Father ideology, an emphasis on the external authority of God and the Bible, closed ideological boundaries and closed (although politely expressed social boundaries).

Similar rhetorical strategies are used by a respondent from New Jersey to maintain ideological and social boundaries. In her negative review of *Conversations with God*, she writes that there is a version of this book

for everyone on your gift list - from young children or teens who are too unaware of the true nature of G-d to understand that they are being manipulated, to any adult, male or female, who wishes to see in print what they hope to be true: that G-d doesn't think anything is sin, and that the highest measure of whether anything is right is whether it is right for you. This

book will confirm many in this error, and confuse many others who thought they knew what they believed. It is NOT recommended for people of faith....Any faith.

As in the previous review, this respondent uses language to seemingly reach out to others of faith. However, those she considers to be truly of HER faith, it is assumed, would not include those “too unaware of the true nature of G-d to understand they are being manipulated,” or, presumably, those who sadly “thought they knew what they believed.” There is a condescending tone in the way this respondent seems to politely include others in her warning about the book, but this language does not really bring others in to her imagined group. It mocks them and reifies the symbolic ideological and social boundaries this individual has constructed around herself. Also as in the previous example, this review identifies an external source of authority, God.

Neale Donald Walsch is not the only author to suffer the wrath of disapproving, Christian readers. Respondents who wrote very negative reviews of Rick Warren’s Evangelical bestseller *The Purpose-Driven Life* used some of the same rhetorical techniques found above to point out and maintain solid ideological and social boundaries. A respondent from the United States, identifying himself as Dan “in Christ,” writes in a review titled “not even remotely Christian,”

This book is solid evidence of the total fall of many in Christian Churches away from God. [It’s] a new Christianity for those who hate God and real churches. It’s an empty Christianity for people who want to join churches that are more like health clubs and entertainment centers than anything

resembling a church. Crosses are discarded in favor of waterfalls. Pop music concerts are "worship." And people spend more time socializing over coffee in the cafe than even thinking about their soul.

This reviewer draws clear rhetorical lines between himself and "those who hate God," "people" with the wrong motivations for attending church, and "people" who do not spend time in church engaged in the proper activities, like thinking about their souls. The same reviewer continues to denigrate these Christians with whom he clearly does not identify:

The modern professional who has no time for deep thinking wants a streamlined road to heaven and Rick Warren delivers. In place of commandments, sin, redemption and the cross there are business motivational lectures. The road to heaven as built by Rick Warren requires little more than being something like a club member in a church. You can live a modern life of sin, be a bad parent, have no ethics. None of it matters because belonging to the "club" and its "purposes" is all that's necessary.

In the preceding section, Dan "in Christ" assumes that modern times are sinful, and that people who might enjoy the messages in Warren's book are categorically bad parents with no ethics. He continues:

The book plays on the ignorance of most of its readers by rewriting the Bible. Warren tells the reader his theories which are not in the bible and then backs them up by using random

quotes from many different translations of the Bible. One of the many problems with that is that anyone who needs to know their purpose or to know God needs to read the bible itself. The Bible doesn't need Rick Warren or anyone else to explain or expand what is said.

This respondent clearly does not count himself among the Christians he describes in such negative terms. By using very dismissive language, he separates himself symbolically from the “modern professional who has no time for deep thinking.” And while he might have shown pity for those he deems ignorant (i.e. bad) Christians, he does not. Rather, he mainly emphasizes how shallow, ignorant and sinful they are. By not referring to this group of Christians as “we,” he thereby sets himself apart from those he describes in such unflattering terms. This respondent reasserts the primary external authority of the Bible, chastises Rick Warren for not only misusing the Bible, but of picking and choosing among various translations, and elevating his own stature above those Christians he denigrates in this review. The reviewer’s rhetorical choices indicate his perception of superiority over those he references in his review. Thus, he reaffirms and maintains non-permeable or closed ideological and social boundaries.

#### **OPEN BOUNDARIES: IDEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL**

Diametrically opposed to respondents who create and maintain non-permeable (closed) ideological and social boundaries are those who allow a variety of ideas and people to permeate their cognitive and social spaces. The greatest percentage of these

permeable-boundary types in this study are found among respondents who wrote very positive reviews of the New Age book *Conversations with God*.

In a five-star review of Walsch's book, a respondent from Texas writes

This is truly an inspiring, excellent work, and I highly recommend it. As others have talked about its main points, I won't bother stating them all here. This book helps one to realize that we've had many erroneous ideas of who/what God is throughout history. While humanity has advanced in its views of technology, physical science, and other endeavors, it hasn't advanced for thousands of years in its understanding of God. This book isn't about a new religion, it sort of transcends the many organized religions. One important thing this book teaches is that God loves all people, no matter what religion or creed you belong to. You don't even have to believe in him, and all people are his chosen people... .

In this review the respondent uses very inclusive language. He writes of "humanity," rather than individual groups, in language that serves to keep symbolic boundaries between people to a minimum. He refers to all people as God's chosen people, which is certainly inclusive, but does so after questioning the very nature of God. In short order, this respondent has obliterated not only any social boundaries between himself and others, but between ideologies as well.



In a manner representative of many otherwise open-minded and social open (or open-armed) reviewers, this respondent sets aside one group of people as the target of some derision and exclusion. Many respondents with the most open orientations both ideologically and socially do show disdain for those they view as extremely close-minded or socially exclusionary. The same review from above goes on to address the type of respondents found in the previous section of the chapter:

Nearly all the fundamentalist reviewers who strongly hate [this book] feel that way because it contradicts the Bible. However, you probably won't receive any really logical answer to the question "How do you know for sure the Bible is the one inspired word of God?" Most people believe it to be infallible simply because they've been raised all their life to think of it that way. It's naturally God's only unquestionable "manual" for humanity, so to most fundamentalists anything ever contradicting it is automatically always the work of Satan.

While it would be uncharacteristic for the people with very permeable boundaries to dispatch those they do not find equally open-minded to hell, they do refer to them in somewhat dismissive terms. As in this review, "fundamentalists" are dismissed because of their perceived faulty relationship with logic, and for their dependence on the ways "they've been raised all their li[ves] to think" about things. The basic rule among the respondents in this study with the most open orientation towards ideas and other people is that everyone is welcome to join them, except for those who tend to exclude or judge others on a wide-scale basis. This social exclusion tactic seems to be an example of

“condemning the condemners,” in that it demonstrates a willingness to reject only the most rejecting of others.

This same respondent concludes his review of Walsch’s book as follows:

I suggest you really read this book with an open mind and heart, and think for yourself whether this book contains truth.

If not, that's okay, you won't burn or be punished. But you may after reading it have a new view on a truly all-loving

God and his relationship with his children.

In this segment of the review we see representations of family, authority and boundaries.

God is depicted as an “all-loving” father who shares a relationship “with his children.”

This God will not burn or punish us, and therefore fits best into Lakoff’s Nurturant

Parent model. This reviewer expresses a preference for internal sources of authority

when he implores other readers to “think for yourself whether this book contains truth.”

He also demonstrates permeable ideological and social boundaries. He suggests that

others read Walsch’s book with “an open mind and heart,” and uses conversational terms

like “I” and “you” that demonstrate a willingness to engage with others, rather than

dismissing them as “other people.”

