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FULL DISCLOSURE: SCHOLARS IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION DISCUSS  
TRANSPARENCY IN RELIGIOUS-BASED RESEARCH

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
English

May, 2020

This dissertation has been examined and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English by:

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On April 20, 2020

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of New Hampshire Graduate School.

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Lauren J. Short

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Rachel Held Evans, who made it okay for many of us to inhabit complicated spaces.

*1981-2019*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: Coding Scheme for How Positionality is Identified.....	24
TABLE 2: Coding Scheme for Rationale of Positionality Disclosure.....	25
TABLE 3: Demographic Guide for Professor Participants.....	29
TABLE 4: Demographic Guide for Graduate Student and Recent Graduate Participants.....	30
TABLE 5: Coding Scheme for Risks and Rewards of Positionality Disclosure.....	35

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Pre-Interview Questionnaire Sample.....31

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
ABSTRACT.....	xi
I. CHAPTER 1: Understanding the Intersections of Religious Ideology and Higher Education... 1	
A Definition of Terminology.....	3
Religious Rhetoric and Studies of Disclosure in Rhetoric and Composition.....	4
Setting the Scene: The Mingling of Secular and Sacred in Education.....	6
Literature Review.....	8
Chapter Outlines.....	18
II. CHAPTER 2: Study Design.....	20
Part I: Textual Analysis.....	25
Part II: Semi-Structured Interviews.....	28
Data Collection and Analysis.....	33
The Researcher’s Commitment to Ethical Research.....	37
Limitations.....	40
A Note on Pronouns.....	42
III. CHAPTER 3: Coming Out as Religious (or Atheist).....	43
Utilizing Queer Theory to Describe Religious and Nonreligious Disclosure.....	43
Motivations for “Coming Out” as Religious or Atheist in the Academy.....	48
“Outing” Themselves: Participants Enact the Language of Coming Out Discourse.....	50

“Outing” Themselves in Print: Scholars Disclose in Academic Publications.....	54
Public Complications to Coming Out in the Academy.....	59
Conclusion.....	63
IV. CHAPTER 4: Forming Allies and Establishing Ethos in the Academy.....	65
Considering the Criteria for Religious or Nonreligious Disclosure in the Academy.....	65
Vulnerabilities and Fears of Religious (Particularly, Christian) Scholars.....	69
Establishing Ethos and Credibility in the Academy.....	72
Authenticity or Transparency as Extensions of Ethos.....	81
Forming Allies in the Academy.....	85
Conclusion.....	92
V. CHAPTER 5: Managing Assumptions and Perceptions in the Academy.....	94
Anticipation and Management of Public Perception.....	95
Self Preservation and Fears of Performativity as Motivators for Nondisclosure.....	103
Scholars Indirectly Disclose or Disidentify in Academic Publications.....	114
Conclusion.....	118
VI. CHAPTER 6: Afterword.....	121
APPENDICES.....	132
REFERENCES.....	140

## ABSTRACT

### FULL DISCLOSURE: SCHOLARS IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION DISCUSS TRANSPARENCY IN RELIGIOUS-BASED RESEARCH

by

Lauren J. Short

University of New Hampshire, 2020

This dissertation explores how and why scholars in Rhetoric and Composition, who study religious topics, choose to disclose (or not) their positionalities in relation to their research. Included in this investigation are scholars of atheist rhetorics, as well. Through interviews with scholars of religious topics in Rhetoric and Composition and textual analysis of religiously-based academic scholarship in the field, I explore the situations and contexts in which scholars feel most comfortable disclosing their positionalities and how they do so. Furthermore, I examine why some scholars choose not to disclose their positionalities in particular instances.

Drawing upon queer theory and “coming out” discourse, I make connections between the language my participants use to express their positionality disclosures in relation to religious research topics. From here, I discuss the nature of scholars to seek “allies” and to establish a sense ethos in their positionality disclosures. Finally, I consider the defensive posturing some scholars assume during positionality disclosure as a means of managing public (audience) perception about a particular religious identity and how that identity pertains to the discloser.

This dissertation illustrates that in the growing subfield of religious studies in Rhetoric and Composition, scholars of religious topics fear discrimination within the academy for disclosing their religious positionalities. Through interviews with several scholars and an

analysis of several scholarly publications, this dissertation interrogates disclosure practices within the subfield of religious rhetorics. Ultimately, I argue that simply calling for positionality disclosure critically overlooks the fears religious scholars have of being perceived as intolerant, anti-intellectual, and/or politically conservative and the how these fears complicate a scholar's sense of power, status, and comfort in the academic context. Furthermore, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of the struggles scholars in this area of research face and for the development of best practices for scholars to safely continue pursuing their work and for the continued expansion of this subfield.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction: Understanding the Intersections of Religious Ideology and Higher Education**

The way scholars identify themselves will often color readers' interpretation of their research. Readers may wonder if the scholar has the professional ethos to pursue their line of research. They may wonder if the scholar is too biased to conduct a study upon a population to which they are so closely affiliated or of which they are an outsider. Readers may even take the scholar less seriously if the scholar aligns with a particular faith group or if they believe the scholar voted the way the majority of their congregation voted.

For instance, how (if) I self-identify will color the way you choose to read this dissertation.

---

In the fall of 2016, Professor Cristy Beemer asked her History of Rhetoric class to submit proposals for their final seminar papers. It was my last semester of coursework and for the first time in my history as a student, I had not one idea for a final paper. Usually, I had a few lukewarm ideas to parse through until one ended up rising to the top. Not this time. I lamely submitted a research proposal on October 18 that started, "In all honesty, I'm a bit flummoxed as to a research question at this point." In the proposal, I wrote through a number of ideas including 1) why ethos and logos are typically lauded as superior rhetorical devices over pathos; 2) why early Christians were drawn to Quintilian as a rhetorician and; 3) why Hildegard von Bingen was so fascinating. Not exactly firm footing.

As class ended after submitting my lame research proposal, the idea for my final seminar paper became readily apparent. I was going to write about contemporary Protestant women responding to the political climate surrounding the 2016 presidential election, what rhetorical strategies they used in an attempt to persuade their audiences, and how they used their religious

platforms to engage with political ideology. Given that candidate Trump was running on a pro-Christian platform, I found it interesting to read blog posts, tweets, and Facebook posts from Christian women writers who spoke out disavowing Trump as somewhat of a false prophet. In my experience, when Christians mentioned politics, they were in favor of conservative leadership. (I probably just wasn't looking hard enough at that point). What fascinated me about these women speaking out against Trump was the fact that many of their readers and followers responded negatively, by posting critical (and not always constructive) comments, unfollowing, disliking, and according to one of these women, threatening death on them and their families, while also sending pictures of aborted fetuses to their email accounts. What motivated these women to identify towards an audience who might react negatively to that identity (e.g. as a liberal)?

This question, and this subject matter, are ones that still fascinate me. However, I wasn't quite able to come to terms with motivations beyond my own conjectures and it was difficult to manage feedback from audiences through comments across multiple platforms. In other words, I needed to find an accessible group of people I could talk to who might face a similar circumstance as the women noted above, yet on a much smaller scale. Harkening back to my reading of texts on religious topics by scholars in Rhetoric and Composition, I wondered how folks in my own field dealt with disclosure of their positionalities as people of faith. Some scholars state their positionalities plainly in their published texts, accessible to anyone who wants to find them. In texts where one's positionality was not addressed, I began to wonder if those scholars identified with the subjects they studied. And if so, why hadn't they disclosed that with their audiences? Certainly, there are levels of disclosure, and disclosing one's positionality in a published academic text will stand as an evident marker of one's identity in a way that a passing

comment to a colleague about attending a religious service will not.

This dissertation explores how and why scholars in Rhetoric and Composition, who study religious topics, choose to disclose (or not) their positionalities in relation to their research. Included in this investigation are scholars of atheist rhetorics, as well. Through interviews with scholars of religious topics in Rhetoric and Composition and textual analysis of religiously-based academic scholarship in the field, I explore the situations and contexts in which scholars feel most comfortable disclosing their positionalities and how they do so. Furthermore, I examine why some scholars choose not to disclose their positionalities in particular instances.

This dissertation illustrates that scholars of religious topics fear discrimination within the academy for disclosing their religious positionalities. Ultimately, I argue that simply calling for positionality disclosure critically overlooks the fears religious scholars have of being perceived as intolerant, anti-intellectual, and/or politically conservative and the how these fears complicate a scholar's sense of power, status, and comfort in the academic context. Furthermore, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of the struggles scholars in this area of research face and for the development of best practices for scholars to safely continue pursuing their work.

### **A Definition of Terminology**

For the purposes of clarity, I would like to pause for a definition of seven prominent terms that are used throughout my dissertation, as provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Merriam-Webster. Along with some of these standard dictionary definitions, I provide a brief commentary for the specific ways I utilize these terms in the proceeding chapters.

Religious: the term “religious” refers to the Merriam-Webster definition “relating to or manifesting a faithful devotion to an acknowledged ultimate reality or deity.” I argue that this definition extends to scholars of atheist rhetorics because their work “relates to an acknowledged ultimate reality” of a universe with no deities. In certain contexts, I will specifically acknowledge “religious” and “atheist” scholars for the sake of clarity and precision.

Nonreligious: not relating to or believing in a religion (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Atheist: a person who disbelieves or lacks belief in the existence of God or gods (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Christian: “Christian” generally refers to followers of the teachings of Jesus Christ. The majority of participants in my study who identify as Christian also identify as Protestant, with the exception of one Catholic.

Catholic: Catholicism is the oldest and largest Christian religious tradition in the world whose beliefs are founded upon the Nicene Creed and the papal supremacy of the Pope.

Protestant: Protestant Christianity is defined by a split from the Catholic tradition and follows various new traditions that arose from the Reformation. The main difference between Protestants and Catholics is that Protestants reject the papal supremacy of the Pope.

Evangelical: Evangelical Christianity is a subset of Protestant Christianity in which evangelicals believe in salvation through grace alone and place emphasis on the importance of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to convert nonbelievers.

### **Religious Rhetoric and Studies of Disclosure in Rhetoric and Composition**

While the study of religious rhetorics in Rhetoric and Composition has been growing and flourishing since the late 1980s-early 1990s, it is still a minor subset of the field that requires further interdisciplinary study. Without collaboration with other disciplines and subsets of our discipline, the study of religious rhetorics in Rhetoric and Composition has the prospect of becoming an insular community only speaking back and forth to itself. In this dissertation, I challenge readers to more deeply understand the experiences of religiously-committed rhetors and for religious scholars of religious rhetorics to consider how they might disclose their positionalities within their work, if they choose to do so.

Within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, discussions of disclosure are of great import, though they haven't been widely applied to religious studies or towards scholars in a field, as opposed to students. Most notably, disclosure, or “coming out,” is a significant topic in queer theory and conversations surrounding coming out discourse. Furthermore, particularly in

Rhetoric and Composition, discussions concerning disclosure are most prominent in terms of disability and one's mental health. Stephanie L. Kerschbaum's 2017 *Negotiating Disability: Disclosure and Higher Education* and Margaret Price's 2011 *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* are a couple of valuable collections that add to existing conversations about disclosure, in general, in the field. Because not much work has specifically examined disclosure of religious scholars who study religious topics, I found it challenging to find source material that made direct connections with some of the conclusions that I draw in this dissertation. That said, this gap in the research, further underlines the import of studying religious disclosure in academia.

Positionality disclosure can be an important methodological consideration for a number of academic disciplines, but it is particularly relevant in a field like Rhetoric and Composition where discussions of identity expression are abundant. Jason Alexander and David Wallace, scholars of queer topics in Rhetoric and Composition refer to the field as “a scholarly and pedagogical tradition that takes diversity seriously” (301) and “our field has a longstanding commitment to inclusive and multicultural pedagogies that address how identity can serve as a tool for helping students and teachers analyze the socioculturally and historically constructed nature of culture and individual agency” (303). As I will examine in this dissertation, while issues of disclosure are particularly important in queer theory, they are also relevant to scholars of religious topics in our field who may fear pushback or shame for identifying with their object of study. As any instructor of writing courses can attest to, writing is deeply personal, and brings to the fore considerations of identity and when it is appropriate to disclose particular aspects of one's identity and how best to approach such a disclosure.

The upcoming sections will provide an overview of the setting in which this dissertation

takes place—academia—and how academia has shifted over the years from a “sacred” place into a generally “secular” one. Following the scene-setting is a literature review providing a brief account of religion’s origins in early rhetorical history, and how the conversations have shifted into modern times. Subsequently, this chapter will end with outlines of proceeding chapters.

### **Setting the Scene: The Mingling of Secular and Sacred in Education**

Colleges have a long history of being religiously-affiliated. Discussing early American rhetoric, Robert Connors describes colleges as “devoted to producing doctors, lawyers, and ministers” (9). In other words, the university was a place for men of money or men of God. According to James Berlin, the college system favored God over intellectualism until about 1850 (*Writing* 32). Up until the Civil War, colleges were mainly run by clergymen (Berlin *Writing* 35), but post-war colleges began a shift away from solely serving the elite and started offering courses that would serve the middle class (Berlin *Writing* 58). He writes: “colleges in the [nineteenth] century redefined their purpose, away from educating individuals in order that they might serve the community, and toward educating individuals so that they might advance their own professional and economic interests” (Berlin *Writing* 88). This shift towards meeting middle class needs introduced a larger and more varied student population and in so doing, interrupted the status quo. In fact, Berlin cites the creation of the new, elective university as a “uniquely American phenomenon at the time, [that] was at once committed to the scientific method” (*Rhetoric* 36). Discovery and validation through the scientific method applied to all subject areas, including the eruption of current-traditional rhetoric in Composition and Rhetoric (Berlin *Rhetoric* 36-7). A narrow focus on the scientific method as a mode for seeking truth suggests that more traditional, and perhaps religious modes of inquiry were becoming less valuable at this time.

Following World War I, Berlin refers to the emergence of progressive education from 1920-1940 (*Rhetoric* 58). He defines progressive education as “an extension of political progressivism, the optimistic faith in the possibility that all institutions could be reshaped to better serve society, making it healthier, more prosperous, and happier” (*Rhetoric* 58). The general education movement that started after WWI led to a significant increase in the student population leading up to and beyond the 1960s and 70s. And according to Roger Finke, mainline Christian denominations began to decline in the 1960s, as well (117). I don’t mean to suggest that one of these events caused the other, but it is worth noting the correlation between the increasing number of students attending college and the decrease of attendance in mainline Christian churches. Explaining the context of the era, Berlin includes a discussion on the “rhetoric of the closed fist” as a response to the controversies of the age. This “closed fist rhetoric” is a group rhetoric of protest signaling a commitment to community (*Rhetoric* 158). Demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, protests, and boycotts were prevalent in the 1960s moving forward and often responded to issues of civics and human rights. During the Civil Rights Movement, many churches, particularly African American Christian congregations, believed segregation was a biblical issue, leading congregants to unite faith with politics for a common cause. These movements suggest a shift away from faith as the sole motivator for one’s driving beliefs towards politics.

There isn’t one clear answer for how universities shifted from religious organizations to secular institutions of knowledge, but the arrival of state and public schools with open enrollment following the GI Bill is a significant marker. Many changes in the university structure took place post-war (namely, an influx of students), when coeducation was introduced and the advent of general education courses geared towards the middle class, helping to change the

university space into what it is today. In the modern day, the university doesn't mandate religious education (of course, with the exception of some religiously-affiliated schools), but many are still interested in conversations about faith within the university, especially within the field of Rhetoric and Composition.

A 2014 Pew research study observes that the higher up one continues in their education, the less likely they are to identify as religious (“Religious Landscape Survey”). For the first time since 1972, when CNN started a survey asking Americans for their religious identity, those who answered “no religion” (23.1%) beat out those who identified as Catholic (23%) and evangelical (22.5%) (Monahan and Ahmed). According to the survey, “the meteoric rise of religious nones began in the early 1990s and has grown 266% since 1991” (Monahan and Ahmed). [Ryan] Burge [a political scientist at Eastern Illinois University and a Baptist pastor], “estimates that ‘No Religion’ will be the largest group outright in four to six years” (Monahan and Ahmed). The study goes on to discuss that even though the numbers of “religious nones” are growing, they are still underrepresented in places like public office. That being said, context is important. Within the academic space, people who identify as religious are less likely to be prominent than they would be in the general public. Pew’s survey data, along with survey data from CNN, and corroboration from interview participants suggests that some religious folks feel like minorities within academia.

### **Literature Review**

Two large trends emerge in surveying current scholarship in religious rhetorics—historical studies and modern-day evangelical Christian students in the writing classroom. According to Pew’s “Religious Landscape Study,” 25.4% of the 70.6% Christians in the U.S. identify as evangelical. Because of this majority, a focus upon the rhetorical resources of these

evangelical students is not surprising. While I have attempted to incorporate perspectives of scholars beyond the evangelical Christian tradition in my dissertation, participants are largely part of this demographic. I see my work extending on areas of study towards Christians in the university, while also providing insight into some lesser discussed traditions in our field, including the Bahá'í faith and atheism. During my study, I strived for greater representation than I was able to achieve (See discussion of “Limitations” in this chapter on page 40). The inclusion of these perspectives amidst the majority Christian viewpoint acts as a means of generalizing the experiences of religious scholars as an identity group within the university and as a means of diversifying existing research studies in the field.

Furthermore, many research studies, specifically those geared towards focus on the (evangelical Christian) student, neglect the real, lived experiences of the teachers, colleagues, and scholars who also make up the university space. Because these scholars interact with students, contribute to the local university community, and to the scholarly conversations taking place in the field at large, their perspectives are equally as valid and worthy of attention. Though my dissertation examines a largely Christian set of participants, I see my work contributing to the ideal that research in Rhetoric and Composition should seek to understand the experiences beyond the population majority (in this case, Protestant Christians) and I have done so in incorporating interview data from a Bahá'í woman and two atheist participants. Finally, my work is a contribution to the study of identity and the role of disclosure based on identity—a contribution that considers the scholar's real, lived experience in the academic space, interacting with students, colleagues, and other scholars.

*Historical Origins of Religion in Rhetoric*

Historically, the field of rhetoric is one in which religious topics have been of great interest, at least since the third century. While a complete history of religious rhetoric is beyond the scope of many large books, it is worth noting here that our field has early foundations centering on faith. St. Augustine of Hippo is one of the first significantly prolific rhetoricians because he took the rhetoric of Greeks and Romans and made them acceptable for Christian persuasive purposes. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* is reminiscent of both Cicero and Quintilian, which makes sense because Christians are cited in the introduction to medieval rhetoric in *The Rhetorical Tradition* as preserving Ciceronian texts (431). Augustine insists that an orator must not only be a good man, but one who can speak well, reminiscent of Quintilian's teachings. Furthermore, honest men may make listeners weary if not skilled in the arts of oratory, which is also a negative (457). Augustine goes on to say that experience is much more important than merely studying: "eloquence will come more readily through reading and hearing the eloquent, than through pursuing the rules of eloquence" (457). He goes on to give the example of children who listen to adults and learn in that way rather than studying and applying rules (457).

Further echoing Quintilian, Augustine considers that "wisdom without eloquence is of small avail to a country, but that eloquence without wisdom is generally a great hindrance" (458). In other words, one must be both smart and expressive. Further, Augustine writes that "an orator ought to speak in such a way as to instruct, to please, and to persuade" (466), reflective of Cicero's insistence to prove, delight, and stir. On a final note, Augustine propounds that an orator speak in a style appropriate to the context: "he ought to consider that he is talking on something of little weight, and so should express himself not in the moderate or in the grand style, but in the subdued style" (471). In the rest of the text, Augustine provides biblical passages

through which rhetors may utilize hermeneutical interpretation to explicate how to speak appropriately according to their contexts.

In the medieval period with the wide spread of Christianity, many rejected what they believed to be a pagan, morally-corrupt, Greco-Roman style of rhetoric. Augustine attempted to change the minds of the masses in favor of rhetoric as a persuasive tool to further spread Christianity. During the Renaissance, women began expounding their rights to speak, and often did so by claiming the authority of God's revelation. It is worth noting that religious rhetoric is one of the first acceptable avenues through which men and women were viewed with some sense of equality in the eyes of the church. The history of religious rhetoric is one in which women are acknowledged as legitimate rhetors in a time long before it became acceptable for women to publicly persuade.

#### *Current Religious Scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition*

The discussion of religion in Composition Studies, particularly Christianity, began in the late 1980s-early 1990s. Perhaps one of the first instances of scholarship speaking to this topic occurred in May 1989 from James Moffett in an *English Education* article titled "Censorship and Spiritual Education," in which he spoke to a potential solution to censorship being the development of a pluralistic education. Shortly after, in winter 1989 we see Chris Anderson in his *ADE Bulletin* piece entitled, "The Description of an Embarrassment: When Students Write about Religion." The piece was about using social-epistemic response to prompt student writers to check their biases and write for conflicting audiences. But it wasn't until 1994 that *College Composition and Communication* released a themed issue called "Interchanges: Spiritual Sites of Composing" that we see a major national journal in the field recognizing religion as a topic of interest worth devoting an entire issue to. These conversations emerged from a time in

Composition when people were already talking about revisionism and the inclusion of alternative voices in the field. Around this same time period, we see texts like Kathleen Weiler's *Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class & Power* (1988), Mike Rose's *Lives On the Boundary* (1989), and Barbara Biesecker's "Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric" (1992).