This open-minded, open-armed orientation is echoed in another five-star review of *Conversations with God* from a respondent in Los Angeles. He writes

I've just finished this book and I really feel that it sums

up a lot of questions about the whole "God" issue. Yes

there is a God but I think that all of these religious extremist

type[s] are missing the whole concept. All this book is

really trying to get across is that the path to "God", or this body of energy, is ultimately through love, compassion and the power of positive thinking or prayer, if you will. It seems naive to think that the Bible, written many, many years after the death of Jesus is the only official word of God. It was written by man as we interpreted it as it was passed down. When you read it, you think why is this God so angry and so willing to condemn us to hell for sins that he/she/it created? As the book says there is no reason for eternal damnation. It doesn't do humankind any good and what could a God possibly gain by punishing a race of beings that it created? ... When you look back through history, most wars it seem[s] have been carried out in the name of religion. What kind of God would turn its perfect own creations against eachother. Organized religion as we know it to be, may not be the right answer...if we could practice love for ourselves and eachother<sup>26</sup>, we would be in a Godly state of being and relation.

---

<sup>26</sup> In this review, the respondent twice uses the combined term "eachother." Given the relative lack of spelling and grammatical errors in this particular review, and the repeated use of the same invented term, I assume this was intentional usage on the part of the respondent. If this assumption is correct, the term "eachother" serves as an excellent illustration of written and ideological boundary-dissolution.

In this review, ideological openness is demonstrated in the multiple terms for “God,” including references to “a” God and to “this body of energy.” Also, ideological openness is evident in the respondent’s questioning of the infallibility of the Bible. Social openness is demonstrated in the respondent’s use of the term “humankind,” as well as his emphasis on “love” and “compassion.” As in the previous review, the one legitimate social target for this respondent appears to be those he classifies as “these religious extremist” types who are “naïve” enough to think that the Bible is the only “official word of God.”

Another example of an individual whose writing suggests very permeable boundaries, both ideological and social, comes in the following five-star review of *Conversations with God*:

First of all -i like this book. It basically teaches us that to be Spiritual the major criteria is to serve humanity, love all people and animals, be generous, trust in your own inner wisdom, show kindness, don’t take life too seriously and have fun. I am not a christian, but I live my life in service to all people and my life has been a beautiful experience so far! I don’t understand why Christians are so serious!

People who understand the true nature of reality, those whom some traditions call enlightened, lose all sense of fear and concern . All worry disappears. Mundane things just don’t bother them anymore. They become light-hearted and full of joy. I try to live my life happily and give love

and joy as often as I can . Does that mean I will still go to "hell" just because am not a christian ? I don't think so !!

What is hell anyway ? An imaginary bad place where bad people go. Very childish and outdated. Am I scared of the devil ? (the boogy-woogyman!!). NO. Am I scared of being punished by Jesus for not reading his best-seller. NO. I don't see how I can go wrong!!! Lighten up and live life in joy and service and don't let people who live in fear try to scare you with outdated theories. PEACE TO ALL!!!.

This review contains the common elements of openness to humanity (and adds other species, as well), love and service to all, and an active questioning of traditional religious ideology. This reviewer also uses a playful, mocking tone to address "christians" [lower-case in original] as overly serious and unnecessarily afraid. This particular reviewer also refers to the concept of "hell" as "childish and outdated," which would probably seem quite foolhardy and flippant to more traditional believers. So, as in the previous examples of reviews which reflect extremely open-minded and socially-accepting attitudes, all are welcome in his world except very dogmatic believers, who run the risk of being mocked by this respondent for their beliefs (or struck by lightning from the heavens, if they are proven correct but are in too-close proximity to this hell-denier).

### **SEMI-PERMEABLE BOUNDARIES: IDEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL**

Unlike the cases above, in which reviews tend to be open ideologically and socially or closed ideologically and socially, many reviews in the data used for this study contained more complex combinations of being open or closed, and many show various degrees of permeability. In cases of mixed types of boundaries, I generally coded them “semi-permeable.” In other words, some ideas and/or people are let in, while others are clearly shut out.

For example, in a very positive review of the Evangelical bestseller *The Purpose-Driven Life*, a respondent from Cleveland provides an open-sounding title for her review: “Great Book! (But also good to read opposing comments).” This title, with original parentheses, acknowledges the usefulness of ideas the respondent does not necessarily agree with. She writes in her review:

It was interesting to review a few of the comments listed.  
(Both good and bad) Within the last year, I have purchased approximately 25 copies of this book for friends and family.  
Only 2 of my friends were not as excited with the book. Sadly,  
I thought there was something wrong with them because everyone else had such positive comments. However, after reading these reviews, I can understand that everyone is different, and we are all entitled to our opinions. (there were only a couple things I didn't agree with in the book, but it's still wonderful to read) [parentheses in original].

This respondent gently chides herself for what was initially a knee-jerk response to friends of hers who did not respond in the same way as she and others to Rick Warren's book. She recounts looking over reviews written by individuals who clearly have opinions about the book that are not aligned with hers, and she is open to trying to understand these other perspectives. She does not acknowledge that her opinions about the book or her beliefs about the book's contents have changed, but rather that she understands and accepts the existence of different perspectives,. This respondent also expresses no sense of threat or attack based on the existence of opinions that differ from her own. She further demonstrates a certain comfort level with differing opinions and perspectives when she acknowledges that she does not agree with all the content of Warren's book, but nonetheless awarded it a five-star review on Amazon.com. Unlike some of the previously-discussed reviews from respondents who seem quite willing to condemn an entire book or school of thought if there is even one part that does not fit into their world-view, this respondent seems quite capable of taking some of the ideas from Warren's book with which she experienced some affinity, and leaving behind ideas that were not as good a fit for her. She expressed neither anger nor foreboding at the notion that not everyone views the world exactly like she does.

In another case of semi-permeable boundaries, a man from Illinois uses his positive review of *The Purpose-Driven Life* to extoll his happiness not only about Warren's book, but also about his (the respondent's) strong relationship with God. It is interesting to note, however, that contained in the middle of his personal testimony is a small prayer for the Amazon.com editor who did not like Warren's book as much as he did. In his review titled "This is the best book I've ever read and experienced!," he writes

This book is life changing, and I'm only on chapter/day 29.

The power is reading one chapter EVERY day- a daily dose of God. The power is reading it-you must read it-with another person, to discuss, share thoughts, emotions, and it's unfolding power in connecting me, in a new, intimate, faith-based relationship with God. I have ditched my old job of "running the world" and turned it over to God –

What a new life this is!! His yoke is MUCH easier than the old one I was carrying. The power of this book, like I have found is the power of my new relationship with God, by FAITH, surrender, love, and daily action and worship of my Creator. (My prayers to your "Editorial reviewer" – Gail Hudson, that she might find the peace, joy, love and life-changing serenity that I have found through a blind step of faith into an abyss- and God puts a floor under me each and every day- the more I trust and obey God, the more I marvel at the beauty of life with God. I am moved to tears of awe and wonder. Behold and be held in the gentle hands of God.

This review continues with a great deal of personal life details included in the respondent's book review/testimony, and the tone of his writing indicates that he is extremely pleased with the spiritual turn his life has taken. However, although ideologically this reviewer seems, at the very least, satiated in his newfound beliefs, he



remains socially open enough to express what seems to be sincere concern and compassion for an editorial reviewer who clearly has not reached the respondent's place of happiness and understanding. He does not condemn her or use condescending rhetoric. Rather, he offers a prayer that she can experience the glories he currently enjoys. He is not asking the editor to be his best friend, but neither is he telling her she is doomed to hell.

Later in the same review, the respondent shares more personal details of his recent spiritual awakening:

What a wonderful new life this is - yes, I feel reborn. Every day now is Christmas! Every day now is my "re-birth" day, because I need and live and walk with God above me. Every day is new and alive. The black hole in my soul that I have tried to fill with money, sex, drugs, material "success", a huge house, bla bla bla, always led to more despair! And all of these things were on the outside of me and felt like I was prostituting myself in some way. NOTHING filled my soul like God does now. Yes I was ready for an answer when I picked up this book, but I had no idea how it would guide me to a connection with God that has been nothing short of being struck by lightning. Oh how beautiful the light is waking up every day to the love of God, always with me! Yes, I am normally very conservative, but this is just overflowing in me now and I can't keep it in!

In this section of his review, the respondent acknowledges the external authority of God and his connection to that authority, but explains that this newfound connection is made stronger based on the personal experiences he lived through, which nods to an internal source of authority as well. In the conclusion of his review, this respondent reaches out to others:

Good luck and God bless you. I am ordering two more books. Remember, you must read this book with someone else at the same time - one day, one chapter (5-7 pages – profound pages!) each day. Follow this simple path, pray, take action, and hang on. God is the greatest life and love you will ever know! God bless you Rick Warren and thank you for your gift to me!

Here the respondent offers helpful advice to others about how to receive the greatest benefit from his favorite book, but also extends thanks to the author himself. While it is entirely possible that this respondent may be in the throes of the newly-converted, his does not seem to be an exclusionary, condemning orientation towards others. For this reason, he falls into the semi-permeable category of cases.

Another semi-permeable case is that of a respondent from Italy (who was also mentioned in Chapter 5). After beginning her review by providing some details about her troubled romantic relationship, she writes in her positive review of Rick Warren's Evangelical book

[a]s flawed as this book may be (as commented in other reviews), it helped to strengthen our relationship beyond

measure. It kept our channel open with God, in fact, it started "our" channel with God. I'm Christian and he's Greek Orthodox. We'd gone to church with the other and there was no problem accepting the other's religious beliefs, but this book helped us to open up and talk more freely about our beliefs. I see myself as the type of Christian who's always in rough seas, but I've got a buoy to hold on to and I do with all my might. Obviously, the sea is life, and the buoy is Jesus, my Saviour.

While this respondent identifies herself very clearly with a particular faith tradition, she is not so exclusionary ideologically as to preclude having an intimate relationship with a man from a different tradition. This suggests some degree of permeability, both ideologically and socially. She also is willing to assign *The Purpose-Driven Life* five stars in her review, despite her acknowledgement that the book is "flawed." This review also alludes to a combined locus of authority, in that Jesus is the respondent's external authority, but her trust in that authority is made stranger by her personal experiences.

Another positive review of the Evangelical book comes from a respondent in Michigan. She writes

I love this book. I am a Christian, but this book has helped me delve a little deeper into what God means for my purpose to be in my life and road to a closer relationship with God... It does help to have a friend reading the book with you so you can discuss some of the questions at the end of each chapter,

also just questions and thoughts in general from what you have read. This book also helps those who are looking for a different way to do a daily devotional to God.

In this section of the review, the respondent identifies herself as a Christian, but acknowledges the value of approaching her faith in new, different ways. She also emphasizes the usefulness of questioning religious ideas and thinking about them in new ways, which is not an orthodox practice of Christianity these days. She concludes her brief review by offering the following:

Just a suggestion: I went to the back of the book to find what scriptures the footnotes were referring to. I wrote next to each number the book, chapter and verse it was referring to. It made it a lot quicker to go through the chapters that way. Instead of focusing on what Bible Warren took the scriptures from I just used my King James version. Also in the back are further questions for you to think about regarding each chapter.

This section of the respondent's review is particularly important, because it highlights an issue that I found existed for many of the very conservative Christians who negatively reviewed Warren's Evangelical book. Many of them were enormously troubled by the fact that, not only did Warren usually cite the New International Version (NIV) of the Holy Bible, but many of his harshest critics dismissed his book outright because it was published by the same company, Zondervan, that publishes the New International Version. Several of the very negative reviews slammed Zondervan as the publisher of the "Satanic" Bible. Every one of these respondents expressed faith in only

one, “real” Bible: the King James Version. Therefore, when the reviewer above says that she cross-referenced Warren’s Biblical quotes in her own King James Version, she demonstrates a relatively high amount of openness to various versions of the Bible (and demonstrates a high level of blasphemy, according to other reviewers of this book).

Another example of semi-permeable boundaries appears in another positive review of Warren’s book. A respondent from California writes

I have been trying to find my footing in the Christian world since leaving the Jehovah Witness religion years ago, have studied the Catholic religion and now [am] learning about Christianity. This book was like food for my hungry soul. Everyone is trying to find their purpose in this life and this book will help you find the right path you should be walking on in this life. I know mine and that is to heal peoples’ souls and lead them to God, so if I can find my purpose, there so lies yours, this is a journey that will lead to fulfillment.

This respondent describes herself as having a seeking approach to religious matters, and she reaches out to others in an effort to help them in their search process, also. She continues her review in a socially-inclusive way:

Even if you don't have a faith or belong to a certain religion, you will find this book uplifting and help you understand the purpose of what you are doing here and for what purpose. So, my friends, trust in God and enjoy reading this book as everyone else has and I know you will find your life

more complete with God in it and your purpose in this  
life, it's a wild ride, so buckle up and enjoy the ride!!

While she asserts that religious or spiritual exploration is beneficial to everyone, she does not seem to be passing any sort of judgment on individuals who might see the issue differently from her. She reaches out to “friends,” acknowledges the shared human condition (“it’s a wild ride”), and wishes others well.

A final example of a respondent who demonstrates a combination of open and closed boundaries is found in another positive review of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. From the beginning of his brief review, the respondent from Oregon adopts a tone of social inclusion:

If you are not a believer, this book may help to answer  
some of the questions about what Christianity is really  
about. If you are already a believer, you can benefit from  
the well written, heartfelt insights from a man who has  
seen the benefits of a life and ministry lived in  
accordance with the directions given by the Creator.

Based on his use of the term “Creator” in a positive review for an Evangelical bestseller, it is safe to assume that this respondent is a believer in God and probably has a particular set of corresponding beliefs. Ideologically, he may not be open to very different ideas. However, he demonstrates a degree of permeability of his social boundaries, by addressing in a welcoming tone both believers and non-believers. Again, this combination of open and closed boundaries stands in contrast to the consistently open or consistently closed respondents discussed earlier in this chapter.

## SUMMARY

The construction and maintenance of social and ideological boundaries are ongoing activities which are vital to the ongoing project of identity development. We understand who we are, in part, based on our relationship to others. Where individuals draw symbolic lines of distinction between themselves and other people helps to orient them in an increasingly fragmented social world.

Respondents in this study fell into three general patterns of boundary construction and maintenance: those who maintain relatively open boundaries, letting both new ideas into their cognitive spaces and a variety of people into their social spaces; others who maintain rigidly closed ideological and social boundaries; and those who present a more complex combination of open and closed boundaries which results in a variety of semi-permeable boundaries, with a limited degree of openness to a relatively narrow range of new ideas and people.

Individuals in this study who were most likely to demonstrate the open boundary orientation were those who gave very positive reviews to Neale Donald Walsch's New Age book *Conversations with God*. These respondents express an interest in a wide variety of beliefs, cultural practices and faith traditions, and seem most welcoming of the widest variety of people. The only people they seem willing to shut out socially are those who themselves maintain rigidly closed boundaries.

Respondents who demonstrated both ideological and social boundaries that seem fairly impenetrable by outside ideas or social groups are those who wrote the most negative reviews of both the New Age book and Rick Warren's Evangelical *Purpose-Driven Life*. They tended to dismiss *Conversations with God* as New Age fluff at best,

and the work of Satan at worst. This group was also particularly critical of Warren's Evangelical book, based on what they perceived to be his advocacy of "feel good" Christianity and his use of Biblical sources other than the King James Version of the Bible. Not only were they dismissive or condemning of ideas with which they did not agree, but they were also very critical of people and groups they clearly identified as "outsiders" of any kind.