Much current scholarship in the area of religious rhetoric within the field of Rhetoric and Composition is focused on the act of recovery. In *Available Means*, we see selections from women rhetors like Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Christine de Pizan, Margery Kempe, Margaret Fell, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, the Grimke sisters, and Margaret Fuller, all rhetorics of faith spanning over four centuries, from the 1390s to the 1840s. Texts like Lisa Shaver's *Beyond the Pulpit* (2012) explores women's rhetorical roles in the compilation of antebellum Methodist periodicals. In *The Gendered Pulpit* (2005), Roxanne Mountford considers the gendered history of preaching in Protestant America, but also examines the ways that contemporary women preachers preach and how they view their roles within a largely masculine profession. In 2014, a collection called *Renovating Christian Rhetoric in Christian Tradition* included selections ranging from interpretations of early Christian texts to more contemporary analyses of an evolving Christian faith.

The current conversation around religion and rhetoric in the field of Composition and Rhetoric is mainly Christian-centered, but there are other denominational traditions and intersections receiving attention. Jeffrey Ringer and Michael-John DePalma, whose work introduced me to religious study in our field, focus on the Christian tradition. Ringer's work is more often student-centered as in his text *Vernacular Christian Rhetoric and Civil Discourse* (2016), which explores the religious creativity of evangelical student writers. Together, Ringer

and DePalma have collaborated on collections like *Mapping Christian Rhetorics* (2014) which include conversations about Christianity and rhetorical theory, education, methodology, civic engagement, and (re)mapping religious rhetorics. Elizabeth Vander Lei and Bonnie L. Kyburz's collection *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom* (2005) is a more general (though mainly Christian) discussion about the rhetorical benefits religiously-committed students bring to the composition classroom and beyond. Heather Thomson-Bunn has also done work to establish a methodology for studying religious rhetorics, as well as examining topics about student perspectives of faith in the classroom and when academic norms and religious belief conflict (in *Pedagogy* and *College English*, respectively—both from 2017). These conversations are meant to establish the pursuit of religious thought in Composition and Rhetoric as a site worth further study and attention. I see the research in this dissertation as expanding the study of the field beyond students to scholars, while also continuing to expand the study of religious perspectives to include voices beyond Christianity alone.

An area of particular interest in Composition and Rhetoric is historical religious rhetoric. Many scholars have looked to past religious traditions and the rhetorical savvy various traditions have employed. Lisa Shaver explores Methodist women's rhetorical roles in the antebellum religious press in *Beyond the Pulpit* (2012). This underscores women's influence in the Methodist church, which grew into the largest American denomination by the mid-nineteenth century. Taking part in the religious press allowed women a place in society beyond their typical domestic role. Roxanne Mountford's *Gendered Pulpit* (2005) mixes history with the modern day, as a means of providing context for the development of preaching into an art for both men and women. She begins by examining preaching manuals starting from the mid-1800's up to now and how these manuals suggest utilizing tradition, space, and "manliness" as virtues. Mountford

continues with three case studies of women preachers in the present day and how these women have either succeeded or failed in rearranging these notions of tradition, space, and gender. Mountford's work highlights the importance of physicality and material space as elements of rhetorical persuasion.

Cynthia Gannett and John Brereton edited a collection called *Traditions of Eloquence: The Jesuits and Modern Rhetorical Study* (2016) about the evolution of the Jesuit tradition starting in the Renaissance to the modern day. This collection explores the Jesuits' longstanding value in education and their understanding of rhetoric as a means to missionary and charitable works. Lisa Zimmerelli has collaborated with Gannett and others on a short piece in *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, though much of her work focuses on women's preaching history. Zimmerelli gave a keynote and led a workshop at the 2018 *Religion and Rhetoric in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* conference on Feminist Historiography and the intersections of faith.

Given that our field values diverse contributions to voices beyond what is upheld by the status quo, scholars have pursued religious rhetoric beyond Christianity within Islam and Judaism. Rasha Diab's *Shades of Sulh: The Rhetorics of Arab-Islamic Reconciliation* (2016). Sulh is an Arab-Islamic peacemaking strategy that Diab explores at the personal and (inter)national level. She was awarded the CCCC Outstanding Book Award in the Monograph Category in 2018 for this text. Additionally, Janice Fernheimer and Pat Bizzell have completed work focusing on Jewish rhetoric. Fernheimer has published texts like *Jewish Rhetorics: History, Theory, and Practice* (2014) with Michael Bernard-Donals and *Stepping into Zion: Hatzaad Harishon, Black Jews, and the Remaking of Jewish Identity* (2014). In this latter text, Fernheimer investigates a multiracial Jewish group called Hatzaad Harishon and the subsequent consideration of Jewish identity. Bizzell's most recent work, which focuses on historical Jewish

rhetoric, has appeared in Fernheimer and Bernard-Donals' collection as well as in *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*. As I emphasize in previous paragraphs, I see this dissertation expanding on current religious rhetoric research in seeking a diversity of participant demographics. Though the majority of participants in my research are Christian, it is important to seek difference to more fully understand the academy and its inhabitants at large.

Other scholars are exploring intersectionality as it pertains to religion. TJ Geiger has organized panels, been a keynote speaker, led conference workshops, and published articles about the intersections of sexuality and faith, particularly Christianity. One of his pieces, "Unpredictable Encounters: Religious Discourse, Sexuality, and the Free Exercise of Rhetoric," appeared in *College English* in 2013. Andre E. Johnson is a Communications Studies professor whose research interests include rhetoric, race, and religion. At the 2018 Conference on Religious Rhetorics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Johnson was a keynote speaker and workshop leader speaking to the intersections of rhetoric, religion, and race. His book *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (2012) follows a similar historical path of recovery and reconsideration as the work of Shaver and Mountford.

I see the main concerns of the discussion about faith in Composition and Rhetoric, at its onset and today, to be twofold: beyond historic recovery and focusing on Composition, the conversation centers around understanding and dealing with the needs of the religious, often Christian, students in the writing classroom. Earlier discussions focused much more on trying to make sense of the Christian student within the confines of the writing classroom and how to understand their somewhat anomalous presence. More recent scholarship focuses further on considering the student of faith not so much as an anomaly that needs dealing with, but more as a student who comes into the classroom with his or her own rhetorical strategies that can be

harnessed within their writing and reasoning. As Michael-John DePalma reminds us in his 2017 *College English* article, three-quarters of Americans identify as religiously affiliated, so to think of religious students as citizens, representative of the larger society as a whole, can provide insight into how we approach our pedagogies and relationships with said students. That said, understanding the identities of teachers, colleagues, and scholars in the university can allow for a deeper understanding of how and why religious scholars choose to disclose their positionalities or keep them close to the chest. Additionally, understanding religious scholars' identities brings light to tensions between best practices in our field (e.g. positionality disclosure as part of one's methodology) and fear that researchers experience. Scholars' fears rob the subfield of religious rhetorics of a nuanced understanding of difference and complex identity. Fear can manifest in silence from scholars who have interesting and worthwhile experiences to share. Making the field overall aware of these fears is a step in the direction of making religious scholars feel comfortable expressing their identities and for the development of a set of best practices for religious scholars to disclose their positionalities.

Given that I have reflected heavily upon the role of rhetoric and religion in our field, I'd like to consider Michael-John DePalma's recent (2017) *College English* article, "Reimagining Rhetorical Education: Fostering Writers' Civic Capacities through Engagement with Religious Rhetorics" because of his focus on what religious rhetorics can bring to the Composition classroom. In his text, DePalma writes, "questions concerning the forms and purposes of rhetorical education have long been central to the work of rhetoric scholars in both writing and communication studies" (251). DePalma notes the experiences of three college professors in varying regions in the US when teaching religious rhetorics in their classrooms. In Jeff Ringer's class, when students were asked reflect on their "beliefs and values in relation to the notion of

casuistic stretching, a form of vernacular religious creativity” (259), one of his students reflected on what it meant to be both a Christian and a lesbian. Such an exploration allowed the student to “begin to see frictions between [herself] and the institutions with which they are affiliated and discover emerging beliefs and values that open opportunities for deliberation and civic engagement” (259). The student in Ringer’s class was able to start a dialogue about what it means to be a Christian student who identifies with a representation of sexuality that is at odds with traditional doctrine. It is not only important for students to have the opportunity to reflect on aspects of their identity that “make sense” but also the ones that contradict one another. Being able to reflect on this allows students the opportunity to converse with others who believe that certain terministic screens are simply black and white or nonnegotiable.

DePalma also notes that it is important to “provide writers opportunities to complicate reductive narratives about religious discourses and identities and offer students occasions to construct alternative narrative” (261). Teaching religious rhetorics in the classroom can bring legitimacy to those voices as well as breaking with “divisive and problematic generalizations that undermine productive forms of civic engagement” (261). When I teach “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” it is nearly impossible to avoid talking about using religion as a mode of ethos in that particular rhetorical space. Students often view MLK as a civil rights activist, but he was also a Baptist minister, and being able to show that faith and civic engagement can coincide allows students a broader concept of those who use faith as an identifying characteristic, whether formally, as MLK did in his letter, or by simply affiliating oneself to faith. We will have a richer and more nuanced understanding of the field of Rhetoric and Composition by gathering together voices from women, people of color, queer voices, religious and nonreligious voices, and any combination of the above, along with voices of the majority.

## Chapter Outlines

As I will discuss in the upcoming chapters, while the field of Rhetoric and Composition has considered the role of positionality disclosure concerning other identities, there is little discussion of positionality disclosure with regards to religious identity.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the methods and methodologies driving my research study. Following my research questions and definitions of key terms used throughout the dissertation, I break down the two parts of my research study: the textual analysis and the semi-structured interviews. Next, I explain my mode of data collection and the methodologies guiding my analysis. In closing, I explain my commitment to ethical research, the limitations of my study, and how I use plural third person pronouns throughout the dissertation.

Drawing upon queer theory and “coming out” discourse, in chapter 3, I make connections between the language my participants use to express their positionality disclosures in relation to religious research topics. In conjunction with a consideration to language use, I discuss motivations for scholars to “come out” in the academy; provide examples of interview data in which scholars utilize coming out discourse; and also provide samples of academic publications in which scholars disclose their positionalities and their rationale for these disclosures. Finally, this chapter closes with a consideration of the public complications of “coming out” as religious in the academy.

In chapter 4, I continue the connection between queer theory and the language disclosure and discuss the nature of scholars to seek “allies” and to establish a sense ethos in their positionality disclosures. This chapter opens with a discussion from my interview participants considering the “criteria” for religious or nonreligious disclosure in the academy. From here, I examine scholars establishing ethos and credibility in the academy through religious disclosure

and I further argue for the inclusion of authenticity or transparency as elements of ethos-building. The chapter closes with a reflection upon the strategies scholars use to form allies in the academy through their positionality disclosures.

Chapter 5 is about scholars managing their assumptions and perceptions in the academy. For instance, when scholars clarify or defensively self-posture their identities as religious people in the academy, there is an assumption about how their audiences view them. Tied in with this conversation is a contention about self preservation and fears of performativity as motivators for nondisclosure, amidst general statistical evidence suggesting a negative public opinion towards religious people, particularly, Christians. I argue in this chapter that a scholar's clarification of their identity as a religious person is a decision based upon that scholar's discourse analysis identifying their audience as that of an outsider to their religious community. The chapter closes in a sampling of scholars who indirectly disclose their identities or who completely disidentify from their research subjects in academic publications.

The closing chapter is an afterword that provides a summary of the dissertation in its entirety, along with a personal reflection of the dissertation's effect on its author.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Study Design: Understanding How and Why Scholars Disclose**

This study investigates how and why established and emerging scholars of religious topics in Rhetoric and Composition disclose their positionality towards their research topics.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of brevity, from this point forward, established scholars and emerging scholars will both be referred to simply as “scholars.” Because not all scholars choose to disclose their positionality and/or believe that a researcher’s identity disclosure is not a necessary component of their methodology, I was also curious to learn why those scholars believed that to be true. Based on my creation of a set of interview questions, the heart of the answers I was hoping to gain insight into became clearer to me. The final driving research questions that emerged were as follows:

- 1) When and why do scholars of religious topics within the field of Rhetoric and Composition believe disclosure is important or unimportant?
- 2) If scholars do believe disclosure is important, how do they go about situating their own positionalities within their research?
- 3) If scholars believe disclosure is unimportant, why do they feel this way?

With the aim of clarity in mind, it is pertinent to define the use four prominent words in

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<sup>1</sup> Within the context of this research study, established scholars are those who have published multiple academic books and/or articles on religious topics within the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Emerging scholars are graduate students who have an interest in religious topics in the field of Rhetoric and Composition and who may or may not have started publishing academic work on this topic.

this study: *disclosure*, *positionality*, *insider*, and *outsider*. When speaking to *disclosure*, the standard dictionary definition applies: “the action of making new or secret information known.”

As for *positionality*, the definition that informed this study:

refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group. The position adopted by a researcher affects every phase of the research process, from the way the question or problem is initially constructed, designed and conducted to how others are invited to participate, the ways in which knowledge is constructed and acted on and, finally, the ways in which outcomes are disseminated and published. (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller)

In the instance of this study, a scholar’s *positionality* denotes their relation to the religious or nonreligious identities of the subjects they investigate for their research. The term *positionality*, with reference to this research study, also allows for the possibility of other identities, or intersectionalities, that may coincide with one’s religious or nonreligious identity (e.g. one’s sexuality, gender expression, or race). The implication of this notion is for the benefit of examining generative intersectionalities that influence how one expresses their identities in differing contexts.

According to David Bleich, scholar of the study of language in social contexts, “people’s literacies and language use reflect their different sets of memberships in society” (53). With regards to *insider* and *outsider*, the Oxford English Dictionary definitions apply: an *insider* is “a person within a group or organization, especially someone privy to information unavailable to others” and an *outsider* is simply “a person who does not belong to a particular group.” For instance, if someone is an *insider* within a particular community, they will be able to enact the discourse of that community and effectively “blend in” with that group. An *outsider* on the other hand is someone who clearly does not have access to a particular discourse community and whose language usage will give away their status as a nonmember of that group.

In order to pursue these research questions, this two-part study, approved by the University of New Hampshire's (UNH) Institutional Review Board (IRB) in March 2019 (see Appendix A) employs an interpretivist paradigm, as pioneered by Max Weber and Georg Simmel, in which "reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing. What is of importance to know, then, is how people interpret and make meaning of some object, event, action, perception, etc.... accessing the perspectives of several members of the same social group about some phenomena can begin to say something about cultural patterns of thought and action for that group" (Glesne 8). Research methods in this paradigm include interacting with people, talking with them about their perceptions, keeping an open mind to the variety of perspectives that may arise, and looking for patterns when they arise without quantification (8).

Furthermore, interview methods and interpretation of data were viewed through the lens of feminist research methodology. Drawing from Gesa Kirsch's *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research* (1999) and *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* (2012) by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch, my research study:

- ask[s] research questions which acknowledge and validate... experiences;
- collaborate[s] with participants as much as possible so that growth and learning can be mutually beneficial, interactive, and cooperative;
- analyze[s] how social, historical, and cultural factors shape the research site as well as participants' goals, values, and experiences...
- correct[s] androcentric norms by calling into question what has been considered "normal" and what has been regarded as "deviant";
- take[s] responsibility for the representation of others in research reports by assessing probable and actual effects on different audiences; and

- acknowledge[s] the limitations of and contradictions inherent in research data, as well as alternative interpretations of that data. (Kirsch 4-5)

Inherent in these principles is a commitment to improvement of participant lives (where possible) and an elimination of inequalities between the researcher and participants. While I cannot claim that this research study acted as a catalyst of improvement in participant lives, at the very least, my research aims and interpretations are meant to do no harm. Finally, in tandem with feminist research methodology, this study utilizes open coding from grounded theory, as illustrated by Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), to analyze both my textual data and interview transcripts.

First, I completed a *rhetorical textual analysis* from a small sampling of scholarship from scholars of religious topics within the field of Rhetoric and Composition. In an effort to make clear the definition of *rhetorical textual analysis*, I have compounded “rhetorical” with the term “textual analysis,” so as to provide a more specific understanding of the type of “textual analysis” undertaken. For the purposes of this study, I examined ten published academic texts published between the years 2004-2016; six books, two book chapters, and one peer-reviewed journal article. Throughout these texts on religiously-based topics, some authors disclose their relationship to the subject matter and others make no mention. My rationale for text selection is to provide a small sampling of the types of disclosures within academic publications from current, established scholars of Rhetoric and Composition. The overall research project investigates disclosure in any academic context, though this textual analysis is meant to provide a means of triangulation, utilizing more than one method to understand the concept of disclosure more completely. By no means do I intend to suggest that my textual analysis sample is a comprehensive reading of the field. Instead, I provide this analysis as a supplement to interview

data, in the hopes of understanding why some scholars may choose not to disclose and if there are other reasons scholars might choose to do so, beyond those indicated in print. Not only did the textual analysis provide inspiration for the generation of interview questions, but the data acts as a means of expanding on, clarifying, and at times, providing more perspectives beyond those found in the interview data.

Next, I conducted semi-structured interviews with fourteen scholars of religious topics within Rhetoric and Composition and transcribed the recordings. Interview participants were asked to take a brief pre-interview questionnaire in order to collect demographic information that seemed most expeditious to ask so as not to waste time during the interview timeframe. This questionnaire was created and distributed using UNH Qualtrics, a research management software. Interview transcriptions along with the textual analysis provided samples of emerging patterns of a scholar's positionality disclosure. These patterns are explored and discussed in further detail in coming chapters.

From textual analysis and semi-structured interviews, this methodologically-triangulated study aims to identify trends in scholar rationale for disclosing their positionality in relation to their research topics, while also exploring the vulnerability involved in a person's decision to disclose any aspect of their identity that isn't visually evident. Methodological triangulation, in this study, is meant to "increase the level of knowledge about something and to strengthen the researcher's standpoint from various aspects" (Bryman). Ultimately, my intention in this study is to offer insight into the lived experiences of scholars in the field of Rhetoric in Composition who choose to publicly identify with their research pursuits, or those who disidentify from them, as well as the ramifications of identity disclosure in a professional environment.

## Part I: Textual Analysis

The first part of this study was a *rhetorical textual analysis* of ten published academic works from a number of scholars in the field of Rhetoric and Composition who have all published multiple articles and at least one book on topics of religious interest. The choice to examine ten texts instead of five or fifteen is arbitrary, except to say that once having gone through ten texts, I felt as though I had enough material to speak with some insight into in-text positionality disclosure from scholars of Rhetoric and Composition. Textual analysis was a useful mode of inquiry allowing me to extrapolate upon the purposes of scholars' reasons for disclosing or not disclosing their positionalities towards their research topics. Throughout this process, I collected key quotes from texts specifically with reference to a scholar's positionality in relation to the religious (or nonreligious) identity about which they write. Doing so allowed for the opportunity to consider social and cultural contexts that influence one's decision to disclose or not disclose. Full texts were not coded. Only those sections in which a scholar disclosed their positionality were coded. Codes from the textual analysis were similar to those found in interview data, but did provide additional insight into some positions, such as *disidentification* from the subject matter (see Table 1 below for more detail).

This initial textual analysis allowed for the formation of initial hypotheses, leading to the creation of my semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix B for semi-structured interview questions). The textual analysis revealed a range of disclosure strategies including *direct*, *indirect*, and *disidentification*. From these modes of disclosure, I was able to identify the rationale that scholars provided for their *identification* or *disidentification* with their research topics. See Tables 1 and 2 below for the coding schemes that informed the textual analysis. At times, multiple rationale for *identification* can be found in one text sample.

How do scholars disclose their positionalities within their published academic writing?

**Coding Scheme for How Positionality is Identified (Textual Analysis)**

**Direct**

Definition: Code as *Direct* any response that refers to an unequivocal affirmation of identity alignment with a scholar’s research topic.

*Direct* may include instances when the speaker:

- a) refers to themselves as belonging to a particular religious identity that coordinates with their research subjects  
*Example:* “Because we both claim evangelical Christianity as part of our heritage, we had to consider our own positionality in relation to *evangelical* and the participants we hoped to recruit.”
- b) refers to themselves as an “insider” to the identity group of their research participants  
*Example:* “I positioned myself as an insider to evangelicalism in my interviews with students.”
- c) refers to instances in which they have donned religiously-symbolic clothing in the academic setting  
*Example:* “I come in with an exercise in one hand and my alb and stole in the other, on a hanger.”

**Indirect**

Definition: Code as *Indirect* any response when the speaker acknowledges a familiarity with the faith tradition of which they study.

*Indirect* may include instances when the speaker:

- a) mentions religious service attendance anecdotally (in the present tense)  
*Example:* “I often share the anecdote of being at Catholic Mass...”
- b) mentions participation in religious traditions, though clearly established as a *past tense* event  
*Example:* “My childhood was filled with preaching.”

**Disidentification (only one instance)**

Definition: Code as *Disidentification* any text that in which the author disidentifies from the religious-based research they are writing about or refer to themselves as an “outsider.”

*Example:* “I cannot accept either the principles or the specific teachings...I raise this point here because [of] my status as an outsider...”

**Table 1: Coding scheme for how positionality is identified in the textual analysis**

<p>What rationale do scholars use for identification or disidentification with their research topics within their published academic work?</p>
<p><b>Coding Scheme for Rationale of Positionality Disclosure (Textual Analysis)</b></p>
<p><b>Identification</b></p> <p>Definition: Code as <i>Identification</i> any response that includes a scholar speaking to an affiliation with their research topic.</p> <p><i>Identification</i> may include instances when the speaker:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) cites ethos as an “insider” to motivate disclosure (e.g. “trust fostering”) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example:</i> “My goal in enacting such [Christian] discourse was to foster trust with my participants.”</li> </ul> </li> <li>b) cites an opportunity to humanize themselves as a researcher as a potential reward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example:</i> “I wanted [my participants] to know that I understood...”</li> </ul> </li> <li>c) cites authenticity or transparency as a researcher as a motivator for disclosure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example:</i> “Our insider status helped us identify (with) other evangelicals, largely because we are able to ‘speak the same language’... on the other hand, our ability to identify as insiders complicated our studies. Because of our proximity to evangelism, we were wary of projecting our experiences onto others or misinterpreting what our participants wrote or said.”</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Disidentification (only one instance)</b></p> <p>Definition: Code as <i>Disidentification</i> any response that includes a scholar speaking to a disaffiliation with their research topic.</p> <p><i>Disidentification</i> may include any instance when the speaker:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) cites aversion towards a perceived negative connotation affiliated with area of research focus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example:</i> “the more I study apocalypticism, the more intense becomes my desire not only to dissent from it but to warn others of the ideological dangers it poses to democracy.”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Table 2: Coding scheme for rationale of positionality disclosure in the textual analysis**

## **Part II: Semi-Structured Interviews**

The second part of this study, the semi-structured interviews, took place between May and July 2019 with fourteen scholar participants via Skype, Google Hangouts, Zoom, or by phone. Interviews lasted between 20-180 minutes and were audio recorded. Interview questions asked participants about positionality disclosure towards their research topics in a variety of professional environments, including the classroom, with colleagues, at academic conferences, and in their written research (see Appendix C for a list of sample interview questions). Recordings were transcribed for analysis.

Criteria for participants included scholars who have a) written about or researched religious topics in the field of Rhetoric and Composition or b) who are currently writing on religious topics within the field of Rhetoric and Composition (e.g. a graduate student or professor). Initial participants recruited were those scholars whom I already have an active, professional relationship. Beyond these recruits, I utilized snowball sampling, in which additional participants were contacted by the recommendation of those within my professional network. Snowball sampling, which uses a small pool of initial informants to nominate, through their social networks, other participants who meet the eligibility criteria and could potentially contribute to a specific study, reflects an analogy to a snowball increasing size as it rolls downhill (Morgan 816-17).

I initially emailed scholars within my network to see if they were interested in participating in my study (see Appendix D for sample recruitment email). At the end of March 2019, I made contact with a tenured faculty member with whom I had a steady working relationship. This scholar's research focuses on religiously-based topics and we had spoken previously at academic conferences in past years. From this contact, I was able to connect with

two tenure-track faculty scholars and four graduate students whose work focuses on religious subjects who all participated in my interview. Interviews with these participants led to fruitful connections with three graduate students. Some participant recommendations were for people I had already spoken with (or was scheduled to speak with) or were not met with response from my email inquiry.

Once I received confirmation from participants in my network, I proceeded with the interview and my final question asked if participants would be willing to refer me to other participants. With these suggestions from my network, I sent recruitment emails mentioning the name of the person in my network and their recommendation (see Appendix D for recruitment email). From there, I received a few further participant recommendations, and reached out to them accordingly as I had in the previous iteration of recruitment.

My process for selecting participants was difficult and I was uncertain of where to start. I was aware of scholars in Rhetoric and Composition who had conducted religious-based research, but was wary that my own bias would potentially hinder insight from scholars that I was unaware of or did not know how to locate. This is the reason, in part, for the application of snowball sampling. Furthermore, some scholars who write about and publish on religiously-based research choose entirely not to disclose their positionalities. Hence, I was left with my own starting knowledge of scholars who have disclosed their positionalities, either identifying or dis-identifying with their research topics. Additionally, in October 2018, I attended the Rhetoric and Religion of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Knoxville, Tennessee, and utilized the program from that conference to hone in on potential participants whose research topics appeared to be a good fit for my interview. While I initially wanted to speak specifically to scholars who study religion and do disclose, further development of the research project yielded a more inclusive project that

considers scholars who study religion and don't disclose, as well as those who study religion and identify as nonreligious.

### *Interview Participant Demographics*

Fourteen people participated in an interview on issues of identity, disclosure, and positionality in relation to work on religious topics within Rhetoric and Composition. Before this interview, participants were asked to take a pre-interview questionnaire through an online survey system, Qualtrics, to provide demographic information. Eight of the 14 interviewees were graduate students, all within PhD programs. Two interviewees graduated in May 2019: one chose to pursue a non-academic job and the other entered into a tenure-track position in the fall of 2019. Finally, four interviewees were tenure-track or tenured professors.

Six participants identified as female and eight as male. Ten participants identified as white, two as African American, and one chose not to disclose. As for participants' current locations: five were located in the Northeast, four in the South, two in the Midwest, two in the Western US, and one in the Southwest. Eleven participants admitted to being religious and/or spiritual, two identified as atheist, and one participant responded that she had been raised religious but was unsure of where she was at currently, though her upbringing had a significant impact on her identity.

Included below are two charts that provide a demographic quick guide for each of the participants. The charts are broken into professor and graduate student participant data for ease of understanding. Included are participants' disclosure of their gender expression, race, and current location. The category labeled "Religious?" in the chart is used to denote responses to the question: "Do you believe yourself to be religious and/or spiritual?"

### Current Professors

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	RACE	RELIGIOUS?
Ben, tenured	male	white	Yes. I grew up in the Pentecostal evangelical tradition (Assembly of God) and now consider myself an Episcopalian.
Josh, tenure-track	male	N/A	No though the term "spiritual" is vague. I do not believe in the supernatural or any kind of supreme deity.
Liam, tenured	male	white	Christian.
Simon, tenure-track and recent grad	female	white	I would categorize myself as both religious and spiritual. I am a Roman Catholic and so belong to a global religious institution as well as to my local church, where I am very involved. I feel that spirituality, or my personal experience of faith, is rooted in this institutional context, so that there is not a clear separation between these two concepts in my mind.
Steven, tenure-track	male	African American	Yes, I would categorize myself as both. I am Christian who goes to church regularly, attends Bible study, and prays.

Table 3: Demographic Guide for Professor Participants

### Current Graduate Students (and Recent Graduates)

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	RACE	RELIGIOUS?
Amanda	female	white	Yes. I'm a practicing Christian and am an ordained minister with the Wesleyan Church.
Brandon	male	white	Yes, I am a Protestant Christian.
Darren	male	African American	I would categorize myself as a religious person. I am a minister of the Gospel.
Erica	female	white	Yes, both religious and spiritual. "Religious" refers to the fact that I remain aligned with the Christian church (broadly understood; I do not belong to a denomination), while "spiritual" refers to the fact that I integrate religious practices such as prayer, Scripture reading, and church attendance into my patterns of life, as well as the fact that I believe in the existence of God and God's interaction with human affairs.
Felicity	female	white	Maybe? I grew up very religious and spiritual. I am not quite sure where I am at right now, but life experiences deeply embedded in religion get in you, and much of the world, for me, is perceived with that lens.
Miriam	female	white	Religious and spiritual - I am a member of the Bahá'í Faith.
Nadia	female	white	No. I was raised religious but I now consider myself atheist.
Rob	male	white	Yes: I would identify as an evangelical Christian (though with some apology at times for the undesirable political overtones of the word "evangelical").
Sabrina	female	white	Yes. I was raised and continue to participate in Evangelical churches. These spiritual practices also have a daily influence on my life.

Table 4: Demographic Guide for Graduate Student and Recent Graduate Participants

Included in recruitment emails was a letter of recruitment (see Appendix D for letter of recruitment) and a study consent form (see Appendix E for semi-structured interview consent form). Additionally, this email included a link to a UNH’s Qualtrics survey software for a “Pre-Interview Questionnaire” (see Appendix C for a list of questions asked in pre-interview questionnaire). This pre-interview questionnaire served as a means for collecting demographic information without wasting time during the interview process. Answer choices were available for questions of gender and race and were ordered with minority selection options first, as well as the option to not disclose, so as to subvert standard notions of majority status carrying greater import. See Figure 1 below.

The image shows a screenshot of a Qualtrics survey interface. The top question, Q1, is titled "What is your gender?". It has a gear icon for settings and a dropdown menu that is currently open, showing four options: "Non-binary" (which is selected with a checkmark), "Female", "Male", and "Choose not to disclose". Below this is question Q2, titled "How would you describe your race/ethnicity?". It also has a gear icon and a list of radio button options: "Middle Eastern or North African", "Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander", "Native American or Alaska Native", "Asian American", "Hispanic/Latinx", "Black/African American", "White/Caucasian", "Multiracial", "Other (explain)", and "Choose not to disclose". The "Other (explain)" option has a text input box next to it. The interface is light gray with a white content area.

**Figure 1: Pre-Interview Questionnaire Sample**

Participants were provided with answer boxes for the rest of the open-ended questions. If participants responded through email with the intention of participating in the study, I asked them to read through the recruitment letter and email with any questions they may have. If participants were satisfied with the recruitment letter and understood the purpose of the study, I

asked them to sign the consent form and take the pre-interview questionnaire. After these interactions, the participants and myself set a date and time to meet virtually via Skype, Google Hangouts, Zoom, or by phone. I acknowledged in my email to participants that Skype was easiest for me, but I was willing to negotiate based on their preferences. A few interviews took place on Google Hangouts, Zoom, and by phone because participants did not have a camera on their computers or were adamant about using a platform alternative to Skype. Participants had the choice of using their first names only or a pseudonym for future reporting of the data.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews offered approximately 123 pages of data, which were stored on UNH's password-protected platform Box. Interview data was analyzed using open coding from grounded theory as characterized by Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Open coding allowed for the segmentation of data into meaningful *concepts*, such as:

- 1) The scholar's connection to their research
- 2) Scholars who acknowledged to disclosing their positionalities towards their research
- 3) Whether a scholar believed positionality disclosure was important or not and why
- 4) Advice scholars had been given about professionalization in relation to their research
- 5) Scholar experience at professional conferences
- 6) Scholars who feared disclosure at some point in their careers

These concepts were created and segmented mainly based upon the questions I asked and the responses participants had given. However, during the coding process, I noticed that sometimes participants addressed these concepts in multiple questions or beyond the question I focused upon for the initial code.

Throughout this process, I quickly recognized that the lengthiest, most compelling, and varied responses emerged from the third concept indicated above: Whether a scholar believed

positionality disclosure was important or not and why. From this narrowing of categorization, I was able to break the data down further by coming to the conclusion that scholar responses in this category tended to come in two parts: a) a general theory or opinion as to why positionality disclosure is important (or not) and b) the scholar speaking to personal examples that fit in with their theories/opinions throughout various settings like the classroom, with colleagues, at conferences, and within academic writing. Most times, scholars had a general theory or opinion as to why positionality disclosure is important (or not), as well as personal examples that fit into their theories/opinions. Generally, if scholars were undecided as to whether disclosure is important or not, they were able to articulate theories as to why it may be beneficial and why it may be harmful. In these cases, scholars were still able to provide personal examples of disclosure or nondisclosure that coincided with their theories and opinions, even if those theories and opinions were still developing. The narrowing from *code* → *concept* → *category* finally allowed for the opportunity to *theorize*.

Here it is worth providing an example of what data looks like broken down into a) a general theory or opinion as to why positionality disclosure is important (or not) and b) the scholar speaking to personal examples that fit in with their theories/opinions throughout various settings like the classroom, with colleagues, at conferences, and within academic writing. For example, Amanda, a white graduate student in the South who identifies as female and religious, was asked if she believed it is important for a scholar to disclose their positionality she said: “Yeah, I think so. Especially if you have a personal stake in what you’re doing.” In another question response, Amanda said she signs all of her emails, “Reverend” because she “worked really hard to become a reverend. I want to own it!” Here, Amanda has a theory for why she considers disclosure as important, as well as a personal example of her disclosure that fits in with

her theories/opinions (e.g. “I worked hard...I want to own it!”). In my initial codes, Amanda was categorized as a participant who believed a scholar’s positionality disclosure was important, contributing to a larger theory that ethos-establishment is a driving factor for some scholars’ positionality disclosures. Because Amanda has an advanced degree in Divinity, and the degree wasn’t easy for her to earn, there is a sense that Amanda’s pride and confidence offers something in terms of her expertise that others may not be able to provide.

Performing interviews allowed participants space to express their stories in their own words and also acted as validation check against the data from the textual analysis. Many scholars’ rationales for positionality disclosure originally collected during textual analysis were reflected in interview responses, and at times the interviews expanded beyond what textual analysis could provide by itself. Furthermore, pre-questionnaire survey data allowed for an analysis cross-demographically to determine any trends reflected in participant responses and their self-identified characteristics. Ultimately, there weren’t any insightful demographic trends, except to say that those with lower and/or minority status were generally less likely to disclose their positionalities within academic, as will be discussed in upcoming chapters (e.g. people of color, women, graduate students). For purposes of clarification, see Figure 2 below for the coding scheme.

Do you believe it is important for a scholar to disclose their positionality? Why or why not?

### **Coding Scheme for Risks and Rewards of Positionality Disclosure (Interviews)**

#### **Reward**

Definition: Code as *Reward* any response that includes a positive response with a discussion of the rewards of disclosure.

*Reward* may include instances when the speaker:

- a) cites ethos as an “insider” to motivate disclosure  
*Example:* “To assert my positionality...was to give myself a little more ethos in being able to talk...from an insider’s perspective.”
- b) cites an opportunity to humanize themselves as a researcher as a potential reward  
*Example:* “[Disclosure] humanizes [scholarship] a lot more, and I think it allows for a lot more honest conversations.”
- c) cites authenticity or transparency as a researcher as a motivator for disclosure  
*Example:* “I think it’s important to be upfront about [one’s identity].”

#### **Risk**

Definition: Code as *Risk* any response that includes a discussion of the risks and rewards of disclosure.

*Risk* may include any instance when the speaker:

- d) believes disclosure to be more distracting than helpful  
*Example:* “I sometimes wonder if [disclosure] is more distracting than helpful.”
- e) cites self preservation as a motivator for nondisclosure (fear of losing credibility, authority, respect, relationships)  
*Example:* “As a graduate student, also as a woman, [disclosure] makes me a little bit more nervous.”
- f) cites the performance of one in said identity group as a de-motivator for disclosure  
*Example:* “people see people who are religious differently. I realize that sometimes people expect something different from me, behavior-wise...They behave differently when I acknowledge that I’m a preacher.”

**Table 5: Coding scheme for risks and rewards of positionality disclosure in interviews**

## The Researcher's Commitment to Ethical Research

All writing is vulnerable, but it is especially vulnerable when issues of identity disclosure come into play. While many research participants believe that positionality disclosure is important, they were undecided in how they would like to appear in text. Some preferred to be referred to by pseudonym up front, while others wished to review how they were portrayed in text before deciding to be referred to by pseudonym or by first name only. Participants in this particular study were cautious in protecting their identities because of a lack of status and/or a perceived sense of prejudicial judgment on the part of readers. For example, one participant, refused to disclose the subject of his dissertation and asked me to strike a particular response from the record, because he believed these things may be traced back to him. He stated to me that because he was entering a tenure-track position, he did not want to feel vulnerable by sharing too much personal information that could end up in a dissertation or future academic scholarship.

Because I view myself as a feminist researcher, it is my stance that research conducted should help those who are studied, or at the very least, do no harm, principles exemplified in the Belmont Report.<sup>2</sup> While I cannot guarantee that those I've studied will be helped by my research,

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<sup>2</sup> The Belmont Report's (1979) three fundamental ethical principles are:

1. Respect for persons: protecting the autonomy of all people and treating them with courtesy and respect and allowing for informed consent. Researchers must be truthful and conduct no deception;
2. Beneficence: the philosophy of "do not harm" while maximizing benefits for the research project and minimizing risks to the research subjects; and
3. Justice: ensuring reasonable, non-exploitative, and well-considered procedures are administered fairly—the fair distribution of costs and benefits to potential research participants—and equally.

I can ensure their trust, safety, and wellbeing as subjects of my study, a responsibility I bear with the utmost respect.

Throughout my research study, I was careful to maintain the ethical standards put forth and approved by UNH's IRB. Upon contact, participants were provided with a letter of recruitment (see Appendix D) and a study consent form (see Appendix E). They were also provided a link to a pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix C). Participants were able to ask as many questions as necessary with me through email before the interview. Additionally, they were able to opt out of taking the pre-interview survey and were told that they could answer each question during the interview with as little or as much detail as they felt comfortable.

The one participant in particular, mentioned in the beginning of this section, who was extremely trepidatious of his identity being revealed, had recently gone on the job market and accepted a tenure-track job. He was also unwilling to share the particulars of his research in case it could be traced back to him and place him jeopardy as a non-tenured faculty member. In this instance, I've removed any identifying information, according to this subject's wishes, from the pre-interview survey that would definitively identify the subject. Furthermore, after I completed our phone interview, I asked said participant if he had any other questions or concerns. This participant asked if one of his responses to an interview question could be "struck from the record." He explained, that in hindsight, he realized that in referencing a particular conversation, his response could be linked back to him. I happily replied that I would remove that response from my data and would follow up with him at a later date to see if he was still happy with the way I was using his data.

At the onset of my research, I didn't anticipate that I would need to "strike" any data from the record, but my methodological dedication to ethical research provided the framework

for how I would move forward. It wasn't a question in my mind that I should honor the wishes of my research subject at any stage in the process. According to Powell and Takayoshi, "an ethical perspective suggests that opening up the research agenda involves thinking about more than roles participants can adopt within the bounds of the study we have constructed. If we want authentic reciprocity, research participants should be allowed to construct roles for themselves and us in the same way we construct roles for them" (398). Because I review research with human subjects as a reciprocal process in which both researcher and participant have the opportunity to benefit from the study, or at the very least, can feel safe with how they are represented in writing, I encountered instances (like striking data from the record) that I did not anticipate, but was happy to accommodate.

At the end of all my interviews with subjects, I would give an off-the-cuff summary of my intentions. I would state that my study utilized feminist methodology and in doing so, I meant to:

- 1) respect each subject's wishes towards anonymity, even if they changed their mind later on;
- 2) have an ongoing, collaborative relationship with my subjects, in that I would share drafts including relevant portions of their interviews; and
- 3) ask for feedback on their identity representation along the way, but respect the subject's decision to ignore or decline to participate further.

The field of religious rhetoric is a small subset of Rhetoric and Composition, which is enough of a motivation for me to keep a positive, working relationship with my subjects. However, even if I were working with a research pool that I may never encounter again, I anticipate that my methods would be the same.

## **Limitations**

Because my initial contacts were a result of my own professional network within religious rhetoric, there is a potential bias in whose voices are represented. As a qualification, those professional contacts did help introduce me to other professors and graduate students whom I might not have had access to without an introduction. There were a number of established scholars whom I reached out to with no response, and I may have had better luck if I had relied on an introduction from a contact who was willing to help me.

In this study, I aimed for as much diversity as possible: diversity in race, gender expression, sexuality, location, and faith (or nonfaith). As anticipated, the majority of participants I spoke with identified as white and Christian. My intention in this study was to represent other religions beyond Christianity, and to a small degree, I was able to do so, though not to the extent that I hoped for. Though this project largely explores the lives of Christian scholars of Rhetoric and Composition, I welcome future projects in which a more diverse respondent pool is investigated. Furthermore, I hoped to speak to as many people from as many different (current) locations as I could and while there was some diversity, it is certainly not a representative cross-section of this population. I received a number of recommendations to speak with multiple students from the same institution and because I had already spoken with three students within that institution, I chose not to pursue those leads. The majority of work in religious rhetoric up to this point has focused on Christianity and that is due in large part to its status as a majority religion in the United States, and hence, a majority of faithful students and scholars identify thusly. That said, the field should still seek to represent those who have yet to garner sufficient attention.

Furthermore, the realm of religious research within Rhetoric and Composition is a relatively small community overall and could be viewed as a limitation to the methodology of this study. The nature of this emerging work in a growing subfield means that it is likely that some participants may influence one another's opinions due to their relationships with those who conduct similar work. For instance, participants Ben and Liam both attended graduate school together and are well acquainted. While a potential limitation, I still see value in this data for the sake of understanding if network connections could suggest a deeper consideration of how scholars consider disclosure and positionality. Additionally, Liam is the only one of my subjects with a tenured faculty position at a religiously-affiliated university. Because of his position as a protected faculty member who likely has more comfort in expressing his religious identity than my other participants, his responses may be considered outliers or at least not subject to the same constraints others may have felt.