Finally, the majority of respondents in this study who are best described as having semi-permeable boundaries are those who were enthusiastic supporters of the Evangelical book *The Purpose-Driven Life*. While they were not open to ideas that differed a great deal from their own beliefs, they seemed interested in other people and often demonstrated an eagerness to reach out to others and share what they believe to be their helpful experiences and beliefs. They were not openly dismissive or hostile to different ideas, even if they did not attribute any credibility to them. Generally, while they were not as open as the New Age fans, they did not seem threatened or fearful of differences, whether ideological or social.



## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONCLUSION**

For the last ten years I have taught two sections each semester of an Introduction to Marriage and Family course to college undergraduates. When we get past the midpoint of the semester, past the material that orients the class as a sociology course (historical development of the idea of the family, demographic trends, the relationship between families and the larger social structure), we get to what the students call the “fun” part of class. We actually start talking about their experiences, the research findings on partner selection, what factors contribute to a mutually satisfying relationship and the like. We begin this section of the course by reviewing a handout that features a list of qualities that, based on national surveys, individuals tend to look for in a romantic partner. The list includes characteristics like dependability, pleasing disposition, financial prospects, good cooking ability, desire for children, and so on.

I ask the students to either rank the qualities from 1 to 22 based on their personal priorities, or, if this is too hair-splitting of an activity (and it frequently is), I give them the option of identifying their personal “top five” and “bottom five,” in terms of the relative importance of qualities they are looking for in a romantic partner. The students do not turn in these handouts. Rather, they consult them as I go through the process of reading out each quality on the list and ask for a show of hands: “How many of you put [read quality] in your top five?” Then, “Okay, how many of you put this in your bottom five?” I follow up by asking the “top five” group what that particular quality means to

them, and why it is so important to them. Then the “bottom five” people are given an opportunity to discuss whether they defined the quality any differently, and why that particular quality is not very high on their list of priorities.

I share this story here, before discussing the findings of this study, because over the last ten years I have had a steady stream of about one thousand undergraduates who have provided me with informal data about the qualities and values that are most important to them. The classroom activity described here serves not only to allow the students an opportunity to get to know each other and to share a little bit (and in some cases, a great deal) about themselves in class, but it has also served as a series of accidental focus groups for me as a sociologist. Each semester I receive informal feedback from a fresh group of students whose ages typically range from 18 to mid-50s. I hear about their experiences, about how they have been raised by their families, and about the qualities they consider most important to pass down to any children they may have (either presently or in the future).

Over these ten years, the most consistent responses I have received from students during this classroom exercise involves the quality that appears on the handout list as “similar religious background as you.” Unfailingly, of all the qualities on the list, this one elicits the clearest split between the “top five on my list” students and the “bottom five” students. In fact, this particular quality rarely leaves anyone in my classes in the middle of the road, priority-wise. While a number of students may end up with something like the quality “good health” somewhere in the middle of their prioritized lists, indicating that it is not unimportant to them, but just not at the very top of their lists, the religion question rarely ends up tenth out of twenty-two in the students’ rankings.

While this pattern is interesting in itself, the discussions that have taken place in my classrooms over the years have been extraordinarily enlightening for a sociologist with interests in religion, but without a clearly-defined religious background herself. For example, the highly polarized response the religion question elicits, made material in the form of raised hands, immediately piques the interest of both opposing groups. How can a quality that is so important to me be at the very bottom of that kid's list? Or, how can something I just don't care about seem like such a big deal to that person? What ensues is always one of the most interesting (and trickiest to orchestrate) discussions of the semester. In the last year, in light of my work on the current study, these discussions have also allowed me to test out some of the findings I describe in the following portions of this chapter.

#### **A CLASSROOM VIGNETTE**

First, though, here is a typical exchange in the classroom discussion of the relative importance students place on the quality "same religious background as me" in a prospective romantic partner:

Me:                So, those of you who indicated that this is very important to you, what does it mean and why is it important?

Student A:      Well, it means that the other person grew up going to the same kind of church as me, so we will understand each other.

Student B:      I don't really care how someone grew up, but it is really important to me that we both practice the same religion now.

Me: What do you mean by “the same religion?”

*Sometimes this is followed by incredulous stares at my seeming ignorance.*

Student B: You know, I’m Baptist and he’s Baptist.

Student C: But what kind of Baptist? Because my Daddy was Free Will Baptist and Mama is Southern Baptist, and I can tell you that it is hard growing up in a mixed-faith household.

Student A: Well, I’d be fine as long as she’s a Christian. I probably couldn’t be with somebody for long if they were Hindu or Catholic or something.

Student D: Well, I’m Catholic and we *are* Christians.

*At this point the class will look at me for some explanation.*

Me: Yes, that is historically accurate. Any religion that posits Jesus as savior is Christian, although there are a number of churches around our campus that teach otherwise about Catholicism. I have had students go on mission trips to Canada to try to save the souls of the Québécoise.

So, how about those of you who put this at the bottom of your lists? What does “similar religious background” mean to you, and why wasn’t it very important to you?

Student E: Well, I just don’t really care about religion.

Student F: I care about religion, but I just think it’s a private thing. We don’t have to be the same religion.

Student G: I agree. I have my own beliefs, and I think it's interesting to learn about other people's ideas.

Student F: Yeah. As long as the other person is a good person, and we have a lot of other stuff in common, that's all that really matters.

Students G: Exactly. I mean, it's all the same God, right? What does it matter whether you go to the same church, or whether you go to any type of service at all?

*At this point I usually begin to notice looks of discomfort on the faces of Student B and Student C. I address them again.*

Me: You look like you want to say something. Do you have a question?

Student B: Yeah, I mean, I think it sounds really great that you guys are so open-minded and all, but I just think it would be too hard to be with someone who didn't go to the same church as me.

Student C: I couldn't do it, either. Also, I would just be worried all the time.

Student G: Worried about what?

Student C: That the person I loved was going to end up in Hell.

*And, scene.*

Some variation of this exchange occurs in my classes four times a year. I have always found it fascinating, but in the last year I have seen it through the perspective of the current study. The above conversation includes discussion of family, authority and boundaries, even if those precise terms never come up explicitly. In a few minutes' worth of classroom discussion, individuals open brief windows into the way they view

themselves, other people, and their relative positions within their communities and the cosmos. And because the students are actively engaged in a conversation with others who may or may not share their perspectives on these matters, I also have an opportunity to witness part of their identity-forming processes. Sometimes students (politely) recoil at their fellow students' comments about religion, whether they deem them too open-minded or too constricting. The students then use different rhetorical strategies to clearly define their various stances on the issues under discussion, and the classroom becomes an interplay of truth claims, social and ideological boundary-maintenance, and assertions of various definitions of family. I usually end up pointing out to the students that they have been experiencing an opportunity to practice adopting a sociological perspective, so they may try to understand why people's opinions may differ, based on their varying life experiences and perspectives. Some of the students get it, and are pleased to practice being sociologists. And a few of them remain concerned with the fates of their fellow students' eternal souls.

### **THE FINDINGS: PATTERNS OF AFFINITY**

The clearest breakdown of the findings of this study occurs along lines of affinity for the two bestselling books which serve as the cultural touchstones for the data used herein. Fans of the New Age book *Conversations with God*, fans of the Evangelical book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and critics of the Evangelical book demonstrated within-group patterns of affinity in their constructions of family, authority and boundaries. Critics of the New Age book sometimes showed similarities in their responses with the other three groups, but they were not clearly-enough defined for me to discuss them as a relatively

cohesive group. This is probably because of the greater heterogeneity of the readers who felt passionate enough to post a review of Walsch's book. They ranged from New Age advocates who found fault with Walsch's writing style, to self-proclaimed fundamentalist Christians who accused Walsch of channeling the devil.

### *New Age Fans*

Respondents who wrote very positive reviews of the New Age bestseller tended to discuss family in terms fitting George Lakoff's Nurturant Parent ideal. They were likely to describe family as people they chose to have in their lives, rather than only those with whom they shared biological or legal connections. Often, they discussed friends and family interchangeably or inclusive of one another. New Age fans also tended to extend this emphasis on the importance of elective relationships and friendship to their conceptions of God, often describing him/her as a loving, helpful friend. This group was also the only one to posit the notion of an impersonal god, and in some cases describe god as energy that exists within them or within all things, living or not.

Fans of the New Age book also placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of internally-located sources of authority. Specifically, New Age fans discussed the high degree of faith they put in their own sense of inner wisdom. They were most accepting of ideas that resonated on a "gut level," and that they experienced as something they already know, but might not have articulated. New Age fans also placed a great deal of faith in the authority they gained from personal experiences they or close friends or family members had lived through. They describe both inner wisdom and personal experience

as very internally-located sources of authority, as opposed to external authority sources that they generally regarded with a great deal of skepticism.

New Age fans also demonstrated clear patterns in their construction and maintenance of boundaries. Ideologically, this group of respondents tended to seek out different ideas and experiences, and was open to receiving the widest variety of new ideas for serious consideration. They did not appear quick to dismiss ideas or practices that may have been completely new to them. Socially, this group also demonstrated very permeable boundaries. They seemed comfortable with the widest diversity of people in their social circles. While some of the respondents in this group expressed interest in reaching out to different people to engage in an exchange of ideas, others did not. However, even those New Age fans who did not express an interest in social outreach did not express trepidation or concern over threats from people who might see the word differently. The only people the New Age fans tended to be dismissive of or mocking toward were those who they experienced as judgmental or close-minded.

### ***Evangelical Fans***

Respondents who wrote five-star reviews of Rick Warren's Evangelical bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life* also demonstrated striking within-group similarities in their constructions of family, authority and boundaries. In their discussions of family, they tended to talk about the importance of relationships with family members and friends. While not fully embracing of Lakoff's Nurturant Parent model, they did not usually talk in terms of the Strict Father model, either. Evangelical fans were likely to discuss both mothers and fathers, or parents in general, and emphasized the importance of love and the



responsibility of establishing strict guidelines for their children. This group was also very likely to talk about God, almost always as a very loving but strict father.

Fans of Warren's Evangelical book always, but not exclusively, acknowledged the primacy of externally-located authorities, specifically the Bible and/or God. However, this group also very frequently discussed the importance of their own lived experiences. The intersection of personal experience and biblical teachings, and internal-external pairing of authority, seemed to elicit the most passionate outpourings for these respondents. Given the emphasis on the experiential in Evangelical Christianity, this is not really surprising. However, it is also important to note that this group does not describe biblical or godly authority in terms that make such authority seem onerous or strictly imposed. Rather, this external authority, particularly when linked with the internally-located authority of personal experience, tended to elicit expressions of joy and gratitude.

Evangelical fans demonstrated the most complex combination of boundary constructions of any group of respondents in this study. Respondents in this group tended to express a great deal of clarity regarding their ideological beliefs, but did not seem wholly threatened by dissenting ideas. So while some were closed in terms of ideological boundaries, others were semi-permeable, or willing to entertain ideas they may not have considered before. Also, this group of respondents was quite open socially, and most likely to reach beyond their boundaries to spread their experiences and enthusiasm with others. This held true even when the "others" might seem quite different from them. This group tended not to talk in terms of feeling threatened socially by those who may not believe exactly as they did, and were also likely to discuss their ongoing

relationships with family members or friends who had clear ideological differences with the respondents. This tendency also fits with the witnessing nature of Evangelical Christianity, and the emphasis on “spreading the good news,” even if the message is not always received with great enthusiasm. Even non-receptive others are not summarily dismissed or condemned by fans of the Evangelical book.

### ***Evangelical Critics***

Respondents in this study who wrote very negative reviews of Rick Warren’s Evangelical bestseller expressed views of family very strongly aligned with George Lakoff’s Strict Father Ideal. They spoke frequently about the importance of establishing and enforcing rules for the safety and benefit of children. They described the social context in which today’s families live as riddled with threats to morality, and emphasized the protective and punishing responsibilities of parents. They did not mention friends in the ways the other two affinity groups did. However, they did discuss God, and clearly conceptualized him as a strict, punishing father. This group did not emphasize love within the context of family or Godly relations, unlike the other two groups.

Evangelical critics only acknowledged external forms of authority. In fact, these respondents cited the authority of the King James Bible, as containing the words of God, as their only basis for Truth. In fact, this was one of the primary reasons for rejecting Warren’s book: it was not biblical enough, and it was not based on the right “kind” of bible, anyway. They do not discuss freely choosing this biblical authority as a guide for their lives. They describe it as imposed—as that which must be followed—or else. To

question the authority of the Bible or God, they suggest very strongly, is to flirt with eternal damnation.

It follows that those who do not adhere to biblical authority in the way these respondents see fit do not make it past the social boundaries and into the close realm of the Evangelical critics. This group of respondents does not entertain ideological questioning, and condemns any dissenting viewpoint as threatening (not to mention foolhardy and blasphemous). So, ideologically and socially, this group of respondents maintains the most rigid boundaries. These findings are summarized in Table 7.1.

#### **RELEVANCE BEYOND THIS STUDY**

While the findings summarized in the preceding section are interesting, I believe they also point toward a slightly different way of looking at one of the foundational issues of this study: how people construct senses of identity in a rapidly changing social environment. While the initial point of entry for this exploration was an examination of reader reviews of religious books, the respondents reveal their thoughts and concerns about issues well beyond the religious realm in the course of their writing.

This brings me back to the classroom exercise described at the beginning of this chapter. Just like the respondents in this study, those Marriage and Family students reveal far more than their opinions on a single relationship issue in the course of our discussion. They reveal their general approaches to difference, the degree to which they feel threatened by dissent, the importance of homogeneity of ideas, and other personal orientations they carry far beyond our college classroom.

Table 7.1: Summary of Findings

	Family <sup>1</sup>	Loci of Authority <sup>2</sup>	Ideological Boundaries <sup>3</sup>	Social Boundaries <sup>4</sup>
<b>New Age Book Fans</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nurturant Parent ideal</li> <li>• Family as chosen</li> <li>• Family includes friends</li> <li>• God as friend or non-personal energy</li> </ul>	Internal Loci <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inner wisdom</li> <li>• Personal Experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open to a variety of ideas that correspond to Inner Wisdom</li> <li>• Generally seeking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open to widest variety</li> <li>• Can be dismissive of those perceived to be very closed themselves</li> <li>• Most have no active outreach, but unthreatened by others</li> </ul>
<b>Evangelical Book Fans</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loving but strict parents</li> <li>• God as loving but strict father</li> </ul>	Combined Loci of Authority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External Loci – Experienced as Elective</li> <li>• Internal Loci – Personal Experience</li> </ul>	Permeable to Closed	Open <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most with active outreach</li> <li>• Most unthreatened by others</li> </ul>
<b>Evangelical Book Critics<sup>5</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strict Father ideal</li> <li>• God as a strict, punishing father</li> </ul>	External Loci of Authority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced as imposed</li> </ul>	Closed	Closed

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Constructions of family based on Lakoff's parental models, with additional analysis of constructions of relationships with God
- <sup>2</sup> Location of primary authority / truth source
- <sup>3</sup> Refers to the degree of 'permeability of individuals' ideological boundaries
- <sup>4</sup> Refers to the degree of 'permeability of individuals' social boundaries
- <sup>5</sup> New Age Book Critics did not demonstrate clear patterns for inclusion in this table of findings.