With regards to snowball sampling, the disadvantages to this recruitment method are: community bias, a non-random sample pool, and a lack of knowledge as to whether the sample population provides an accurate reading of the overall target population (Dudovskiy; Atkinson & Flint). Despite these disadvantages, snowball sampling allowed me to locate hidden populations, which I would not have known existed without the assistance of my social network. Further, because of the narrow focus of my topic, it was difficult to imagine a random, sampling population size through which to recruit (e.g. a listserv or Facebook group).

Finally, the textual analysis is limited in terms of what could reasonably be analyzed and included within a timely dissertation completion timeline. There are any number of worthy texts that deserve analysis and inclusion here. As mentioned previously, these texts are also not meant to suggest a complete reading of disclosure within texts focusing on religious-based research.

Instead, I hope that what is included here will provide a well-rounded introduction into the possibilities of discussing disclosure within Rhetoric and Composition.

### **A Note on Pronouns**

Throughout the duration of this dissertation, I have employed the use of the gender neutral “they/them/theirs” even when referring to singular subjects as a means of disrupting the gender binary and in case anyone I refer to generally does not identify with a particular gender. When participants are referred to by pseudonym, the pronoun that corresponds with their pseudonym derives from the pre-interview questionnaire in which I asked participants to indicate their gender expressions. Though I did not ask participants which pronouns they would prefer to be referred to in text, this is a practice I would undertake in future research.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **“The Moment I Outed Myself”: Coming Out as Religious (or Atheist)**

In my interview with Rob, a white male who graduated with his PhD in spring 2019 from a Northeastern university, I noticed that he was enacting the language of “coming out” discourse as studied in queer theory. During our interview, Rob, who also identifies as gay and religious, spoke to his “coming out experiences as a person of faith” and shared an instance in a graduate seminar in which a classmate referred to Rob’s momentary positionality disclosure as “the moment [he] outed himself [as religious].” Rob’s use of coming out discourse made me curious to learn if other participants used similar discourse in their interview data. In addition to Rob, three other participants used the terms “come out” or “coming out” to describe the process of their positionality disclosures as religious or atheist. Because this occurrence is so prevalent in my study, I draw a connection between queer theory’s coming out discourse to examine the religious (or atheist) disclosure of my research participants, especially since so many enacted that discourse of their own accord.

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#### **Utilizing Queer Theory to Describe Religious and Nonreligious Disclosure**

A prominent voice in sexuality and writing studies is Jonathan Alexander, author of the academic books *Techne: Queer Meditations on Writing the Self* (2015) and *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies* (2008), accompanied by numerous articles on his own and collaboratively with others. Alexander’s solo work alongside his collaborations with Jacqueline Rhodes (2011), David Wallace (2009), and Michelle Gibson (2004) provide an apt framework through which to understand queer theory in the context of studies in Rhetoric and Composition. Alexander and Gibson (2004) identify “recurring strains of

thought in the work of major queer theorists” (3) who they view as applicable to writing pedagogy. These tenets are as follows:

- 1) Identities are constructed and performed rather than essential and “natural.”
- 2) All spaces (both inside the classroom and out) are saturated with gendered and sexualized constructions of identity, which are never entirely our own but are given to us as “narrations of self.”
- 3) We negotiate multiple identities through multiple social spaces, creating complex intersections between self, perception of self, other, and perception of other.
- 4) Our conceptions of selves as sexualized and gendered beings are intimately connected to ways power is shaped, shifted, and shared between self and other in the social milieu.
- 5) Understanding the construction and negotiation of these identities allows us to resist *normalizing* identity, which robs our differences—and the differences of others—of their critical power...
- 6) Queer theory moves us *beyond* the multicultural task of accepting and validating identity and moves us *toward* the more difficult process of understanding how identity, even the most intimate perceptions of self, arise out of a complex matrix of shifting social power. In this way, we believe queer theory has uses and applications for self-understanding that engage *all* students as they narrate their identities for us, tell us who they are, and give us—and themselves—the stories of their lives, past present, and future. (Alexander and Gibbons 3)

Each of these tenets of queer theory are equally applicable in the context of this dissertation’s study of religious rhetorics and for similar studies in this subfield. The third tenet in Alexander and Gibson’s above list serves as a practical starting point for understanding the application of queer theory to that of religious rhetorics. Scholars of religious topics in my study are negotiating “multiple identities through multiple social spaces” (3) as both scholars and as religious or atheist. Further, these “complex intersections” of self allow for interesting perceptions of self, but of others, as well (and I would argue for how scholars of religious topics perceive how others perceive them—see chapter 5 for further discussion of this topic). Finally, Alexander and Gibson’s sixth tenet states that “queer theory has uses and applications for self-understanding that engage *all* students as they narrate their identities” (3) and I would extend this tenet to move beyond students and to include scholars (in this case, of religious topics) who are navigating their

own identities as religious or atheist in addition to their identities as scholars, teachers, and colleagues.

Coming out discourse has been borrowed and adapted from queer theory by numerous identity groups because of its rich, rhetorical benefits. The notion that linking one's religious positionality disclosure with queer theory can feel like the connecting of two seemingly disjointed entities. Queer theory can allow for folks from vulnerable identity groups to come to terms with the expression of their identities; many of the religious scholars in this study are the nation's majority Christian religion and thus, do not typically face danger or fear of harm in the expression of that identity. That said, as I assert in this dissertation, one's identity is complex, complicated, messy, and often doesn't easily fit within the confines of a standard definition. Sometimes, outwardly conflicting identities coexist at once. My intention in utilizing queer theory is not to (mis)appropriate its application, but to view religious disclosure through the lens of an already established and incredibly insightful theoretical framework, especially since participants enacted some of the language of coming out discourse themselves.

While the notion of disclosing one's religious identity may be met with prejudice or resistance, I do not by any measure mean to suggest that "coming out" as religious is anywhere near the same as "coming out" as queer in some way. To assert that feelings of religious or atheist vulnerability equate with a persecuted queer minority is irresponsible and ethically inappropriate. I do, however, propose that because there has been such thoughtful work from queer theorists about the sociocultural act of claiming an identity that you fear might result in some kind of pushback, it is worth applying this work to a conversation where it doesn't naturally appear to apply. Furthermore, to ignore the potential of applying an already established

and richly discursive theoretical framework would be a failure of recognition on the part of the researcher.

In terms of disclosure with colleagues, cohorts, and while in graduate school, participants either shared experiences of “coming out” during seminar discussions, as a means of harnessing ethos, or they claim that they have not spoken about their positionality explicitly because it’s already known or something that could easily be found out by doing a quick web search. According to Doug Cloud, a scholar of social change rhetoric, in “Rewriting a Discursive Practice: Atheist Adaptation of Coming Out Discourse,” “coming out is more than just a phrase...From a political perspective, coming out is a powerful way for members of an identity category to constitute themselves as a counterpublic” (166). He goes on to explain that it is possible to come out as: “an undocumented immigrant, a Mexican, an adoptive parent, an academic mother, a conservative college student...a Wiccan, and many others, some serious and some less so” (166). Notably, Cloud utilizes coming out discourse applied to contexts in which they may not immediately be anticipated.

While coming out discourse has been utilized widely in a number of ways, Cloud doesn’t make mention of anyone coming out as religious (and doesn’t enact a coming out of his own identity in his article). Certainly, given that atheism is a nonreligious ideology, Cloud’s work has provided a foot in the door for the kind of research pursued in this research study. Since two participants in my study identify as atheist, while the majority identify as religious, I find merit in the application of coming out discourse widely to that of atheist, as well as, religious scholars because there is overlap in the responses of my religious and nonreligious participants in terms of positionality disclosure.

Disability studies and feminist/queer theory scholar, Ellen Samuels makes an essential distinction about the use of coming out discourse in varying contexts. In “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse” (2003), Samuels notes: “an important difference between the analogies of sex-race and sexual orientation-disability is that the former relates to oppressions, while the latter describes processes of liberation and self-actualization, in this case, ‘coming out’” (235). This distinction, when recognized, can allow for the utilization of coming out discourse outside the confines queer theory. As Samuels mentions, some use of coming out discourse applies to oppressed individuals while other connections can be applied to individuals seeking liberation and self-actualization. The distinctions between oppression and liberation/self-actualization are subtle, but require attention. To apply queer theory to a context in which individuals are not oppressed and to not acknowledge that fact would be a disservice to those who are still seeking liberation. In the context of my participants, I acknowledge that some of my subjects are seeking liberation and self-actualization as opposed to experiencing oppression. For example, some participants “come out” as a means of reclamation and clarification about what their brand of spirituality or faith looks like to them. Further, some participants speak to authenticity as a drive for their positionality disclosures, suggesting that a fully integrated sense of self as a scholar, teacher, and person of faith (among other things) is a valuable pursuit in terms of self-presentation for some scholars. During this process of liberation and self-actualization, participants enact identity integration, a “developmental” stage of the coming out process, as posited by Eli Coleman.

Coleman, a prominent sexologist, posits a theory in which “five stages describe many of the patterns seen in individuals with predominantly same-sex sexual orientation” in his piece “Developmental Stages of the Coming Out Process” (1982). Coleman makes explicit that not

everyone “follows each stage and evolves through all” (32). The stages proposed by Coleman are: pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationships, and identity integration. While not all of these stages are applicable to my participants, the final stage, identity integration, is useful to examine interview responses. In the identity integration stage, according to Coleman, “individuals incorporate their public and private identities into one self-image” (39). This ongoing, lifelong process invites “new labels and concepts [to be] discovered, new social networks [to be] identified and explored, and new relationships and intimacies will be enjoyed” (39). Five participants in my study speak to moments in which they “come out” and it is apparent that these subjects are still exploring how to best integrate their public and private personas.

### **Motivations for “Coming Out” as Religious or Atheist in the Academy**

The two most common refrains for one to pursue questions of disclosure, or “coming out” in the academy as religious or atheist have to do with self exploration and reclamation. Because many scholars in this study have felt a conflicted sense of self, in identifying as religious and as an academic, they have used their work to explore what it looks like when a person’s set of identities conflict or are at odds with one another. While personally motivated, respondents hoped that in doing this work, they might find answers that could help others like them in the future, who are seeking an understanding of their seemingly conflicting identities as religious and academic, for instance. Furthermore, religious identity in the United States comes with it a hefty array of baggage. Scholar motivation in this area is meant to break with blanket notions or stereotypes about religious people in general, thus reclaiming religious identity as a complex space of being. Self exploration and reclamation as motivations for “coming out” as religious or atheist in the academy ties in nicely with Alexander and Gibson’s first tenet of queer theory as applied to Rhetoric and Composition: “identities are constructed and performed rather

than essential and ‘natural’” (3). In this sense, religious identity is constructed and performed—there is nothing that inherently makes everyone the same. Hence, if all identity were essential and ‘natural,’ then there would be more uniformity (and stereotypes would be true).

Both Liam and Brandon expressed the sentiment, “Not at home at church and not at home in school” as a refrain and motivation for carving out a space where they and others like them can inhabit and merge their seemingly contradictory identities. These responses can be viewed through the lens of social identity theory in that “establishing a positive social identity subsequently fosters a sense of individual well-being, including reduced depressive symptomatology and enhanced self-esteem” (Ysseldyk et al. 62). Social identity theory posits that when one joins a group of people who identify in similar ways, they have a stronger sense of self worth. For instance, a church community or membership in an identity-based club can be positive for understanding one’s self concept. But when someone feels out of place, particularly, in this case, if someone considers themselves to be both religious and academic, “religious identification may be a source of both threat and comfort” (Ysseldyk et al. 64). The disclosure of one’s religion, depending on the context, can be a source of ethos or an invitation for skepticism in a scholar’s academic work. As Ysseldyk et al. determined in their research study, “Religiosity as Identity: Toward an Understanding of Religion from a Social Identity Perspective” (2010), “discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation is likely to be particularly harmful to individual well-being” (65). If one is not at home in church nor at school, the scholar must then devise an identity suitable for the space in between. Because academia offers the possibility for conflicting identities to coexist in one person, many participants spoke about slowly coming to terms with not fitting a “one-size-fits-all” definition of a religious person, but also an academic.

When I asked Liam about his work being influenced by any personal connections, he explained:

as an undergraduate, and even through early years of grad school, [I] didn't feel like there was a space to begin to think through those questions about the ways my religious commitments might inform my political activism or my scholarship. And so, I think that longing for wanting to create spaces for that kind of important work to happen for other students was really a major motivation for that work. I didn't see church as providing that space, I didn't see the academy as providing that space. And so, what does it look like to do this [work] in a productive way?

Brandon also commented, “we occupy this mental space: not at home at church and not at home in school, which is potentially generative, but also kind of painful and it sucks.” While the work of religious scholars is personally explorative, as Liam suggests, it is also meant to create space for others who may also feel as though they don't quite belong.

To wit, it's important to consider the motivations of scholars' positionality disclosures, especially as opportunities for self-actualization and liberation as opposed to a means of overcoming oppression. Solidifying this point helps separate the notion of “coming out” as religious from “coming out” as a sexual (or other nonvisible) minority.

### **“Outing” Themselves: Participants Enact the Language of Coming Out Discourse**

Rob, a white male who graduated with a PhD in spring 2019 from a Northeastern University, while trying to assert ethos, spoke about disclosing his positionality for the first time within his graduate coursework. He identifies as gay and religious and his scholarship focuses on non-dominant identity construction and language fluidity. During our interview, he explained:

we were having a conversation about [Sharon Crowley's *Toward a Civil Discourse*], and there were some moments in the book that I, as somebody quite familiar with Christian religious discourse, found problematic. And [I] ended up saying in that context as a way of claiming some authority in the matter, saying like, "Well, as somebody who would identify myself as evangelical, I can say definitively that that is not true." And one of my classmates after that class referred back to it as *the moment I outed myself*. Of which, I think at the time, I didn't even necessarily process it that way. But yeah, there was a kind of self-disclosure that hadn't previously felt that necessary. But in that moment, because

what we were talking about was so tied to my own experience, it was sort of hard for me to speak honestly about it without acknowledging that.

Interestingly, Rob had many more moments of “outing” himself to come. During the process of his graduate work, he published a book about being gay and Christian while reflecting on the complexities that an identity such as that can bring to the fore. He talked about how his book simultaneously outed himself as religious to some who might not have known and also about his being gay. He indicated that:

Certainly I think my own "coming out" experiences as a person of faith ...who also happens to be a sexual minority person that troubles some people of faith... when all of those coming outs happened simultaneously for me, I did become highly aware that it created some complexities for my academic life that hadn't previously been there.

Worth noting is that Rob’s book, though not academic, does place him in a unique space as someone who has deeply reflected and could be considered by some to be an expert on the intersections of faith and sexuality. While potentially a mark of ethos, Rob acknowledges that being outed as both gay and Christian led to a complicated intersection by which he may be viewed as an outsider in both of the communities that he claims to identify with. For instance, within some circumstances, Rob noted that he is excluded from certain faith contexts because of his sexuality. He also considered that sometimes he feels as though he isn’t “queer” enough for the LGBTQIA community due to his faith identity. Like some of the participants who noted feeling “not at home at church and not at home in school,” Rob is also in a liminal space in which the complexity of his identity does not offer a clear sense of belonging. While being both gay and Christian place Rob in an interesting position from which to draw a unique perspective, it is “potentially generative, but also kind of painful,” as noted by Brandon when speaking about not feeling like he could ever fully integrate his identity and be the same at both church and school. And because there isn’t an excess of outed queer people of faith, Rob’s exceptional position and ethos is worth drawing upon and learning more about.

Brandon, a white male graduate student in the Northeast, uses the term “comes out” to describe his religious positionality disclosure with peers, particularly within the setting of a graduate seminar. Brandon also identifies as religious and studies historical religious rhetoric.

During the interview, Brandon says:

In my interactions with colleagues and stuff like that, [my positionality disclosure] *comes out*, usually pretty naturally...Most of my intellectual development was happening around theology and Christian thinking...when I want to throw my oar in...I end up quoting Augustine or John Calvin...and so, [my positionality disclosure] *comes out* that way.

For Brandon, part of how he views his “coming out” is by using Christian theological thinkers as evidence of rhetorical strategy when “someone [else] is quoting Foucault.” While Brandon’s use of the term “comes out” isn’t specifically tied to an overt and explicit disclosure to his religious identity, his use of the terminology twice within a short space is noteworthy. According to Dr. Wayne Bullock, a psychologist who specializes in sexuality and intimacy and LGBT[QIA] and sexual orientation:

coming out to others is a stage commonly marked by anxiety, shame, and internal struggle as GLB [gay, lesbian, or bisexual] persons search for a way to tell people in their lives about their sexual identity. This is out of a wish to be more authentic with the people they love and care for... There are many stereotypes and misconceptions that people have about what it means to be GLB, and the person who is coming out holds some of the same negative views. Therefore, GLB persons often believe that others are going to think less of them when they come out. (“Sexuality Matters: What Does It Mean to ‘Come Out?’”)

Bullock’s description of what it means to come out as LGBTQIA correlates to the experiences of participants in my study referring to their own “coming out” experiences as religious. There is not only a sense that an identity is hidden and unwelcome, but a fear that those they choose to disclose to will judge them and/or think less of them based on stereotypes and misconceptions. While LGBTQIA folks and religious folks contemplating “coming out” are both confronted with

anxiety about their decisions to disclose their identities, LGBTQIA folks are most certainly a minority and exceedingly more likely to experience ridicule and violence for their decisions to come out, as opposed to a religious person in the academy who may fear being perceived differently than before they “came out.” In the case of Brandon, one of his modes of “coming out” within academia is by consistently citing Christian philosophers in rhetorical discussions with his classmates.

Bullock’s description of what it means to come out along with Brandon’s experience coincides with Alexander and Gibson’s fourth tenet of queer theory as applied to Rhetoric and Composition: “our conceptions of selves as sexualized and gendered beings are intimately connected to ways power is shaped, shifted, and shared between self and other in the social milieu” (3). Based on this tenet, we can understand that religious scholars in the academy may fear power structures as they relate to their place in the academy. The revelation of their identity exposes them to increased suspicions, lack of trust, and enhanced stereotyping. However, this issue is a complex one in that some religious people, particularly Christians, understand that their identity allows them societal privileges and powers in the world at large.

Other participants were more explicit in their usage of the terms “coming out,” “come out,” or “comes out” to describe the actual process of someone stating their positionality within academia. For example, Liam, a white, male, tenured professor at a religiously-affiliated university in the South, when discussing whether he discloses his faith in the classroom responded: “It’s not like I ever *come out* and identify in any way. I think students [are] constantly reading our behavior, they’re listening for the ways that we respond to them, they’re looking at the texts we choose, the kinds of invitations that we give to write.” Here, like Brandon, instead of

saying that he doesn't "disclose" a particular identity, Liam enacts the term "come out" to describe what he views as something that is not an overt revelation for himself personally.

Nadia, a white female graduate student in the Western U.S., who also identifies as atheist and studies political and religious/atheist rhetorics, also reflected on her disclosures with colleagues, students, and in her scholarship. She explained that she no longer discloses her identity as an atheist in the classroom because of a negative past experience in which her "coming out as an atheist...just made me go, eh, probably not a good idea." She went on to say, "in my writing, [my disclosure as an atheist] kind of depends...I wrote an auto-ethnography where I definitely had to kind of *come out*." Like Liam, Nadia enacts the discourse of the queer coming out discourse to describe the experience of expressing her identity as an atheist in a variety of academic settings.

### **"Outing" Themselves in Print: Scholars Disclose in Academic Publications**

Three scholars who make a direct disclosure of their identities in relation to their research subjects are Jeffrey M. Ringer, and T.J. Geiger II, and Chris Anderson. All of these scholars have written about Christian students in the writing classroom (and in the case of Geiger, the intersections of faith and LGBTQIA identity). Cope and Ringer use the term "insider" multiple times to rationalize their disclosures to participants in their research studies; Geiger sets himself up as an "ally"; and Chris Anderson dons a stole and an alb in a class on Literature and Western Civilization.

In *Vernacular Christian Rhetoric and Civil Discourse* (2016), Jeffrey M. Ringer directly cites his identity in relation to his research subjects multiple times in his introduction to the text.

Early on he writes:

as an American Christian with deep evangelical roots, I had often found myself at odds with Crowley's narrow construction of fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and Christianity.

I agree with Beth Daniell, for instance, when she argues that *Toward a Civil Discourse* excludes the vast Christian middle to which many of us—myself included—belong. (1)

Just from this small excerpt, Ringer identifies himself 1) “as an American with deep evangelical roots” and 2) someone who inhabits “the vast Christian middle.” Furthermore, he situates himself as a researcher who finds himself in conflict with Crowley’s characterization of Christianity in her scholarship, but aligned with Daniell’s notion that Crowley’s definition is too narrow. Some may identify as strongly fundamentalist, evangelical, or conservatively Christian, but as Daniell and Ringer purport, the majority of those who claim to identify themselves as “Christian” are bit more moderate in their viewpoints and perspectives. Ringer’s disclosure here certainly serves as a piece of “expert witness” because of his insider status. Not only is he able to “reclaim” Christianity for his own sake, but for his research subjects who might feel embarrassed or tentative about being identified as such because of misidentification as fundamental or highly conservative.

In discussing his methodology, Ringer contends that his reasons for disclosing his positionality to his research subjects has much to do with developing sound relationships with his research participants. Students who might feel potentially judged, for instance, for being evangelical will most certainly be put at ease by a researcher who appears as an insider. The result may be more willing and open participants speaking about their experiences knowing that the “authority figure” across from them does not think their religious beliefs somehow make them less academic than nonreligious students. Ringer explains:

I positioned myself as an insider to evangelicalism in my interviews with students. My participants knew from the outset that I identified as a Christian, came from an evangelical background, and attended an Episcopal Church near campus. When the occasion called for it, I enacted evangelical discourse during interviews, often by alluding to a biblical passage or using language common within evangelical circles. My goal in enacting such discourse was to foster trust with my participants. I wanted them to know that I understood and could enact the evangelical discourse that shaped their lives.

Readers should note, then, that in some of the interview transcripts, I sound as much like an evangelical Christian as I do a composition researcher. (13)

Ringer doesn't mention how he disclosed his identity to his participants (in an introductory email, consent form, verbally), just that he did. Either way, he makes his identity clear to students as someone familiar with evangelical discourse, given his background and his current attendance at an Episcopal Church. There is a sense of continuity in Ringer's identity as one familiar with evangelicalism that would likely appeal to his research subjects. Whereas a researcher could claim a background with evangelicalism or a current affiliation, Ringer's continuity is a comforting state of being that would allow for participant trust.

Furthermore, Ringer didn't stop identifying himself with his research participants to the point of persuading them to take part in an interview. Even when subjects were already taking place in an interview with him, Ringer "enacted evangelical discourse" so that they knew he "understood and could enact the evangelical discourse that shaped their lives." Ringer's further engagement with evangelical discourse beyond recruitment solidifies his status as an insider with his subjects and can provide a sense of ease and familiarity in an otherwise potentially uncomfortable situation like an interview when personal questions are being asked.

Ringer's disclosure with his research subjects is a tactic with a discrete function: to gain the trust of his participants. Furthermore, there is a sense of ethos, credibility, and authority that Ringer gains in the eyes of his subjects due to his membership in the evangelical tradition. In other words, he's not a skeptic with no background knowledge who may make participants feel guarded in their responses. Because there is a shared discourse and belief set between researcher and subject, an authentic interaction can occur. Not to say that authentic interactions are confined to those within the same discourse communities or belief sets, but the walls that some put up for fear of judgment are less likely to get in the way.

In “Emerging Voices: Unpredictable Encounters: Religious Discourse, Sexuality, and the Free Exercise of Rhetoric” (2013), TJ Geiger II considers the pedagogical value of merging conflicting identity concepts even when these intersections pose unrest and confusion. In his piece, Geiger proposes teaching fraught intersections and allowing students to sit with their uncertainties. Geiger also goes on to discuss the pedagogical implications of discussing faith-LGBTQIA intersections within his first-year writing class. In his introduction, Geiger notes, “The anti-gay Christian is a much more readily accessible image in our culture than the queer Christian...It is a painful problem for me to witness both as a rhetorician and a heterosexual Christian ally in LGBT struggles” (249). Geiger’s identification as a Christian ally to LGBTQIA folks is direct and provides an understanding of how he may approach the pedagogy of merging conflicting identities. While not LGBTQIA, Geiger considers himself an ally and hence (likely) has a vested interest in the community and an understanding of how two seemingly discordant identity groups might coexist or merge. Geiger’s disclosure appears in text, though it is not clear whether or not he disclosed similarly to his students.

Chris Anderson, in *Teaching as Believing*, sets up a rather dramatic scene in which he silently hangs his stole and alb on the open classroom door, while handing out an exercise asking students to consider how they’ve been taught to read the Bible. As students work in groups, Anderson dons his vestments as a deacon. They move into a class discussion about coming from different backgrounds, some who currently identify as religious and others who do not. Anderson makes the point that students, whether religious or not “both have a set of attitudes they bring to the text. Both have assumptions, to read literally, to reject all literalism. Both are wearing albs of their own, really...” (28). From this point, Anderson finally calls attention to his clothing and its purpose. He goes on to say:

But the unease in the room is also the point. When several students volunteer, nicely, respectfully, that my putting on the alb made them uncomfortable, I respond that of course it did, of course it seemed silly and wrong, because it is. A professor shouldn't act as a minister in a classroom on a public campus, a professor shouldn't begin class by making the sign of the cross, a professor shouldn't preach. That's to mix up roles that shouldn't be mixed up, and students shouldn't mix them up either. (28)

Anderson's point, he says, is not make students uncomfortable, but to disrupt students' notions of how the Bible can be read as literature, beyond a sacred interpretational viewpoint. There is certainly a fine line between what Anderson deems as a professor's "mixing up of roles" and donning his vestments in the classroom space, one that is quite dramatic and an outlier in terms of a professor's religious positionality disclosure with students. And certainly, while he is not ministering, making the sign of the cross, or preaching, his very presence in the front of the classroom in religious garb sends a particular message that is different than the one projected when one is wearing nonreligious clothing. Interestingly, Anderson's disclosure-by-clothing adheres to what many participants said about religion in the classroom space: it tends to make students uncomfortable. Nonetheless, students can learn from discomfort, especially if that discomfort forces them to confront rigid ideologies. Certainly, donning religious garb in the classroom context is not right for every instructor, but as with disclosure in general, whether to make such a choice is dependent upon the instructor's weighing of the potential risks and rewards such a disclosure could bring. For Anderson, the reward of jarring his class into challenging their assumptions must have outweighed any potential negative consequences.

In Anderson's instance, his is a double "coming out" in that he initially "came out" to his students, in stages, in the classroom, then again, in print. Initially, Anderson silently dons his deacon vestments, solely a visual cue for his (potential) religious leanings. It would be interesting to note what his students thought his vestment-donning meant—beyond a general feeling of discomfort. Did some students believe it was a costume? Did they think he was

joking? Or did they genuinely believe he was a “man of the cloth”? Anderson doesn’t go into detail to say if he performed this ritual again, which would be worth knowing. If it was important enough to include in an academic book publication, wouldn’t it be worth incorporating pedagogically at least with some regularity? Or perhaps Anderson’s experience in and of itself was a bit too discomfoting (though memorable), even for himself, to repeat.

### **Public Complications to Coming Out in the Academy**

Other scholars who don’t explicitly disclose their positionalities within their scholarship acknowledge that it seems like audiences already know, can make an accurate hypothesis, or can easily look them up if having full knowledge of that person’s positionality is important enough for them to know. In the article mentioned earlier in this chapter, Doug Cloud makes a distinction between high and low agency coming out (174, 178). High agency coming out reflects a positionality disclosure in which a person is able to take responsibility and fully shape the manner, time, and place in which they come out (178). In contrast, his description of low agency coming out is a positionality disclosure in which the “person has no choice” (174). I would expand Cloud’s definition of low agency coming out to include those instances in which a person is not able to take their coming out experience fully into their own hands (e.g. choosing the manner, location, and time in which they reveal their identities). Some of my participants noted a complication in coming out as religious or atheist that reflects Cloud’s notion of low agency coming out because the person is not able to fully control or shape the way their identities are discovered. This lower agency coming out has much to do with the confluence of information about people available on the internet.

Cloud’s notions of high and low agency coming out, along with the experiences of my participants merges with Alexander and Gibson’s second tenet of queer theory as applied to

Rhetoric and Composition: “all spaces (both inside the classroom and out) are saturated with gendered and sexualized constructions of identity, which are never entirely our own but are given to us as ‘narrations of self’” (3). Even when great care is taken to shape and form one’s identity, while taking advantage of high agency opportunities, religious scholars’ “narration of selves” are never entirely their own. Sometimes religious identity is “handed down” to a person through a sort of filial inheritance or is accepted as part of a longstanding tradition that extends far beyond a single individual. These “inheritances” of identity (e.g. a longstanding family tradition identifying as a particular denomination of Christian, for instance) come with terminology that merely scratch the surface of each individual religious believer’s identity. Hence, some “narrations of self” are misguided stereotypes applied to a religious (or atheist) person from an outside audience who doesn’t completely understand the complexity of one’s identity—and these misguided stereotypes can be harmful and damaging to the individuals to which they are applied.

Miriam, a white female graduate student in the Northeast explains her rationale for not disclosing within her scholarship in more detail. Miriam identifies as Bahá’í and her dissertation topic focuses on framing immigration policy through religious advocacy. She explains:

In terms of the papers that I've published on Bahá’í topics, there are two of them, and I don't think I made my positionality explicit in either of them because I figured that if people were curious they could just Google my name and from the results, it would be very obvious that, yes, I am Bahá’í. Since in my spare time I write articles on Bahá’í topics for small online outlets. So, I figure that my identity is out there. It's public, publicly-available, so I didn't go to the trouble of making an explicit disclosure.

There are a small number of people who identify as Bahá’í and an even smaller number who write about the faith in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Because Miriam is so easily identifiable, she can’t reasonably hide her religious identity. Whether she explicitly discloses or not, someone can easily look her up and make assumptions about her based on her faith. Luckily,

for Miriam, this appears to be strategic, in part. During her undergraduate degree, Miriam took her résumé to a review session and the advisor told her that she should at least consider removing her religiously-affiliated activities (she was actively involved in the Bahá'í campus organization) to avoid any potential bias from future employers. Ultimately, Miriam said she decided to leave her involvement on her résumé because she believed it was an integral aspect of her personal and professional identities.

Rob believes in disclosure within his scholarship not for explicit methodological reasons, but because he anticipates that audiences will feel like he's hiding something or that he's ashamed of his work. During a mock interview at the end of his PhD program, Rob initially left his nonacademic publication about being gay and Christian off of his CV because he wanted to emphasize his scholarly work. During the mock interview, he was blindsided by an interview question that prompted him to update his CV to include the nonacademic publication before entering the job market officially. He explains:

leaving that [nonacademic publication] off of my CV could also seem like either like an attempt to deceive or that I was ashamed of some part of my writing profile...the CV that I sent my mock interviewers didn't have my book listed on it. And so when one of the mock interviewers Googled me shortly before our mock interview, he then in our mock interview asked me a question about my non-academic work and about how it influenced my academic work. And about how my relation to the queer community as a person of faith impacted my participation in conversation about queer theory and queer identity...[I] made a statement about my own positionality in a variety of regards, including both faith and sexuality, and how those experiences kind of shaped the interests that I had in the questions I was asking in the dissertation about the liquid nature of identity.

As mentioned before, Rob went on to explain that leaving something as big as a book publication off of his CV, even if it is nonacademic, could be viewed as an ethos-damaging oversight on his part that could lead to raised eyebrows on the part of potential hiring committees. Because of an experience like the mock interview, Rob was allowed to reflect on what the potential perils of

not disclosing his positionality openly while on the job market could be. In this instance, Rob came to the conclusion that the risks of nondisclosure were far greater than any potential reward.

Beyond disclosures of positionality to peers that take more explicit forms, at least four participants talked about disclosure amongst peers as an organic, natural occurrence that took place on a case-by-case basis or as something that people simply “already know.” Interestingly, these participants didn’t elaborate to suggest why they believed that their peers and colleagues already knew their positionalities or any implicit actions they may have taken to suggest a certain position or leaning, with the exception of Miriam. She explains:

within my department I think that most of my peers and professors know my religion. They know because I've written a lot of papers about my religion. And I was president of [the] Bahá'í Campus Association for a few years. So, I definitely wasn't keeping my faith identity on the down low.

Miriam highlights that her faith is such an integrated part of her identity that it would seem unreasonable for her peers and professors to not know about her faith. Interestingly, Miriam noted that she had not disclosed her positionality in any of her nonacademic published work, though she does have a forthcoming piece in which the editor required her disclosure for a scholarly publication. Again, when speaking about this implicit disclosure, she says “I think that most of my peers and professors know my religion,” suggesting that she isn’t certain whether that is true or not. Some of Miriam’s peers may not know her religion, but Miriam’s perception is that because she is so open about her religious commitment, anyone who takes the time to do any research about her would very easily find out about her faith.

Nadia briefly explained that her research allows her to speak about her positionality and explain why she pursues her line of work. She said, “all of my colleagues know I’m an atheist because I talk about my research quite a bit and I kind of talk about it from my positionality.” Like Miriam, Nadia doesn’t necessarily have an exact count of the colleagues who know her

positionality, but she infers, because of her openness that it would be difficult for someone to miss. In terms of strategy, Miriam and Nadia don't go out of their way to disclose their positionalities to colleagues (beyond explicit discussion about their research topics), but they don't make any attempts to hide or conceal it either.

Another emergent trend is respondents opting for an implicit (or low agency coming out) disclosure of their identities as opposed to an explicit (or high agency coming out) confession. In this occurrence, scholars of religious (and atheist) topics do not feel shame or a need to hide their identities, but they simultaneously don't find advantage in a blanket disclosure of their identities, either. As mentioned previously, unless scholars find a need to harness ethos or a kairotic moment to build relationships, disclosure is less appealing than it would be in a different, more advantageous context. Miriam and Nadia insist that their colleagues "already know" how they identify and thus, they don't need to explicitly disclose. In the case of Miriam, as she says, a simple Google search would "out" her anyway.

## **Conclusion**

Utilizing coming out discourse from queer theory is a practical lens through which to view a person's identity disclosure, when that identity is not a visibly present marker, but doing so must accompany a statement distinguishing the use of coming out discourse as a means of self-actualization or as a liberatory project, as opposed to one seeking freedom of oppression. In the case of religious or atheist positionality disclosure, participants in this study naturally referred to their experiences using terms like "coming out" or "come out," to describe the moments when they decided to make their identities public or keep them private. Furthermore, published scholars in the field of Rhetoric and Composition have revealed their own religious identities in their academic scholarship as a methodological move to gain participant trust or to

disrupt critical notions of religious identity in the classroom. The difference between high and low agency coming out can be viewed through the example of a scholar choosing to disclose their positionality in academic scholarship (high agency) and when a scholar's identity is implicitly suggested by an internet search linking them to a particular religious or nonreligious ideology (low agency). Positionality disclosure, whether religious or not, is a personal experience for every individual and allowing scholars the freedom of choice to "come out" or not should be respected, even when audiences are just curious to know one way or another.

The juxtaposition of religious identity and "coming out" discourse reveals a correlation between coming out as queer and coming out as religious in the academy. There are fears and anxieties that disclosure can lead judgment or being thought less of. However, the consequences of disclosure as a queer person and a religious person within the academy are where the similarities end. Countless stories about the mistreatment and discrimination of the LGBTQIA community serve as evidence that their struggle for acceptance is one in which choosing to "come out" is much more fraught. That said, an inclusion of queer theory in unusual places (like religious people "coming out" in the academy) is a celebration of a resilient population, but one that must be deeply respected and treaded lightly.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **“Honor the People You’re Writing About”: Forming Allies and Establishing Ethos in the Academy**

Felicity is a white, female graduate student in the Midwest who is unsure of her religious beliefs (though she was raised religious) who studies evangelical sexuality and discourse communities. During an interview I asked her if she believed a scholar’s positionality disclosure of their religious or nonreligious identity was important and she said, “I guess I think it's important to know if you're writing as an insider or an outsider of a certain community. Not that there's a binary, but... it honors the people you're writing about, too.” Felicity’s response was something I carried with me in my interviews with subsequent participants, especially the part about honoring the people you write about in your research. Throughout the study, emergent themes of establishing ethos and forming allies developed. Some participants believed that disclosing their religious positionality to research subjects led to trust-building and establishment of researcher identity as authentic or genuine. This particular trust-building strategy led to examination of a scholar’s criteria for positionality disclosure in the academy and the role of intersectionality in such disclosure.

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#### **Considering the Criteria for Religious or Nonreligious Disclosure in the Academy**

In “Self-Disclosure as a Strategic Tool” (2010), Lad Tobin considers a young, woman first-year writing instructor named Linda who sought advice about disclosing to her student writing a personal essay about her mother recently being diagnosed with breast cancer, because her own mother had also recently been diagnosed with breast cancer:

I know that I need to maintain some professional boundaries with my students,” Linda told us, “especially since I’m a new teacher and I’m not much older than they are. But all I can think about when I’m reading her essay is how much I’m dying to tell her that I

know exactly how she feels. I mean, do you guys all really think it would be a really terrible mistake for me to tell her? (196).

Tobin and a group of other composition instructors listened to Linda's concern and responded, "it depends" (197). Their advice to Linda was to consider whether "the pedagogical risks outweighed the probable pedagogical rewards" (197). In the end, Linda decided not to disclose to her student because she determined that she was still unconfident in her "still-evolving teacherly ethos" (197) and the possible negative consequences for disclosing outweighed any benefit she saw in making a personal connection with her student.

As Tobin explains, we "can't extrapolate a general assessment of pedagogical self-disclosure based on any particular example...it is misleading and unfair to offer guidelines for self-disclosure without taking into account the very different material conditions that can constrain a teacher's options or influence a student's reactions" (200). Like Tobin, a couple of my participants spoke to their personal experiences with disclosure, but noted that disclosure is just that—personal—and lacking in a set of guidelines or criteria for the field at large. With regards to when it's appropriate for a scholar to disclose their positionality, Simon, a white male who graduated with a PhD in spring 2019 and began a tenure-track professorship in the fall, notes that "I can't seem to think of particular *criteria* (author's emphasis) to use to determine whether or not someone should talk about their positionality in relation to their research." Simon also identified as religious and resided in the Southwest at the time of our interview. Likewise, Brandon, a white, male graduate student who attends a state school in the Northeast notes:

disclosure is a rhetorical move, so it should be purpose-based. It should be for the purpose of some accomplishment, some goal. Like I said, I think that disclosure is very tricky because you can always disclose more. When [someone] says he's a Christian as a black man, it's a totally different message than when I disclose that I'm a Christian as a white man. And a woman would be the same way. And someone who's gay would be the same way. It just wouldn't always mean the same thing...I don't think [disclosure] should be necessary. I don't think it should be required. I think it can be important in some

certain circumstances, but I don't know what those circumstances are. I'd have trouble coming up with *criteria* (author's emphasis) for that.

Brandon, who also identifies as religious and studies historical religious rhetoric, believes that disclosure should be “purpose-based,” and not just a thoughtless exercise performed for the sake of itself. Instead, if scholars choose to disclose, they need to think about *why* they disclose and share that reasoning so readers may understand that the choice is a critical one. He also, like other participants, does not believe that disclosure should be compulsory. As other participants have spoken to, there are “layers” of disclosure in Brandon’s mind according to the message that disclosure within a particular identity group (or groups) signals to readers. Beyond the notion of layers, the notion of identity is further complicated due to some identities seemingly being in conflict or tension with one another (e.g. a gay Christian).

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, critical race theorist and creator of the term “intersectionality,” explains in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” (1991), that “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences...ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups (author's emphasis), another problem with identity politics” (1242). As Crenshaw notes, a lack of clear understanding about a certain identity facet within that group can make engaging with other groups more challenging. For instance, the term “Christian” does not mean the same thing to all those who claim it as an identity marker. As with the instance noted above, some believe you can be both gay and Christian, while others cannot imagine these identities coexisting. Again, this lack of understanding about difference within the group (particularly Christians, in this instance), can make it more difficult to express difference to those who do not identify within said group.

The intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality when complicated further by religious identity adds a layer of understanding about a topic that is specific to the scholar. bell hooks speaks to intersectionality in *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) by saying that “the assumption that we can divorce the issue of race from sex, or sex from race, has so clouded the vision of American thinkers and writers on the “woman” question that most discussions of sexism, sexist oppression, or woman’s place in society are distorted, biased, and inaccurate” (12). While hooks speaks specifically to the intersections of racial and gender biases, her notion that public understanding of one’s identity can be “distorted, biased, and inaccurate” if researchers examine an aspect of one’s identity in isolation, especially if there are layers of oppression worth taking note, is significant. The faith identities of people of color and for LGBTQIA people are complicated and require a nuanced investigation to understand the depth of one’s experience in comparison to otherwise unoppressed peoples.

More recently, Patricia Hill Collins, scholar of race, class, and gender, in her 2019 text *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, explores what intersectionality means in today’s society. She writes, “intersectionality is far broader than what most people, including many of its practitioners, imagine it to be...as a discourse, intersectionality bundles together ideas from disparate places, times, and perspectives, enabling people to share points of view that formerly were forbidden, outlawed, or simply obscured” (2). As Brandon says, “all that stuff [intersections of identity] plays.” Whether that intersectionality is relevant and important to disclose will depend on the topic and the scholar’s thoughts about the necessity of disclosure in one’s work.

The implications of intersectionality as applied to participants is to say that they are not simply religious and nonreligious scholars. Participants are religious and nonreligious women, religious people of color, and queer religious and nonreligious people. Understanding

positionality disclosure in the context of this study is to affirm that there is not one single, isolated demographic examined, but rather a multitude of demographics coexisting together at once. That said, there is not a standard positionality disclosure or set of disclosure practices. We can, however, look at the examples of positionality disclosure from scholars of religious topics in the field; how they have disclosed; why they choose to disclose in a particular moment; and how they perceive these disclosures with some distance from the event(s).