In a sense, the students in my class experience on a very small scale, and to a smaller degree, some of the transition to a fragmented culture described by Bauman, Giddens, and others. This exercise takes place in the middle of the semester. The students have had a couple of months to bond a little bit and get to know each other. By that time, they are comfortable enough to chat amiably with each other before I walk in the door. Sometimes they will have formed friendly little alliances with each other, sometimes against me (particularly if they want a test rescheduled). Despite their varied home lives and national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, in that classroom they share a number of significant statuses that help form them into a fairly cohesive group. They are all students, they share common interests in time management and grade attainment, and are similarly situated in a common classroom at the same time.

Then we start talking about what they look for in a romantic partner, and suddenly the blasphemer or Holy Roller (depending on their perspectives) in the next desk is revealed. They essentially, and in a minor way, move from a moment of relative social and moral order into a moment of social and moral chaos. They are made to confront the chaotic moment, much as many individuals living in postmodern/late capitalist/ liquid societies must do today. And in confronting the chaotic moment, they make decisions that reveal their orientations toward such issues as authority and boundaries. Some of the students express a very open orientation, both ideologically and socially, revealed through statements like “It’s all one god,” and “religion is private and I don’t care if we don’t all agree.” Other students express a semi-permeable orientation, revealed in statements like “well, as long as they’re Christians, I guess that can work out.” Other students who express concern about which type of Baptist someone identifies as, or who

say they could never marry someone they did not know for sure was going to heaven (presumably as will they), demonstrate a more closed orientation when confronted with a fragmented social and moral moment.

If these different response orientations materialized among the respondents in this study, and similar orientations arise in my Marriage and Family classes every semester, perhaps there are models of these orientations that can be useful in understanding different individual's patterns of adapting to conditions of social change or perceived moral chaos. The next section contains descriptions of three ideal types of response orientations, which may help move us beyond the analysis of motivations based on religious beliefs and into a better understanding of the different approaches individuals take in actively constructing senses of self through agency.

### **THREE COGNITIVE ORIENTATIONS**

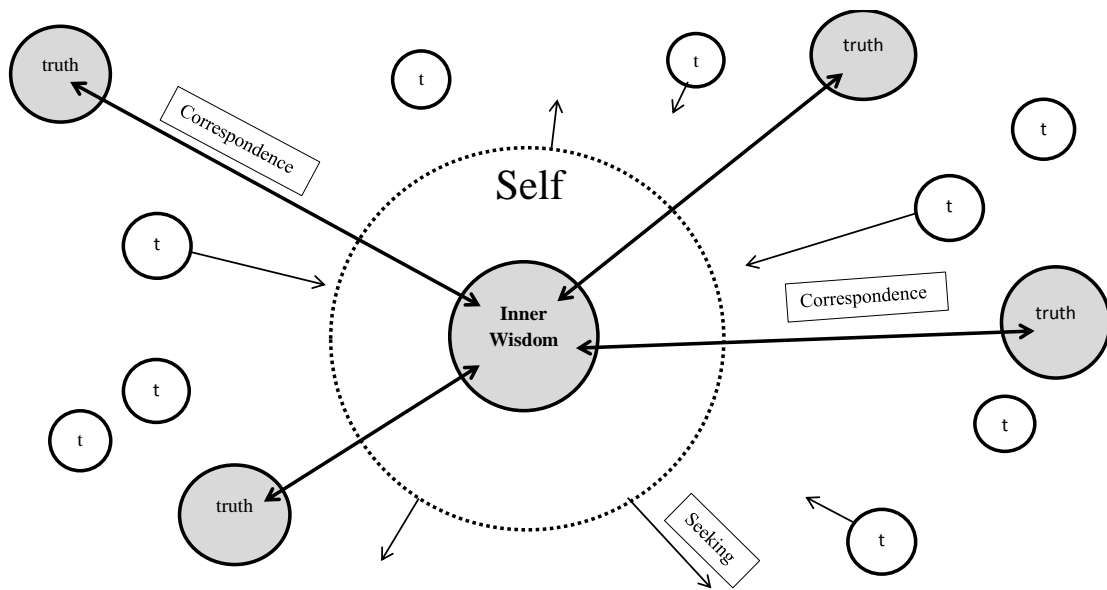
This study began as an attempt to understand some of the larger social dynamics behind some of the shifts in religious life in the United States. From an overview of these shifts based on recent national surveys, I moved through an examination of some prominent theorists' descriptions of the changing nature of social conditions over the past several decades, and the resulting uncertainty confronting many people in contemporary societies. As a means of exploring the ways in which individuals attempt to impose order in their little corners of a changing social landscape, I performed an in-depth analysis of the way people talk about religious and spiritual issues. This analysis yielded some clear patterns in the ways different groups of respondents actively construct their understandings of family, authority and boundaries. I would like to propose a few ideal

types of orientations that the respondents in this study seem to take in their attempts to make sense of a rapidly changing social world. My hope is that these models might provide an alternative way to understand what may appear to be differences in belief, but may actually be differences in underlying cognitive orientations to the world.

### ***The Open Ideal Type***

I propose that an Open ideal type of cognitive orientation, based on my analysis in this study, is one that features very permeable ideological and social boundaries. In a world of ideas, someone with an Open orientation often actively seeks out new ideas. This individual would be open to considering new ways of doing things and trying out new perspectives. While not all of the ideas the Open individual considers will be incorporated into his or her set of beliefs or larger worldview, even most disagreeable ideas would not be experienced as threatening. At worst, rejected ideas may be interesting, but not worthy of further consideration.

So, in this sea of ideas, and in this process of actively seeking out new ones, how does an Open individual settle on some sense of personal truth or authority? The ideas that will appeal to a person with the Open orientation are those that correspond or resonate with that individual's sense of inner wisdom. Inner wisdom, or the sense of having known something all along, even if they were not aware of knowing it, is the ultimate source of authority to individuals with an Open orientation. Ideas that resonate with a deep sense of inner wisdom are actively collected and internalized into the understanding or worldview of the Open individual. A basic schematic of this orientation might be represented by Figure 7.1.



**Figure7:1: Open Ideal Type** - Permeable Boundaries, Seeking Orientation, and Internalization of Ideas Corresponding to Inner Wisdom (Predominant type among fans of New Age book *Conversations with God* in this study)

In the figure above, the Self inhabits a world of ideas (or truths). Ideas that do not correspond to the individual's inner wisdom are labeled "t." Arrows emanating from the Self indicate instances of active seeking of new ideas and practices. Those ideas that do resonate or correspond to the individual's inner wisdom are then internalized and incorporated within the Self. Note that the Self in this model features a permeable boundary, with many points of entry. Also, the internal authority of inner wisdom informs the Self and helps drive the Self, but still remains an internal component of the Self.



In this model, the Open individual is an active agent, in that he or she seeks out ideas, evaluates them based on “gut-level” correspondence with an inner sense of truth, and then internalizes those new ideas which are a good fit. In this study, this ideal type best corresponds with fans of the New Age book, but beyond this study the model may work well in understanding the cognitive orientations of other open-minded people, as well.

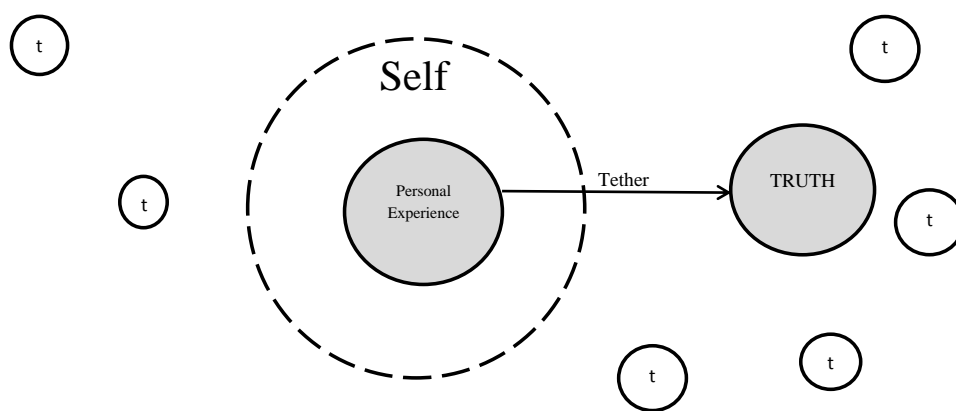
### ***The Semi-Permeable Ideal Type***

Individuals with a Semi-Permeable cognitive orientation to the world feature an identity or Self with a semi-permeable boundary. This individual is not closed off to all new ideas or practices, but will only be drawn to a limited range of ideas. There are fewer points of entry through which new ideas may enter, and those most likely to do so will probably be similar to, or at least compatible with, ideas already accepted by this individual.

The primary location of authority for the Semi-Permeable ideal type is external to the Self. This type seeks an external authority source, but is primarily attracted to those sources that seem to correspond to personal experiences the Semi-Permeable individual has lived through. Validation of lived experience from an external authority source may be very comforting to a Semi-Permeable type, as they lack the gyroscope of inner wisdom that seems to allow the Open types to maintain some sense of balance.

The Semi-Permeable individual is also engaged in agency, in that he or she actively searches for external sources of authority and also continually aligns the Self, based on lived experiences, with that external authority. That external authority source

becomes recognized as Truth, which is not viewed as one of many possible truths, but as a uniquely legitimate Truth (See Figure 7.2). How does this type know real Truth when confronted with it? Because it provides understanding, explanation and guidance to this type as he or she attempts to make sense of lived experiences.



**Figure 7.2: Semi-Permeable Ideal Type:** Semi-permeable boundaries, attracted to limited number of external ideas which correspond with personal experience, limited seeking orientation (most likely to appear among fans of the evangelical book *The Purpose-Driven Life* in this study)

Semi-Permeables, once anchored to an external authority or truth source, remain relatively open socially. They are not easily threatened by other, new ideas, nor are they as interested in them as the Open types would be. They are tethered to their Truth, and may be very eager to share it with others. In the present study, fans of the Evangelical book best fit this ideal type. However, based on discussions with friends of mine,

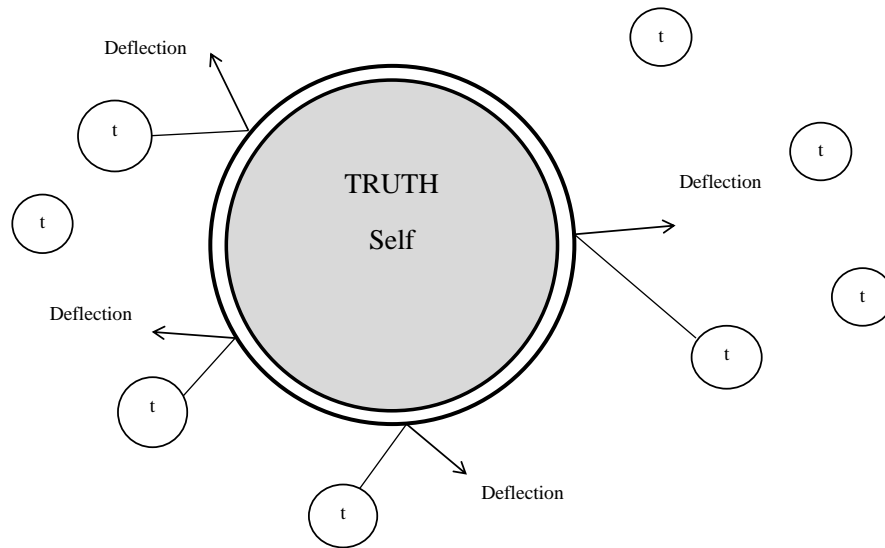
individuals involved in organizations like 12-step programs may also fit this type. In cases where individuals have suffered painful life experiences and lost faith in their abilities to “right” themselves, they may gladly tether themselves to an external authority like Alcoholics Anonymous and thrive on the stability it helps provide them.

### ***The Closed Ideal Type***

The final cognitive orientation suggested by the analysis in this study is the Closed type. The Closed ideal type features closed ideological and social boundaries. Only external forms of authority are acknowledged by the Closed individuals. In fact, based on the respondents in this study, external authority may be experienced by Closed individuals as not elective at all. In other words, the Self may be subsumed within the authority or Truth, like an individual who is born into a religious tradition and is never in a situation to question that tradition. As discussed by Taylor (2007) and Roy (2004), most people in advanced contemporary societies confront a variety of choices, including religious choices, which humans in earlier societies could not have imagined. In a society like the contemporary United States, all but those individuals who grow up in the most secluded, parochial social environment manage to avoid confrontations with religious choice.

Therefore, those individuals who typify the Closed cognitive orientation may be willingly refusing to engage in the process of choice (beyond making the choice not to engage any further). The Closed individual experiences Self as encased within authority. The authority or Truth provides a barrier between the individual and the process of engaging with new ideas, and such ideas are experienced as threatening to the Self. They

are deflected off the surface of the self, so that no further consideration of potentially invasive ideas takes place. They are dismissed as non-truths, as they originate from outside the only legitimate source of Truth (Figure 7.3).



**Figure 7.3: Closed Ideal Type:** Non-permeable Boundaries, Identity (Self) subsumed within unquestioned, unified ideology imposed from outside the individual, Anti-seeking orientation, all other ideas are deflected and/or dismissed. (Most likely to appear among people who identify themselves as Christians and are highly critical of the evangelical book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and also in some self-identified Christian critical reviewers of the New Age book *Conversations with God* in this study)

Despite the Closed cognitive orientation of this type, a certain degree of agency is involved in the denial of new ideas and truth claims, and in the refusal to consider them.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

My hope at the conclusion of this dissertation is that I have made a convincing case for the existence of certain patterns of affinity among the various groups of book reviewers who served as the respondents for this study. Despite the fact that I could not be certain of the religious or spiritual identification of the respondents, I believe the systematic and close method of analysis I brought to bear on the data produced reliable findings.

People do not simply believe ideas, whether religious or otherwise, in a passive fashion. We struggle with ideas, play with them, sometimes beat them into submission, and sometimes choose to ignore them entirely. Each of these choices of engagement with ideas, though, is just that: a choice. Choice implies agency, a process of activity that is sometimes concealed behind statements of belief. This study provides a view into the processes of active construction of meaning of concepts like family, authority and boundaries. These processes are vital components in our ongoing constructions of identity and senses of orientation in a rapidly changing world.