Conversations concerning intersectionality hearken to Alexander and Gibson's third tenet of queer theory as applied to Rhetoric and Composition: "we negotiate multiple identities through multiple social spaces, creating complex intersections between self, perceptions of self, other, and perception of other" (3). Alexander and Gibson's tenet can be applied in the present study in contexts like the classroom, professional conferences, interactions with colleagues, and within academic publications. According to nearly all my participants, there is a sense that their perceptions of themselves are at odds with other peoples' perceptions of them. Not only do scholars of religious topics navigate the intersections of their faith and academic commitments, but any additional markers of their identities, as well (like race, sexuality, gender expression, etc.). These multiple intersections lend to complex identities that may be difficult to express fully all at once, leading some to make snap judgments about one identity marker instead of considering all markers of identity together.

### **Vulnerabilities and Fears of Religious (Specifically, Christian) Scholars**

Although a large portion of research participants could not substantiate instances of explicit discrimination towards their religious identities within academia, many did express fears job-related fears (e.g. that they were not published because of their identities) as well as fears of being perceived as intolerant, anti-intellectual, and/or politically conservative. Participants spoke

specifically to instances in which they believed they may have not been published in academic texts because of a religious affiliation with their work. Graduate student participants also expressed fears of entering the job market as scholars of religious topics. Finally, more than half of my participants expressed vulnerabilities of being identified as intolerant, anti-intellectual, and/or politically conservative because of a religious affiliation to their research topics.

Two participants, Liam and Steven, spoke specifically to instances in which they suspected their academic work on religious-based topics was not selected for publication due to bias. Liam, a white tenured professor who resides in the South and identifies as religious, discussed an academic collection he and two other scholars approached an editor with a few years prior. Initially, Liam said the editor asked, “Do people actually need this work at all?” and made clear that their work was something she has no interest in. However, Liam went on to explain that even though the editor was “suspicious,” if he and his collaborators could provide a significant bibliography, she would consider their proposal. After compiling a bibliography of about 200 sources and a proposal, Liam explained that the editor expressed, “Wow, this seems like it actually is a legitimate area in the field. There might be interest here...this [proposal] is actually very persuasive. I want to not actually consider your proposal but I’ll go ahead and send it out.” A couple months later, Liam and his collaborators reached out to editor to discover that the editor had not actually sent their proposal on for consideration. Liam reflected on the experience in saying, “there was a kind of gatekeeper function that was very much particular to this person...the fact that the project...feels really niche to editors—and in some ways, they’re right, it is—but that doesn’t make it unimportant.”

Steven, an African American tenure-track professor who lives in the Northeast and identifies as religious, recounted a similar experience to Liam. Interestingly, Steven was adamant

during our interview that he does not believe positionality disclosure to be relevant in a scholar's work. He talked about submitting an article to a prestigious journal in rhetoric and receiving a desk rejection. Steven took the editor's comments to his advisor and she told him, "Well, to be honest, it may have been rejected due to religious bias. There's really nothing you can do about that." He went on to say that his advisor was understanding and didn't have a solution, but simply listening to him and providing her insight was helpful. Due to his experience, Steven concluded that he would continue to send out his work and hope another journal reviewer wouldn't "write off the article" potentially due to its subject matter.

Three graduate student participants spoke specifically to fears entering the job market. Felicity, a white graduate student residing in the Midwest, who is uncertain of her religious beliefs, talked about her fears of coming across as "dumb" because of her past religious commitments. Sabrina, a white graduate student also in the Midwest, who identifies as religious said that she anticipated being asked by universities about her connection to the religious content of her research and reflected, "we'll see what happens and if [my research topic] ends up negatively affecting certain searches, then maybe I don't want to work at that kind of university any way." Sabrina doesn't necessarily seem to imagine the job market will be an uphill struggle for her, but the fact that she acknowledges that she may be perceived negatively in some way indicates at least a low level of fear. Finally, Darren, an African American graduate student and pastor who lives in the Northeast, when asked if had been given any advice about how to navigate professionalizing himself responded, "it's difficult to get a job when you study religion, right?" Darren's tone, especially in asking, "right?" at the end of his statement, implies that what he is saying is explicitly apparent. Like Liam and Steven's experiences in publishing their scholarship, Felicity, Sabrina, and Darren don't necessarily have evidence to validate their fears

of experiencing job-related vulnerabilities. However, the fact that they all expressed sentiments of uncertainty invites an understanding of why they may be cautious to express their positionalities, or at least, the manner and contexts they choose to do so.

As will be discussed in further detail in chapter 5, a large majority of participants expressed fears of being perceived as intolerant, anti-intellectual, and/or politically conservative. Ben, a white tenured professor in the South who identifies as religious; and Erica, a white graduate student in the South who identifies as religious both spoke at length about distancing themselves from the misunderstanding that because they identify as Christian does not mean that they identify as politically conservative. Rob, a white recent PhD graduate who resides in the Northeast and identifies as religious, like Felicity above, both worry that identifying as religious will make them appear less academically rigorous than their peers. Rob says, “I think I sometimes have concerns that if I’m known as a person of faith in the context of my research, that will cause people to perceive me as thereby less able to make thoughtful and well-researched claims on the matter.” Darren, also mentioned in the previous paragraph, does not speak to *how* he may be perceived as differently if people discover that identifies as religious, but simply says that “people will look at [him] differently.” Finally, Josh, a tenure-track professor in the Western U.S. who identifies as atheist, says that his biggest fear in terms of positionality disclosure is “being discounted...I don’t want to be discounted.” Whether religious or atheist, the thorough line between all of the sentiments expressed here is that scholars will not be provided the opportunities to speak for themselves and to establish their own narratives—narratives that may in fact disrupt or complicate stereotypes that some audiences may have.

### **Establishing Ethos and Credibility in the Academy**

Five participants specifically cited ethos or credibility-building as a motivation for religious or nonreligious positionality disclosure. To these respondents, ethos or credibility can mean being upfront with your research subjects, readers, or audiences to establish a sense of trust and build relationships. Furthermore, not disclosing one's positionality, according to these subjects, would damage one's ethos, invite suspicion, and lead audiences to believe that the researcher is biased or trying to hide something. Some participants incorporate disclosure into their research methodology and some believe it's simply the "ethical" thing to do.

Alexander and Gibson's sixth tenet of queer theory as applied to Rhetoric and Composition is a useful bridge to understanding how positionality disclosure as an act of ethos-building can be useful not only to scholars of religious topics, but to audiences who may benefit from reflecting upon religious identity as complex and varied. Alexander and Gibson's sixth tenet is that:

Queer theory moves us *beyond* the multicultural task of accepting and validating identity and moves us *toward* the more difficult process of understanding how identity, even the most intimate perceptions of self, arise out of a complex matrix of shifting social power. In this way, we believe queer theory has uses and applications for self-understanding that engage *all* students as they narrate their identities for us, tell us who they are, and give us—and themselves—the stories of their lives, past, present, and future. (3)

The utilization of queer theory applied to the identity construction of religious scholars can help "outsiders" understand the multifaceted intersections of pursuing a career in academia, as well as maintaining a faith commitment. Furthermore, employing queer theory to understand religious identity in the academy can allow for "outsiders" to move beyond simply *accepting* different religious beliefs to actively resisting *essentializing* religious belief with preconceived, and at times stereotypical, notions.

One participant, Amanda, a white female graduate student who identifies as religious and currently resides in the South said:

[It's important to disclose] especially if you have a personal stake in the work that you're doing...And also, doubly important because I am a member of this group that I am studying. If I'm going to study clergywomen and women preachers, I have to recognize that I am one of those. I am a woman preacher and a clergywoman. And, so to not acknowledge that, I think it would, in some way diminish my own ethos as a scholar, to not just acknowledge I am one of these people of whom I speak.

Scholars who believe positionality disclosure is important generally agree that disclosure can be a form of ethos-building. Amanda goes on to explain that getting her Master's in Divinity was challenging and that effort has allowed her to feel comfortable owning her identity as a clergywoman. Amanda's identity as a clergywoman is a vulnerable position, as many Christian churches reject female preaching, and even those denominations that ordain women do not fully accept them. Not only must Amanda be aware of the indignation she may receive as a clergywoman in the academy, but within the Christian community at large, as well. Moreover, for Amanda to ignore acknowledgement of her identity could invite criticism from readers of her work who may believe she has a reason for hiding something about who she is. For instance, readers could believe Amanda has an agenda for hiding her identity; that she has a potential bias towards her research subjects; or that she is simply not acknowledging her own expertise of the subject matter. Certainly, one reading scholarship about clergywomen could be surprised to learn that the scholar was a clergywoman, if it hadn't been previously disclosed. Such an omission would invite a number of questions and general skepticism of the author's credibility. Wanda Pillow, a scholar of gender studies, who studies reflexivity, or self-reference within one's research, writes that "qualitative researchers using critical, feminist, race-based, or poststructural theories all routinely use reflexivity as a methodological tool to better represent, legitimize, or call into question their data" (176). Reflexivity and positionality disclosure have clear overlaps in that they refer to the researcher's self-reference within their studies and it is evident that such self-reference is a common and valuable research practice in qualitative studies.

The question of a clergywoman writing about other clergywomen and whom has the “right” to study or write about whom invites a regard for the disability rights movement (DRM) and the demand for “Nothing About Us Without Us.” Scholars in a number of fields, but particularly in Rhetoric and Composition, pay special attention to those who speak as members of the identity groups to which they study and what the implications may be for someone to study identity groups to which they do not belong. While the “Nothing About Us Without Us” movement speaks specifically to disability rights oppression, the question of writing about vulnerable and/or minority groups (e.g. people of color, LGBTQIA folks, etc.) when a scholar does not belong to those groups requires special care if one is to pursue them. Similarly, there is a level of expertise and ethos or credibility-building that comes with writing from personal experience.

James Charlton, in *Nothing About Us Without Us* (1998), inspired by a slogan he first encountered in 1993 during an international disability rights conference, writes about disability oppression and empowerment. In his his text, Charlton argues:

“Nothing About Us Without Us” requires people with disabilities to recognize their need to control and take responsibility for their own lives. It also forces political-economic and cultural systems to incorporate people with disabilities into the decision-making process and to recognize that the experiential knowledge of these people is pivotal in making decisions that affect their lives.

Charlton goes on to explain liberatory goal of the disability rights movement (DRM) and that those with disabilities speaking for themselves is a “necessary precedent to liberation” (12). This theoretical understanding can expand to apply beyond disability studies into other classes of oppressed peoples, like the LGBTQAI community, racial/ethnic minorities, and women. To make the argument that people of faith within the university are a minority within the academic space is a claim that I feel uncomfortable making. However, there is still the expectation within

scholarship that if one is writing about a particular faith, then there needs to be some connection there to establish a sense of ethos.

A consideration of “appropriateness” of who should or should not write about whom was a topic that arose from a number of participants. Another participant, Ben, a white male tenured faculty who currently resides in the South, also weighed in on disclosure in his own work on religiously-committed students in the Composition classroom:

I would be very skeptical of my work if I read it from someone who did not identify himself...Even if it was to say, “Just letting you know...I don't believe in any of this. This is just an academic curiosity...” I think it's possible to take it too far, and to naval gaze, and make too much of it, but I think it can be quick...It's just kind of acknowledging, here's who I am in relation to this. Here's how I come at this...I guess I see it as particularly important for the work that I've done with evangelical Christian students, because they're a population of students who get such a bad rap. And so I guess you could say, I have an agenda to rescue the elements of that identity or positionality that are worthwhile and that are good...I think in order to do that, I find it important...to identify myself in relation to them in a way that I think underscores or makes sense why I would be looking at these students not just as problems, but as having a range of rich discursive resources that could be rhetorically beneficial.

Like Amanda, Ben worries that his work would be perceived as hiding something if he weren't to disclose his positionality. When he says, “I would be very skeptical of my work if I read it from someone who did not identify himself,” there is a sense that disclosure is a means of protecting oneself from critics who may use the scholar's proximity to the subject matter as ammunition to weaken their argument or their overall credibility.

Furthermore, Ben emphasizes that disclosure need not take too much time or focus to make a difference. In fact, he says that an overemphasis on disclosure could be considered “naval gazing.” Since Ben typically identifies with the faith identities of his research participants, he sees disclosure as a means of leaning into and protecting potentially vulnerable students. Ben discloses his positionality by enacting discourse of the evangelical Christian community with his recruits. He will also include a sentence or two in his academic books to

explain his methodological strategy of relating to and gaining trust from his research participants. Ben is also in a unique position in which, because he was once in the position of many of his subjects, he can see students of faith bringing “rich discursive resources that could be rhetorically beneficial.”

Liam, a white male tenured professor in the South, like Amanda and Ben, believes a scholar’s disclosure of their positionality towards their research to be of utmost importance:

We're invested, in some ways, based on our experiences, our bodies, our way of being, our worldview, values, whatever those are. So I think, one, the work of articulating positionality makes us more aware of what those various parameters are. And we certainly can rethink them and think critically about them, but I think that work is important. And also I think it, for readers, legitimizes a way of seeing the work that you're doing and builds credibility, certainly in rhetoric and writing studies. And so I would say that you have an ethical obligation to yourself. If we're thinking about writing as relational and what sort of relation are we creating with ourselves through that rhetorical work but then also, how are we trying to build that relationship with readers, I think, is always an important question to be asking. And that move methodologically, I think, is really something at least I would always encourage.

Liam’s scholarship engages the field of Rhetoric and Composition from a number of different angles, but a significant portion of his work focuses on religious rhetoric, some of them historical in nature. Like Ben, Liam specifically sees disclosure as a component part to his research methodology. In addition to “an ethical obligation to yourself,” Liam speaks of disclosure, like many participants, as a means of “legitimizing” and building credibility when he says, “[disclosure] for readers, legitimizes a way of seeing the work that you're doing and builds credibility, certainly in rhetoric and writing studies.” Furthermore, Liam takes a stance similar to Ben’s in which disclosure acts as a mode of relationship-building with one’s research participants and audience. In this sense, ethical research moves beyond ethical research methodology *in medias res*, but beyond the research study itself in relationship formation.

Being up front with one's audience (whether writing as an insider or an outsider) can be considered an act of authenticity which builds trust with the communities about whom one researches or writes, and ultimately can "honor people." Concerning one's positionality disclosure, Felicity explains, "I guess I think it's important to know if you're writing as an insider or an outsider of a certain community. Not that there's a binary, but... it honors the people you're writing about, too." Just as Liam mentions that researchers have an "ethical responsibility to [themselves]" for disclosing, Felicity's responsibility to her research subjects echoes of feminist research methodology as defined by Gesa Kirsch in *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research* when she says that "feminist principles of research include a commitment to...take responsibility for the representation of others in research reports by assessing probable and actual effects on different audiences" (5). Whether acknowledged or not, many respondents reported practicing feminist principles of research, which is likely a result of the vulnerable nature of the identity explored in the research topic.

Felicity goes on to say:

My department super focuses on positionality and how people frame the way that they're part of communities they're researching...I would think it does expand in terms of how people position themselves in any writing, academic writing, depending on their vulnerability level, whatever that is. If I'm writing about African American communities, am I African American? If I'm not, can I write about them? If I am, then there's other dynamics at play. Do I have some kind of bias? ...Identifying as Christian in the academy is a huge risk. I could see how there would be even more at stake in some ways.

While Felicity herself admitted in the pre-interview questionnaire that she was uncertain of her religious and/or spiritual status, she still has a sense that one's level of vulnerability in a given space can determine their hesitance, reluctance, or willingness to disclose their positionality freely. While some scholars of religious rhetoric who identify as religious and/or spiritual may not be part of a universal minority (particularly Christians), many participants expressed

misgivings about being completely open concerning their identities because they feel like they will be judged for being religious and/or spiritual. According to a 2019 study from Pew, half of Americans say that “evangelical Christians suffer at least some discrimination,” with higher numbers for Jews and Muslims in the U.S. While none of my participants used the word “evangelical” to describe themselves, some may very well identify with or fit the definition of an evangelical Christian, as opposed to a mainline Christian,<sup>3</sup> but these distinctions can be difficult to differentiate. And those outside the community of Christianity may not understand the nuance of difference between evangelical and mainline Christians, and could very well make the assumption that everyone falls into the same group. Subjects also often expressed that disclosure can be a positive ethos-building exercise, but it could also invite criticism from those who disbelieve that a person can be both academically rigorous and believe in something that cannot be seen (like a god or spirit). As participants noted throughout the interview process, disclosure and its potential for ethos-building is context-specific. Disclosing one’s identity with research subjects to establish trust, like Jeff Ringer’s approach in *Vernacular Christian Rhetoric and Civil*

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<sup>3</sup> The differences between evangelical and mainline Christianity can be difficult to discern. Evangelical Christians generally uphold the components of Bebbington’s quadrilateral, which is defined by: 1) Biblicism—a regard for the Bible; 2) Crucicentrism—a focus on the atoning work of Christ on the cross; 3) Conversionism—the belief that human beings need to be converted; and 4) Activism—the belief that the gospel needs to be expressed in effort.

Mainline Christians have a more modernist theology in which they do not read the Bible as the inerrant word of God, but as a historical document, which contains God’s word and important truths, but requires interpretation in every age across time and place. Some Mainline Christians believe that there may be other ways to salvation beyond Jesus Christ. Mainline Christians are also less concerned with personal conversion or proselytizing.

Green, John. “Evangelicals v. Mainline Protestants.” *Frontline: The Jesus Factor*. PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/evangelicals/evmain.html>

*Discourse* is certainly ethos-building with those participants. Within academia and the world of publishing, depending on the context, such a disclosure could be ethos-damaging.

Steven, an African-American male assistant professor in the Eastern U.S., for instance, speaks to a “range of disclosures,” in which it may not be necessary for a scholar to reveal their positionality in published work, but may be employed as a means of persuasion in person. When I asked Steven if there were times in his professional life when he revealed his positionality, he said, “I’m sure there have been academic discussions where I’ve brought it [disclosure of his religious background] up, maybe as a way to leverage my ethos on a particular topic.” Similarly, Ben explained that he would have reservations about the credibility of one’s work on faith without a disclosure as someone who is a part or not a part of that faith community. When asked about the importance of a scholar’s disclosure, Ben was quick to respond in the affirmative: “I think it is. Yeah...I would be very skeptical of my work if I read it from someone who did not identify himself.” Conversations about credibility and ethos surrounding a scholar’s disclosure oftentimes dovetailed with a consideration of bias and who gets to talk about whom.

Like many of the people who believe disclosure of positionality is important, Steven added some qualifications to his statement and began by admitting that he didn’t have a strong opinion on the topic. While he believes that a scholar should not have to hide their identity (and has disclosed his own positionality beyond the space of academic publication or presentation), he came to the conclusion in our interview that a scholar’s disclosure is unnecessary. During our conversation he said:

I don't have a strong opinion about it, except that because I haven't [disclosed] in my published scholarship, my default is kind of like, "Well, no, I don't think it's necessary." My mind's not fully made up on that. I guess my arguments for doing so would be that I sometimes wonder if it's more distracting than helpful... When one introduces one's religious identity in that kind of scholarship, I wonder if it then changes the ability of the reader perhaps to really get what the analysis can offer. I'm not sure that it adds to the

analysis. So, I guess that's where I stand right now. I certainly don't believe that one should feel like they have to hide their religious identity in an academic space. My own experience in the past has been that academic spaces can be hostile, not everyone, but I can certainly tell several stories where I had faced hostility or seen hostility towards religious faith. So, I think those of us who have more security, let's say, it's important to show that, "No, academics can be both faithful believers and also good scholars, as well." So, in sum, I guess in my public scholarship, I don't think it's necessary. It's distracting. But I think we should be open about who we are with our fellow scholars.

In subsequent interview questions, Steven commented that he was largely disappointed in panels on religious topics at professional conferences in the field because they lack a strong “methodological or theoretical base.” He also says, in regards to his identity and research, “I’m trying to be intentional. I want to be open. I think it’s important for people to see that you can be both [a scholar and religious] ...it makes me want to work harder as a scholar, right? To show that, no, it is possible to be a person of faith and critically look at a document or debates around the document that is central to that faith.” Even though Steven generally doesn’t believe that a scholar’s disclosure is necessary, he does recognize a desire for people of faith within academia to be recognized as just as rigorous as their nonreligious peers. It also seems as though Steven’s rationale for not disclosing within his own written scholarship or at conferences has to do with ethos in a manner different to previous participants. In admitting one’s positionality, Steven believes one distracts the audience from the central argument of their work. In keeping that positionality close to the chest, a scholar has less of an opportunity to dip into what Steven calls “memoir-ish” territory, in which a scholar focuses more on autobiography without acknowledging theory or methods. Steven’s decision to opt out of explicit disclosure can be read as a move to keep scholarship within the field rigorous, whether one is religious or not.

### **Authenticity or Transparency as Extensions of Ethos**

Two participants credited authenticity or transparency as a motivation for identity disclosure. Both subjects revealed authenticity or transparency to mean “honest,” “realistic,” and

“humanizing.” One of the participants admitted that disclosure can allow readers to accurately gauge a scholar’s identity without making undue assumptions. In some ways, this response can be taken to mean that identity disclosure can allow readers to accurately contextualize a scholar’s work and move on. When a scholar does not identify their positionality, it can sometimes serve as a distraction, as the reader or audience may be fixated on determining whether or not the scholar identifies with the subject matter they research.

Another participant, Erica, a white female graduate student in the South, shared, “I think [disclosure] strikes me as more honest and more realistic. That we have these histories that spark our interest in certain research subjects and perhaps shape how we approach them.” She goes on to say, “sure, it feels weird to get into my positioning but I also think that some positioning is important. That I’m not, [speaking immodulately] “I AM THIS” robotic researcher.” Beyond credibility, Erica’s reasons for disclosure have to do with not coming across as cold and purely objective. As Tom Newkirk argues in *Minds Made for Stories*, when authors write from a narrative perspective and tell stories, the final product is much more engaging for the reader. Arguably, locating oneself within the narrative can act as a means for producing engaging writing and scholars are often drawn to topics they are most passionate about.

Nadia, a white female graduate student in the Western U.S. who identifies as atheist and studies atheist rhetorics, responded in a similar vein as the previous participants in saying:

I think [disclosure] definitely is [important], especially in the scholarship itself or when they're talking about it, just because one, it humanizes it a lot more, and I think that it allows for a lot more honest conversations. Definitely I will try to figure out how to incorporate my positionality into my writing, but I've definitely had times while reading other scholars' work about religion and trying to figure out their positionality and not wanting to make assumptions and wishing they would just be upfront. So I think it would be nice, just because it doesn't really happen that much, at least when talking about religiousness. You just kind of need to make assumptions based off the person's tone. And it would be a nice if that positionality was there to let us know where people are coming from or approaching the scholarship from.

Interestingly, Nadia doesn't seem to consider how a disclosure might hurt her own credibility. In conversations with Josh, who is one of her dissertation committee members, he articulated that he has advised Nadia to be open about her identity because it is already evident based on her warm tone towards atheist subjects. Nadia's response above advances the point that disclosure can be humanizing when the person disclosing is personally invested in and identifies with the subject. Nadia's response, and the responses of others, might be complicated when considering disclosure coming from someone who disidentifies with their research topic. While this research study sought researchers of religious topics who did not identify with the subject matter, I was unable to speak with anyone fitting that qualification.

Understandably, scholars generally pursue lines of inquiry to which they feel passionate and in which they have a personal connection. However, with religious topics, one's personal connection to the subject matter (and the audience's assumption about that connection or lack of connection) can depend on the subject matter. For instance, when scholars write about historical religious figures, an audience may assume the motivation for inquiry has to do with a little known or reclaimed rhetorician who may provide insight into current practice and pedagogy or allows for historical revision. For instance, Brandon, a white male graduate student in the Northeast who identifies as religious and studies historical religious rhetoric, says he doesn't disclose his positionality in his scholarship because it seems less relevant than if he were writing on a more contemporary topic (e.g. evangelical students in the Composition classroom). A scholar's positionality disclosure doesn't necessarily mean it will keep the audience from making assumptions. Depending on the level of disclosure a scholar undertakes, an opportunity to clarify

and/or disidentify as fundamentalist<sup>4</sup>, for instance, is available to them, as many of my participants made known. Many scholars in this study were content to disclose as Christian, but felt the compulsion to clarify that they were not fundamentalist or politically conservative. This impulse, understandably, allows scholars to have more control of the image they project about their identities, though there may still exist assumptions in an audience's mind for which a scholar cannot account.

Nadia's response also shows that she thinks about the issue of disclosure from her own experience in attempting to determine a scholar's positionality while at the same time not making any assumptions about someone. In her answer, Nadia notes that when doing research in which a scholar doesn't disclose their positionality, she has to make an assumption based on tone alone. This response indicates that whether or not scholars intend to explicitly disclose their positionality, their tone may intrinsically suggest a positive or negative leaning. When considering whether or not to disclose, scholars may consider the tone they assume when writing on a given identity. Such a tone could implicitly suggest to readers a sympathy, indifference, or hostility whether intentioned or not. By the same token, if a scholar has reservations about a reader making assumptions about their identity, they may consider the benefits and drawbacks a more explicit disclosure could bring.

The responses from Erica and Nadia both refer to disclosure as "honest" and both appear to be making the assertion that disclosure can be a benefit to readers because it can give them a sense of where the author is coming from. There is an inherent curiosity and need for ethos-establishment for readers to understand an author's background and identity despite Stanley

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<sup>4</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a fundamentalist is "a person who believes in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture in a religion."

Fish's exhortation that "the author is dead." My research suggests that the reasons for these questions of a scholar's religious or nonreligious identity, at least within our field, are threefold: first, people are curious and want to understand how a scholar arrived at their research topic; second, people use the scholar's relation to their research as a metric for their credibility or bias; and third, audiences tend to trust people they perceive to be authentic or transparent researchers.

### **Forming Allies in the Academy**

According to Merriam-Webster, an ally is "one that is associated with another as a helper: a person or group that provides assistance and support in an ongoing effort, activity or struggle—often now used specifically of a person who is not a member of a marginalized or mistreated group but who expresses or gives support to that group." As a direct link to queer theory, a person who calls themselves an *ally* is someone who supports LGBTQIA rights but isn't LGBTQIA themselves. In the context of this study, I will rely on the broader definition of "ally" as a helper, or a person providing assistance in an ongoing effort. Participants in this study seek allies within their (current or previous) church communities and colleagues. On the other hand, participants have also acted as allies to students who may otherwise feel marginalized in the academy. Context here plays an important role. Participants may seek allies within academia because of their perceptions about who makes up that space. In other words, participants have made the push for connections between themselves and others because the context feels appropriate to do so.

Interestingly, when asked if they attended panels on religious topics at professional conferences, many of my participants responded in the affirmative and expressed feelings that the overall experience was positive for them, especially since they were amongst more peers who identify as religious, than they would in other spaces. Liam, a white male tenured professor in

the South (at a religiously-affiliated university) who identifies as religious notes that attending conferences is a means of “forming a community of people who had, kind of, shared interests and were doing similar kinds of work.” Ben, a white male tenured professor in the South who also identifies as religious, also reflected on conferences as a “source of community.” Brandon, a white male graduate student in the Northeast enthusiastically responded to religious panels at professional conferences in saying, “Yes! My people! Kindred souls! People who get it. People who think that there must be a way that religion and rhetoric deal with one another.” And Rob, a white male who graduated with his PhD in spring 2019 who identifies as gay and religious, refers to hearing a room full of academics talk about faith as “refreshing...it’s just nice to hear them acknowledge that faith is a thing that exists, that has real world impact.” He went on to say that in his own experience disclosing during conference presentations that people have approached him with “secretive delight” and approached him with an attitude like, “Oh, are we allowed to talk about this now? Oh my gosh! I’ve been waiting to talk to about this.”

As indicated by the positive response from four of my respondents about the nature of community-building at religiously-focused conference panels, there is a level of “strategic essentialism” at work that might not always be present in other contexts in which it is more difficult to identify the group present. Coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, strategic essentialism refers to a temporary uniting of individuals from a particular identity set for the shared goal of social action (“Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”). Taken further, strategic essentialism acknowledges that not all individuals in an identity set are homogenous, but joining together can allow for a group to act with cohesion. This strategic essentialism allows for scholars, in this case, at scholarly conferences, to “lump” their identity as religious with others who also identify as religious within academia—forming community and a safe

environment in which to consider issues of positionality disclosure. This essentialism is strategic in that a refusal to identify with other religious academics is forgo the opportunity for community. Because scholars in my study seem so comfortable in being open about their identities at conferences on religious topics (assuming religious scholars or sympathetic nonbelieving scholars will be the largest population of attendees), it is likely because they view their audience as sympathetic and/or as one who largely identifies in similar ways. This comfort at religious panels can also provide rationale for why religious scholars may be less likely to disclose their positionality in other environments—they perceive their audience will be less receptive.

Darren, an African-American male graduate student and pastor who resides in the Northeast, spoke to the position of one as an insider or outsider in his interview responses. His research on black activist James Baldwin has taught him that it can be important for one to state their religious positionality, especially in the case of indictments against the church institution. He speaks of his textual expertise in saying:

if a person is raising an indictment against the black church, speaking that one has been a part of the church—and I'm thinking especially of someone like James Baldwin who has a lot of indictments against the black church, but then also states his positionality, stating, 'I'm a black preacher...here are the reasons that I left the church. Here are my indictments against the church.' Things like that are important to state because people keep their religions close.

Again, in this instance, Darren not only gains a sense of ethos amongst his peers by asserting his connection to the black church, but he also sets himself up as an insider towards a secondary audience who might be a part of the black church, but protective and noncritical of the church as an entity. Darren suggests that within the black church at least, one necessitates a sense of ethos and insiderism in order to critique the church institution. In essence, if Darren would like to pursue work relating to the black church, he feels the need to retain allies in that institution.

Brandon, a white male graduate student in the Northeast whose work focuses on historical religious rhetoric, discusses the building of allies within his graduate program by disclosing his positionality as a religious person. He mentions his positionality disclosure coming “pretty naturally,” in that he will lean on religious scholars as examples of rhetoricians in conversations with colleagues, sensibly, considering a large chunk of rhetorical history is founded upon religious rhetors. Brandon will also invite graduate students who he has befriended to hear him preach at his church. Because of these somewhat “organic” instances when Brandon feels that disclosing part of his religious identity (which is tied to his scholarly research), he finds that more often than not people know how he identifies because of his many “natural” and “organic” interactions with faculty, colleagues, and students. Within class discussions, for instance, Brandon shared that “when [my classmates] quote some sort of ardently anti-religious scholar, they'll sort of make sure I'm okay with their eyes and then continue the conversation.” Brandon’s intake of this information indicates the deliberate nature of disclosure on his part, and that forming allies within his particular academic space has granted him a greater sense of freedom when bringing up religious topics in graduate coursework, for instance. Again, while Brandon is a graduate student, he is also a white man, which may allow him a sense that his disclosure will not have a negative impact on his future advancement in ways that women and people of color may not feel is available to them. That said, one of the rewards of Brandon’s disclosure is the building of relationships, or allies, particularly with his colleagues.

Steven, who has notably stated that he believes disclosure within one’s academic work is distracting, does admit that he has disclosed his faith to people who he feels close to. He mentioned that in graduate school, he made a point of saying he was “going to Bible study, [he] was going to church,” so as to not hide that aspect of his identity. He went on to say that the

majority of his dissertation committee knew about his faith, though not all of his professors as a PhD student were aware of his positionality. Finally, he ended his response in saying, “colleagues outside of my own institution, those who know me well, know that I’m a practicing Christian.” In this instance, Steven infers that he is upfront in his disclosure with fellow scholars of religious rhetoric. Because these scholars are more contextually likely to understand one’s disclosure and bringing one’s self into the research, there is provided a more intimate environment than one would have disclosing to the general field at large and the opportunity for the formation of a network of allies.

Ben, a white male tenured professor in the South, makes it a point to disclose his positionality within his scholarly work as a means of establishing trust with his research participants and he explains this rationale within his methodologies. Ben says:

I actually kind of make an attempt in everything I publish about these questions to locate myself, my own positionality, in relation to the work that I'm doing...I try not to grandstand and navel gaze. I don't want it to be like, "Look at me!" But I think because I'm dealing with an identity issue on the part of the participants, the students that I'm talking about working with, I want other scholars to know how I'm looking at it, that this isn't just for me some dispassionate interest, or like, "Look at that crazy phenomenon over there," but it's really something that I take deeply seriously. And so I think sometimes it's only a sentence or two in my book. I think it was much more a part of my methodology...[where] I'm talking a lot about how I position myself in the interviews so as to foster trust. And it wasn't just trying to trick them into it. It was genuine when I was able to identify with [them].

When some participants were asked about disclosure, it was either a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer for them, but with Ben, he tries to make clear that when he discloses, it’s not meant to be something that takes up a lot of space or needlessly waxes on about his own identity while ignoring that of his participants. Ben is adamant that disclosure needn’t take up more than “a sentence or two” out of an entire book’s length of work. Again, part of Ben’s reason for disclosure has to do with building trust with his research participants, so it is necessary for him to discuss that

methodological rationale within his scholarship. If he were to ignore this disclosure, it would likely come across as though he were trying to hide something or that his research is unsound in its practice.

Additionally, Ben's nod to a transparent methodology aligns with the larger field of Rhetoric and Composition, which generally values positionality disclosure. As Gesa Kirsch and Patricia Sullivan write in the introduction to *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research* (1992):

methodological pluralism [or the existence of more than one methodology in the field] is possible if researchers consider several of the important issues raised by feminist scholars. Among these issues are an open discussion of the researcher's agenda (it is never disinterested), the researcher's relation to the subject (the researcher's presence and authority are never neutral), and the purpose of the researcher's questions (they must be grounded in participants' experiences and relevant to participants). (8)

Kirsch and Sullivan's assertion insists that transparency and positionality disclosure are issues of import to feminist scholars, but that they should also be important considerations for everyone conducting research in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. David Bleich, a scholar who researches the study of language in social contexts, in his 1998 *Know and Tell: A Writing Pedagogy of Discourse, Genre, and Membership*, describes self-disclosure as "an emerging scholarly convention" and calls self-disclosure "fundamental to writing and language use as a subject of study" (22). Notably, even in 1998, Bleich's reference to self-disclosure as "emerging" in the field of writing studies suggests that it was not until the past twenty or so years that questions of self-disclosure started to take shape as a convention within the field.

In the specific example of Ben, a researcher's disclosure can grant ethos and sometimes provide not only the audience, but the scholar, with an understanding that ethical research is of utmost importance. And while that disclosure does grant some positives, there can also exist a fear in the leaps that audiences may take and how they might interpret or read into what one's

identity disclosure says about them as a scholar or an up-and-coming scholar. In other words, identity disclosure carries with it the risk to diminish the very ethos that it offers.

Ben has a personal, vested interest in his research topic in that he identifies with those participants of whom he studies. Bias, prejudice, or just generally being too close in proximity to one's research topic can certainly be limiting factors. However, as Ben has attested to, there is something to be said for other scholars understanding that one is approaching their research from a place of investment. Because Ben is a stakeholder in the communities about which he researches and writes, audiences and other scholars get a sense that he is not intending to do harm or unjustly critique the identities of his research participants. An understanding such as this can provide scholars like Ben with a sense of ethos and research integrity, despite his potential biases.

Sabrina, a white female graduate student in the Midwest who identifies as religious and studies cultural rhetorics and religion, cites a particular methodology which prompts her to disclose her positionality within her dissertation work. Disclosure for Sabrina, like all of my research participants, depends upon the subject or topic of her research and the methodological framework she finds herself working within. She says:

Generally, I do disclose this [religious] part of myself. One of the kind of methodologies that I'm relying on are those of cultural rhetorics and those methodologies kind of ask you to position yourself in your research and kind of always be transparent, to some extent, about who you are as a researcher and your connection with your participants. So, definitely in my dissertation work, that has been the case.

Again, Sabrina acknowledges that in the case of her dissertation, positionality disclosure is necessary because her identity is the same or similar to those of her research participants. If her research were to shift focus or she were to change methodological lenses, her call for disclosure may be less relevant than it is for her currently.

As a general rule, my participants expressed that they don't disclose their positionality to their classes. Sabrina corroborates the belief that disclosure of one's positionality is only appropriate on an individual basis. She says:

I think there is some nuance to [disclosure]. We talk a lot about what it means to disclose certain things, especially in the classroom and for students. I tend to do that more on a one-to-one basis with students who maybe think those things are important. I mean, being at an institution in the Midwest, I for instance...encounter a lot of Christian students.

Sabrina doesn't mention a lack of criteria for determining whether or not one should disclose their positionality, but she does start to identify what nuance looks like cases of disclosure. As she notes, when it comes to disclosing her identity to students, it comes down to reading and evaluating her audience. When it seems appropriate to disclose her identity as a religious person to her students, she will do so, but not on a grand scale, in a high-stakes environment like the classroom space in its entirety. Instead, Sabrina deems if disclosure is important or relevant on a case-by-case basis and will only do so individually and if she believes it may be useful for a student to know. Because Sabrina identifies as Christian, she has something in common with a large number of her students. If a student writes about a Christian topic, for instance, it might make sense for Sabrina to discuss her positionality because she can not only claim a sense of ethos, but also establish a sense of trust and mutual understanding with her student. While the first-year writing classroom encourages students to consider who their audience is, the basic truth is that their instructor is generally the final, "authentic" reader. Again, while the ideal context for reading a student's essay is an objective, judgment-free one, every instructor brings their own experiences (and prejudices and bias) to bear.

## **Conclusion**

While participants spoke about their rationale for positionality disclosure, one of the most common reasons to disclose in any academic setting had to do with ethos-building, building

trust, or coming across as authentic. Participants also expressed a desire to form relationships with allies, whether those allies are a part of the church community or academic environment. Furthermore, while participants found value in becoming allies with for their own benefit, they also saw worth in positionality disclosure with students or student research participants, so that these lower-status individuals had access to a supportive community. Questions of the appropriateness of positionality disclosure and a scholar's rationale for doing so also tie in with considerations of intersectionality. When a scholar undertakes the decision to disclose their positionality, they must consider the various intersections of identity that they inhabit when disclosing both inside and outside of the groups to which they identify. As Brandon discusses in this chapter, to be a religious person is not a single, static identity. Being religious while also inhabiting a minority race or sexuality, for instance, has a different meaning than it would for a white, heterosexual man. Intersections of identity inform one another and produce an identity expression different and unique to that individual.

As far as ethos-establishment, participants in my study generally agreed that positionality disclosure, either as an insider or outsider, can be seen as transparent and authentic, contributing to their sense of authority and credibility as a researcher. Being "authentic," beyond ethos-building is viewed as a sign of respect towards the community scholars research. Moreover, it is important to understand why audiences desire to understand a researcher's identity in relation to their religious or nonreligious research: curiosity; as a measure of credibility or bias; and/or as a means of establishing mutual trust through a sense of authenticity and transparency.

Understanding these audience motivations for desiring positionality disclosure, can make it easier to understand why scholars choose to disclose or resist disclosure—and can provide insight for scholars who may be considering a positionality disclosure of their own.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**“All People Who Identify in This Way Aren’t Idiots”: Managing Assumptions and Perceptions in the Academy**

*“faith is not a passive intellectual assent to a set of propositions. It’s a rough and-tumble, no-holds-barred, all-night-long struggle” –Rachel Held Evans, Inspired*

One of the most striking findings in this research study is a sort of defensive disclosure or self-distancing on the part of scholars who feel the need to clarify something about their religious identities. Erica, a white, female graduate student in the South who identifies as religious makes very certain that when identifying herself to others, she makes sure that her audience understands that she’s “not the kind of religious person” who voted for Donald Trump. Ben, a white, male tenured professor in South who identifies as religious, disclosed a similar instance when in graduate school a classmate asked Ben if his research into religiously-committed students was personally connected to his identity and Ben responded, “Yes, but I’m not the kind of evangelical Christian you’re thinking about.” Finally, Liam, a white, male tenured professor in the South who is employed at a religiously-affiliated university, finds value in speaking about his identity as a religious man who pursues meaningful scholarship. He says, “I disclose to say, ‘All people who identify in this way aren't idiots.’ Maybe you do think I'm an idiot after you've read this, I don't know, but... just to say that these identities [as a scholar and a Christian] can co-exist.” Built into these anxieties about how they will be perceived by others is a perception that identity as a person of faith, particularly a Christian, carries with it a set of pre-conceived notions about what that identity entails, as well as an unintended assumption that their audiences have bought into these pre-conceived notions about religious, or Christian, identity.

## **Anticipation and Management of Public Perception**

Some respondents shared experiences in which they chose not to disclose their positionalities, specifically, in the classroom setting because they believed it would make things uncomfortable, not only to themselves, but to their students. In their responses, Nadia, a white, female graduate student in the Western U.S. who identifies as atheist, and Simon, a white male, who identifies as religious and who recently graduated from a school in the Southeast and accepted a tenure-track position in 2019, didn't elaborate as to what exactly about disclosure in this setting might make them uncomfortable, except to say that personal experience had left them with a feeling that the classroom is an inappropriate space, as a whole, to disclose one's faith or nonfaith. Nadia and Simon chose not to go further into what it was about their experiences in the classroom that made them uncomfortable and I sensed an urgency to move forward from them both. These participants' perceptions of discomfort in their positionality disclosures in the classroom can lead to a productive consideration of what discomfort or fear in social settings might reveal. I theorize that discomfort towards disclosure of faith or nonfaith is a result of self-preservation, e.g. fear of losing credibility, authority, respect, relationships or because one feels that the disclosure is distracting or irrelevant.

Nadia, who is comfortable self-disclosing in certain contexts, like conferences, says:

I only ever revealed I was an atheist in a classroom once, and it felt kind of uncomfortable, so now I tend to avoid doing that. Just because there were some things that happened that I don't know [if they] happened because of my coming out as an atheist, it just made me go, eh, probably not a good idea.