I believe it would be interesting to try to apply the models of cognitive orientation suggested in this concluding chapter in other areas of sociological interest. For example, I believe the application of these models may be usefully applied to political beliefs. It would be particularly interesting to find out if someone who demonstrates a particular cognitive orientation in one area, like religion, either remains consistent in this orientation in other areas, or if different orientations are used in different areas of life. I am also curious about the process by which individuals may shift from one orientation to another. For example, individuals who grow up as very participatory members of white

supremacist groups, which would suggest a very Closed orientation, sometimes transform into open-minded people who look back on their pasts with horror. What is the mechanism of change at work here? And could we learn to streamline this process? The first step would be to articulate the mechanism of cognitive orientation, and my hope is that this study contributes to our ongoing process of better understanding one of the areas of ongoing disagreement in our society, and in the world at large.

## REFERENCES

- Albanese, Catherine L. 2007. *A Republic of Mind & Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- , 2006. *America: Religions & Religion*. Albany, NY: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- , 1993. "Fisher Kings and Public Places: The Old New Age in the 1990s." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527: 131-143.
- Ammerman, Nancy. 2005. *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1997. *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*. New York: New York University Press.
- , 1998. "Postmodern Religion?" In *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas, 55-78. Malden MA: Blackwell.
- , 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Malden: MA: Polity Press.

-----, 2007. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Barna, George. 1997. *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators*. Dallas: Word Publishing.

Bell, Daniel. 1976. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books.

Bender, Courtney. 2010. *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Besecke, Kelly. 2005. "Seeing Invisible Religion: Religion as a Societal Conversation about Transcendent Meaning." *Sociological Theory* 23:2 (June): 179-196.

Black Rock City, LLC. 2010. "What is Burning Man? Mission Statement." Retrieved September 25, 2010. ([http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/mission.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/mission.html))

Bloch, Jon P. 1998. *New Spirituality, Self, and Belonging: How New Agers and Neo-Pagans Talk About Themselves*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.



Castells, Manuel. 2000. *The Rise of the Network Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Inc.

Cerulo, Karen. 2006. *Never Saw it Coming: Cultural Challenges to Envisioning the Worst*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

-----, 1998. *Deciphering Violence: The Cognitive Structure of Right and Wrong*. New York: Routledge.

Chidester, David. 2005. *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Conant, Eve. 2009. "Modernity's Worldwide Belief Boom." *Newsweek*, April 20.

Cross, Whitney R. 2006. *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Doktòr, Tadeusz. 2003. *New Age and Fundamentalism*. Paper presented at the CESNUR 2003 International Conference, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Drury, Nevill. 1999. *Exploring the Labyrinth: Making Sense of the New Spirituality*. New York: Continuum.

Durkheim, Emile. (Translated by Karen E. Fields). 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.

------. (Translated by John A. Spalding and George Simpson). 1997. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. New York: The Free Press.

Evans, Jeff, Morgan, Candia and Anna Tsatsaroni. 2006. "Discursive Positioning and Emotion in School Mathematics Practices." *Educational Studies in Mathematics* 63: 209-226)

Frykholm, Amy Johnson. 2004. *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gallagher, Sally. 2003. *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

George, Leonard. 1995. *Alternative Realities: The Paranormal, the Mystic and the Transcendent in Human Experience*. New York: Facts of File, Inc.

Gergen, Kenneth. 2000, 1991. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books.

- Griffith, R. Marie. 1997. *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Guest, Matthew. 2007. "In Search of Cultural Capital: The Spiritual as A Cultural Resource." Pp. 181-199 in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, Edited by Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing House.
- Guthrie, John J., Jr., Phillip Charles Lucas and Gary Monroe (Eds.). 2000. *Cassadaga: The South's Oldest Spiritualist Community*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Griswold, Wendy. 1994. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Griswold, Wendy. 2000. *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Harvey, David. 2010. *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- , 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Heelas, Paul. 1996. *The New Age Movement*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

-----, 2008. *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Howard, Robert Glenn. 2011. *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*. New York: New York University Press.

Hudson, Winthrop S. and John Corrigan. 1999. *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (Sixth Edition). Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

Hunt, Darnell. 1997. *Screening the Los Angeles "Riots": Race, Seeing, and Resistance*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hunt, Kate. 2003. "Understanding the Spirituality of People who Do Not Go to Church." In *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*, ed. Grace Davie, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, 159-169. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Jameson, Frederic. 1991. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Judd, Terri. 2001. "Doctor admits the Pope has Parkinson's disease." *The Independent*, January 4. Retrieved August 1, 2010. (<http://www.independent.co.uk>).
- Kosmin, Barry and Ariela Keysar. 2009. "*American Religious Identity Survey 2008 Summary Report*." Retrieved April 15, 2009. (<http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org>).
- Lakoff, George. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamont, Michèle. 2002. "Symbolic Boundaries and Status." Pp. 98 – 107 in *Cultural Sociology*, edited by Lynn Spillman. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Lasch, Christopher. 1979. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lee, Thomas Y. 2007. *Needs-Based Analysis of Online Consumer Reviews*. Conference paper from the August 19-22, 2007 meetings of the International Center for Internet Commerce, Minneapolis, Minn.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1968. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Markham, Annette N. 2003. "Representation in Online Ethnographies: A Matter of Context Sensitivity." In *Online Social Research: Methods, Issues and Ethics*, edited by Sarina Chen, Jon Hall and Mark Johns. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Marsden, George M. 2001. *Religion and American Culture* (Second Edition). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Mayer, Egon, Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar. 2001. "American Religious Identity Survey." Retrieved July 10, 2006.  
([http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research\\_briefs/aris/aris\\_index.htm](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/aris_index.htm))
- Meacham, Jon. 2011. "Is Hell Dead?" *Time*, April 25.
- . 2009. "The End of Christian America." *Newsweek*, April 4.
- Micklethwait, John and Adrian Woolridge. 2009. *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Neuman, W. Lawrence. 1997. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (Third Edition). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Putnam, Robert D. and David E. Campbell. 2010. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Radway, Janice A. 1991. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Riesebrodt, Martin. 1993. *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Roig-Franzia, Manuel. 2005. "A Manhunt and a Woman's Story." *Washington Post*, March 15. Retrieved September 30, 2010. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35137-2005Mar14.html>)

Roof, Wade Clark. 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

-----, 1994. *A Nation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. San Francisco: Harper.

Rosenbloom, Stephanie. 2005. "Today's Horoscope: Now Unsure." *New York Times*, August 28. Retrieved August 8, 2010. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/28/fashion/sundaystyles/28ASTRO.html>)

Roy, Olivier. 2004. *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Seccombe, Karen and Warner, Rebecca L. 2004. *Marriages and Families: Relationships in Social Context*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Smith, Christian. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Spradley, James P. 1980. *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Spencer, Wayne. 2003. "Are the Stars Coming Out? Secularization and the Future of Astrology in the West." Pp. 214 – 227 in *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*, edited by Grace Davie, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing House.

Strassberg, Barbara A. 2005. "Magic, Religion, Science, Technology, and Ethics in the Postmodern World. *Zygon* 40:2 (June). 307-322.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.



- Thomas, George M. 1998. *Revivalism and Cultural Change: Christianity, Nation Building, and the Market in the Nineteenth-Century United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Walsch, Neal Donald. 1995. *Conversations With God: An Uncommon Dialogue, Book 1*. New York: G.P. Putnum's Sons.
- Warren, Rick. 2002. *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.
- Weber, Max. (Translated by Talcott Parsons). 1958. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Weber, Max. (Translated by Ephraim Fischhoff). 1993. *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Weiss, Brian. 1988. *Many Lives, many Masters: The True Story of a Prominent Psychiatrist, His Young Patient, and the Past-Life Therapy that Changed Both Their Lives*. New York: Fireside Books.
- Williams, Peter W. 1989. *Popular Religion in America*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Wuthnow, Robert. 1998. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.