Nadia's work focuses on political and religious rhetorics. Again, she did not go into detail about what happened after her disclosure, but whatever it was deterred her from any future disclosures in her classroom. Simon explained that he has never disclosed his positionality because he has found that any discussion of religion within the classroom setting tends to make students

uncomfortable. At the time of our interview, Simon resided in the Southwest and identified as religious. He explains:

I don't think I've ever disclosed my religious affiliation when I'm teaching. I guess I haven't found a situation in which I felt that it would be relevant to give them that information. I find that students, when the subject of religion or any particular religion comes up in the classroom, at least at the schools that I've taught at, it seems to make students uncomfortable. That's something that I would tend to address directly with my students, especially talking about my own religion.

When Simon says that disclosure is something that he “would tend to address directly” with students, he insists that an overall statement to the class is inappropriate because it’s generally not relevant to disclose to an entire class whether one is religious or nonreligious. However, if disclosure *does* become relevant for some reason, it is appropriate to do so “directly,” or on a one-to-one basis, rather than with the class at large in between wrapping up a lesson and assigning homework for the coming class.

While Simon and Nadia have addressed discomfort solely within the classroom setting, other respondents mentioned feelings of discomfort towards positionality disclosure in varying academic contexts. However, these fears or discomforts expressed by other respondents had not led them to a particular conclusion or reaction. For example, Brandon, a white male graduate student who resides in the Northeast and identifies as religious, explained that he has felt afraid of disclosing his positionality but went on to say, “almost never has it hurt me to speak about where I’m from [religiously]...There’s still certain things I think that I’m pretty sure would not go over well or I would have to be really careful about the time and place in which I brought those things up.” Brandon’s work focuses on historical religious rhetorics and he expresses a fear of disclosure based on how he would be perceived by his audience, but concludes that his fears have been unfounded. While some participants practice caution while disclosing their positionalities, and evaluate their audiences and settings, their experiences in disclosing in the

past have not led them to a decision to forgo disclosure entirely in the future, as with Simon and Nadia in the classroom space.

Brandon is an interesting case. He's the only participant who admitted that he will disclose his positionality with students, without fear of what that disclosure could bring. He says:

Pretty much always at the end of a semester, I will tell stories about times when I was working in churches. And realizing the power of words to hurt or help people. And so, by that time, that would be me disclosing, I suppose, because I say I was working as a youth minister at a church. Sometimes it happens earlier than that. Every day when I teach, to take attendance, I ask some sort of question that everyone has to answer. And every semester, I give them a day where the question is they ask me a question. So, they'll ask me any number of things and I'll try to answer as well as I can...when students ask me whether I'm a Christian, I say yes and then I qualify it somehow to skirt any bad connotations. So, I'll say I'm a Christian in the reformed tradition, which I'm reasonably assured they won't really know what that means, but it'll be other than some other bad sort of Christian...

Of course, Brandon frames his disclosure anticipating that to say he is Christian without clarification would be to suggest that he is Christian along with all of the cultural baggage that this vague term can beget, or as Brandon calls it "some other bad sort of Christian." For instance, some general assumptions about religious people, especially Christians, is that they are intolerant and/or ignorant. According to a 2014 Pew study, nearly a third of non-evangelical Christians rated evangelical Christians as "cold" on a thermometer ranging from 0-100, where 0 represents the coldest, most negative rating and 100 represents the warmest, most positive rating ("How Americans Feel About Religious Groups"). The study does not go on to define what the terms "cold" and "warm" represent more specifically, though the connotation of "cold" is certainly not desirable. The "bad connotations" that Brandon says he tries to avoid when identifying himself as Christian, but not "some other bad sort of Christian," likely have something to do with a generally cold public perception in the U.S. towards evangelical Christians. The notion of a "good" versus a "bad" Christian is a matter of difference depending on the community and

audience. For instance, those within the community of Christianity are likely to view themselves more favorably than those outside of the community, a fact also confirmed by the 2014 study by Pew. Brandon's need for clarification suggests that he reads his audience as outside of the Christian community.

Interestingly, some respondents noted that it is easier (and incidentally, less complicated) to explain what they are *not* than it is to explain what they *are*. Erica, for instance, says that she will indicate that she once taught at an evangelical Bible college, but that she herself is not evangelical. She goes on to express that "saying what I'm not serves a very specific social function, which is to reassure people that...I did not vote for Donald Trump, which is an assumption that they may make if they know what some of my academic history is. No, no, no! I'm not that person." Notably, Erica has assumptions about what other people will assume about her, a thread that carries through many of my participants. When Erica says, "I'm not that person," it's reasonable to wonder what kind of person she is referring to. While explicitly she states that it's incredibly important for her to make clear that she isn't one of those Christians who voted for Donald Trump, there seems to be something under the surface that suggests she may be harboring a fear of coming across as the "bad" sort of Christian Brandon refers to above.

Reflecting on Erica's statement about who she *isn't* as opposed to who she *is* can be worth taking note so as to continue breaking with the notion that a Christian, person of faith or nonfaith, ascribe to a one-size-fits-all conception of their faith. Because of their backgrounds and experiences, many of my participants sought the opportunity to set the record straight that everyone is intersectional, even people of faith, and these intersections complicate the understanding of their religious identities and how those identities are expressed in generally secular settings like university spaces.

The way that some participants in my study feel the need to clarify their identities towards their audiences has an interesting connection to Alexander and Gibson's fourth tenet of queer theory as applied to Rhetoric and Composition: "our conceptions of selves as sexualized and gendered beings are intimately connected to ways power is shaped, shifted, and shared between self and other in the social milieu" (3). Reframed to include the conceptions of selves as *religious* in addition to sexualized and gendered beings, this particular tenet has noteworthy applications as it applies to power and status. Religious scholars in my study have expressed feelings of an imbalance of power when it comes to their identities in the academy, with positionality disclosure leaving them vulnerable to stereotyping that can paint them as intolerant, anti-intellectual, and/or politically conservative. Especially in the academic space, tolerance and intellect are values of great importance. Those scholars who may be perceived with suspicions from peers and/or students about their levels of tolerance and intellectual rigor, are at a disadvantage in terms of status. Fears about this type of disadvantage have led some scholars to "reframe" or "reclaim" their identities to bolster their ethos and save professional face.

Ben, a white male tenured professor who currently resides in the South and identifies as religious, in discussions with peers during graduate work, considered disclosure as a means of reframing or reclamation, which in some regards, can tie in with his own personal ethos. Ben's work focuses on evangelical students in the composition classroom. The power and confidence to clearly define oneself, breaking with any stereotypical notions, can be a factor that deepens one's sense of ethos, especially in the academy. Ben recalls a particular experience in which he framed the discussion surrounding his own disclosure according to his own terms:

It was my...first semester...and of course, everyone's question at that point when they meet you is... "what are your research interests?" ...I remember telling [one of my peers], "Oh, I'm interested in the writing of religiously committed students." ...He's like, "Oh, that's so interesting. Is that who you are? ...Are you interested in that because of

your own background?" I said, "Yeah, I am." But I remember whenever I had those conversations trying to...do a dissociative move. It was like, "Yes, I'm interested in this because I identify with the population we would call evangelical Christian, but I'm not the kind of evangelical Christian you're thinking about. Why don't we go get a beer and talk about it?"

Ben goes on to explain that these introductory conversations he had with peers took place surrounding the 2004 presidential election and this particular context made it pertinent for him to explain that he wasn't your "typical" evangelical Christian. Ben's "dissociative move" allowed for an expansion of understanding surrounding Christian identity, breaking with perceptions about Christians as solely "religiously or politically conservative," as well. Interestingly, Ben also says, "I'm not the kind of evangelical Christian you're thinking about." Like Brandon earlier in the chapter, Ben feels the need to clarify his brand of Christianity and, in so doing, assumes that his audience (in this case, his colleague in a graduate course) falls outside of the Christian community. I theorize that the reason for this assumption stems from Ben's reading of his colleague's language and identifying him as someone outside of the Christian discourse community, because he failed to enact the language of that community.

While not specifically confined to interactions with peers, Erica's assertion that she rejects the term "evangelical" as a self-descriptor is similar to Ben's motivations, because Erica is intent on making it known that she didn't vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Of course, the most recent presidential election is much more fraught politically and religiously, than perhaps the 2004 election, but a small subset of religiously-committed people has always attempted to distance themselves from the notion that their religious beliefs and political leanings are inexorably linked.

Ben has used conference experiences to interrupt stereotypical portrayals of people from his faith community by explicitly identifying himself as Christian. Early during his career he said

he was in a conference panel in a room with standing room only and during the Q+A session someone in the audience asked, “Do you know of anyone in the field who identifies as an evangelical Christian?” He reflected on that moment in saying: “there are those moments when I just own it, because I want to trouble everyone's overly simplistic thinking about their immediate knee-jerk reaction to the term “evangelical.” So that was one of those moments where I was like, “I am.” While there is certainly a sense that Ben may be reading his audience as having a narrow view of evangelical Christianity, I posit that Ben’s move is a result of him wanting to a) identify with some in the audience who also identify as evangelical Christian and b) to disrupt the general public’s perception of Christianity. While Ben didn’t go into detail about his interactions during this conference, the fact that his panel was asked, “Do you know of anyone in the field who identifies as an evangelical Christian?” denotes that evangelicals in Rhetoric and Composition were not well known or spoken about at the time.

Through actions such as raising his hand at his conference presentation and disclosing his positionality with his research subjects, Ben has been open about his positionality as an act of reclamation for the “evangelical” identity and as a methodological means of establishing insider status and trust with his research subjects. By disclosing his identity as an evangelical Christian at a professional, academic conference, Ben strategically enables an expansion on what it “means” or what it “looks like” to be an evangelical. Ben goes on to say it wasn’t fear so much driving his desire to disclose his positionality but “just trying to manage the first impression and make sure I didn’t do anything to give people a sense of me that I don’t think I am.”

Ben, like Erica and Brandon, expresses in his response a fear that his identity as a person of faith is stereotyped and not intersectional or complex. Here it is difficult to discern if one’s fear of disclosure is driven by being judged for their beliefs, what people perceive that belief to

mean, or perhaps both. Like Erica and Brandon before him, Ben has a compulsion to explain; it's not enough simply to identify, but to set the record straight. On the other hand, the potential fear of being judged based on their assumptions about outsiders' assumptions, comes into play when participants express their fears, as well. While that fear is certainly valid, there is sometimes an assumption on the part of religious scholars about how they perceive how they will be perceived by others.

Liam, a white male tenured professor who resides in the South and identifies as religious, like Ben has a twofold rationale for his positionality disclosure; an acknowledgement of his potential bias, but also to represent himself as a fully integrated and complex individual. Liam wishes to be seen as both a scholar and a person of faith, not just one or the other. Liam considered his dissertation work in saying:

in the methodology section, I very much make it explicit about my positionality as a Christian, and how that informed the questions that I was asking. And also, acknowledged maybe the kinds of biases or terministic screens that I might be creating as...I looked at the work that I was studying in the archive.

He goes on to expand on how his work has evolved from the dissertation stage and how his rationale for disclosure has similarly developed into a clearer understanding of disclosure as part of what Liam sees as his purpose, or life mission. In his professional publications, Liam says that he thanks God or Jesus in the acknowledgements of articles and books because he is:

acknowledging that the work that I do is something I see as a vocation in the sense of [a] calling, not just professional, but that that is very much intentional...In one sense, [I disclose] to say, 'All people who identify in this way aren't idiots.' Maybe you do think I'm an idiot after you've read this, I don't know, but... just to say that these identities [as a scholar and a Christian] can co-exist.

As noted in Liam's discussion of disclosure in his dissertation, part of his reason for stating his positionality has to do with an obligation to be methodologically upfront with his audience about why he came to his area of research and how his own prejudices may have affected his

interpretation of data. Moving forward, Liam also acknowledges that he wants to be explicit that he sees his professional and spiritual lives coexisting and thus, to eschew recognition of this concurrent identity would be a denial of what Liam views as his genuine self. Because Liam works at a religiously-affiliated university, where faculty are required to belong to a church, the ability for him to express his dual identity as a scholar/person of faith is likely much more integrated than it may be for someone who works at a public or non-religiously affiliated university. Furthermore, there is a sense that being authentic or transparent as a researcher is to invite the opinions of others—some of which may not always be favorable.

### **Self Preservation and Fears of Performativity as Motivators for Nondisclosure**

Two participants agreed that disclosure of positionality can be important, but stated that self preservation could be a reason that they chose not to disclose or why others might not. One subject recalled personal experience feeling judged after disclosing too much about her religious identity. The other subject generally spoke to disclosure posing potential harm to already vulnerable populations.

As Alexander and Gibson assert in their fifth tenet for queer theory in the context of Rhetoric and Composition, “understanding the construction and negotiation of these [queer] identities allows us to resist *normalizing* identity, which robs our differences—and the differences of others—of their critical power” (3). Understanding the complexity of religious identity (and various beliefs that defy stereotyping) can help those in our field avoid stereotyping religious identity because such unique viewpoints are complex and worthwhile. In the context of my research study, some scholars choose not to disclose their positionalities because they’d rather not have to perform one aspect of their identity (e.g. the religious person) or they keep quiet as a means of self preservation. I argue that at least part of the reason some scholars choose

not to disclose their positionalities in certain contexts has to do with a fear that their identities will be viewed through a stereotypical lens and that lens will “rob” scholars of their “differences” and the “critical power” that they bring to the fore.

When speaking with Felicity, a white female graduate student who currently resides in the Midwest and is uncertain of her religious faith, she initially told me she believed there were “degrees to disclosure.” I followed up with her to ask if she believed there ever came a point in research when disclosure became “too much.” She responded in saying:

Too much for whom? For me? For the audience? I think, for myself, yes. I think there can be too much... there's very much something in our society about vulnerability being, kind of, really great and stuff like that, but then I think there's times when I've regretted being vulnerable when I didn't need to. And it just caused harm, or judgment... There's some people who have their ideas and they're gonna judge you...

As this response indicates, Felicity has previously felt “burned” by revealing too much about herself and, moving forward, keeps her identity much more closely held. Certainly, disclosure can be different for men and women, as well as senior scholars with tenure as opposed to emerging scholars in graduate school or entering the tenure-track. Interestingly, Felicity doesn't say that she faced any kind of pushback from the structural frameworks that she was working within (e.g. the institution where she obtained her Master's degree), but she did feel personally affronted and perhaps judged from those surrounding her in the academy.

Josh is a scholar of rhetorics of social change, including queer rights, human rights, atheism, and climate change, who identifies as gay and atheist. He further considers that some scholars may not choose to disclose because they come from vulnerable, historically minority populations and to disclose may open the door for harm towards the scholar. When asked if he believed that it was important for a scholar to disclose their positionality, he said:

I believe that it can be. But I believe that it must remain a choice for the reason of privacy, that we're in this rush... there's a fancy word for it. It's called apotropaic. It's

like when you do... it's almost like the sign of the cross. You do this repetitive thing to ward off evil, right? And I think in our field, acknowledging our positionality has become apotropaic. Very uncritical and very, like, I have to pause here to acknowledge that I am a horrible person, and I don't know anything about this, and it's disrespectful for me to even think about it, but nonetheless I'm going to try. And it's... you get what people are doing. They're trying to acknowledge that direct experience with something matters. I really admire that. I really believe in that. But I don't think compulsory positionality statements are good. And I think they can in fact be kind of harmful, and they can cross a line into requiring people to reveal things they don't want to reveal.

As many participants noted, disclosure can be important but it must be critical, nuanced, and shouldn't be compulsory. Interestingly, Josh says that he believes disclosure within our field has become "apotropaic," or a ritual to subvert evil influence, while other participants made known that their own hesitancy for disclosure came from the notion that not many people in the field explicitly disclose their positionalities. Josh's response suggests that, in his mind, disclosure has become an uncritical exercise in which scholars reveal their identities as a way to potentially keep critics at bay who may question one's closeness to the subject matter. He goes on to examine what he sees to be the reason for disclosure when one isn't close to the subject matter when he provided the mock response: "I don't know anything about this, and it's disrespectful for me to even think about it, but nonetheless I'm going to try." Josh shared with me that he received pushback from a journal who assumed that he was writing about a group outside of his own community and strongly recommended that he disclose his positionality in his article. I infer that Josh's reason for his responses has to do with his experience being criticized for writing about a community outside of his own identity and also when writing about his own identity because he comes from a vulnerable identity group and doesn't believe scholars should be forced to disclose unless they so choose.

Three participants spoke specifically to performativity playing a role in how and why scholars choose to disclose their positionality. One subject chooses not disclose unless directly

asked because he believes people will act differently based on who they perceive him to be. Evoking Josh from the previous section, who believes that compulsory disclosure can harm vulnerable populations, he goes on to say one way this harm can manifest itself is through an invasion of privacy in which these vulnerable populations are constantly having to think about their identities or intersectionalities. Finally, one subject notes that objectivity is impossible in research and that to pretend otherwise is inauthentic.

Darren, an African American pastor and PhD student in the Northeast reflected about whether or not disclosure of one's positionality is important:

In some cases, yes. And in some cases, not so much...people see people who are religious differently. I realize that sometimes people expect something different from me, behavior-wise or thought-wise or whatever-wise. It just sort of happens. They behave differently when I acknowledge that I'm a preacher... Things like that, I think, are important to state because people keep their religions close. And if you attack a religion, sometimes people don't necessarily respond kindly to that.

Darren is in a unique position to respond to this question because of his dual role as a pastor and graduate student within the academy. He is able to comment not only from a secular, but a religious perspective, as well. Like Felicity, many of Darren's reservations about identity disclosure stem from a perceived understanding that he will be viewed differently (whether positively or negatively). Felicity's apprehensions derive from previous experience of feeling as though she were perceived negatively after revealing a vulnerable aspect of her identity, particularly relating to her religious identification or her background of being raised in an evangelical family. Darren, on the other hand, views disclosure on his part has the potential for interrupting genuine interactions with people. He believes that people who know him as a pastor or as a religious person will act differently around him or will expect him to act differently. From this viewpoint, there is a level of performativity at play from both Darren and those with whom he interacts. Tom Newkirk writes that the "key feature of...presentations [of self] is their

selectivity; every act of self-presentation involves the withholding of information that might undermine the idealized impression the performer wants to convey” (*Performance of Self* 3). In this instance, Darren withholds his identity as a pastor unless asked because he is afraid of how people will, in turn, perform or act differently around him than if he weren’t a pastor.

Darren goes on to explain that:

as a teacher, I rarely mention [my positionality] unless a student asks. So, if a student asks me, "Are you affiliated with the church?" I would usually give a vague response and say, "Yes, I go to church." If they were to ask me directly, "Are you a preacher or a minister?" then I would definitely respond with a yes for that.

Something of note here is the tension between the secular and the sacred. Darren was not specific as to the denomination for which he preaches, but he did say he considers himself to be “a minister of the Gospel [of Jesus Christ].” There is certainly an assumption that a “man of the cloth” should behave in a certain way, conjuring fears of forced performativity. However, an audience to Darren doesn’t have the full set of information required to make any clear assumptions or judgment calls into how Darren should express himself, nor do they necessarily need to know that information. Responses such as these call into question what outsiders determine people of a certain identity *should* disclose. Many scholars can relate to reading a piece of academic writing, particularly on identity, and wondering whether the author relates to their subject matter. While some may have a preference that a scholar disclose their positionality, risks of disclosure as noted by scholars in this chapter and the previous one, provide insight into why disclosure doesn’t always suit a subject or a scholar. As Darren makes evident in his response, he isn’t trying to hide anything about who he is, but he isn’t going to freely offer that information, either.

Steven experienced a response similar to Darren. He said:

in the classroom with my students, for example, I don't necessarily always disclose. Although, several students that I've developed relationships with know that I'm a practicing Christian.

Again, like Darren, Steven isn't trying to be devious or withhold an essential truth about himself, but he also doesn't feel the need to put the fact that he is Christian on display. Like many of the participants above, Steven doesn't feel that disclosure in the classroom is compulsory, but he does find value in the one-on-one relationships that can be formed with students that can come from disclosing his faith.

Understandably, it can be exhausting to play a role that one feels they must perform. Josh, a male, tenure-track professor who identifies as gay and atheist, comments on this phenomenon in saying, "Don't people have a right to spend time with themselves without thinking about those [inventories of one's diversity]? Like, without those being activated all the time constantly." This insight is worth noting because while some scholars inhabit spaces of diverse identity, but they may not want to evoke or engage with those identities at all times. In some ways, these scholars may want to simply *exist* and not worry about how they are being perceived within a religious or secular context and whether or not their words and actions conform to the perceived set of ideals for the identity groups they inhabit.

Noted as a reason in favor of a scholar's disclosure, a number of scholars spoke to human nature and a lack of true objectivity in one's pursuit of scholarship. Brandon specifically addresses objectivity in saying:

I do like the move to stop pretending that objectivity is possible. I believe fairness in perspective is possible, but I don't think that objectivity is possible, which is something that people are very careful about nowadays, which I love. However, they tend to be super careful when it comes to religion. Like I said, there's just as much bearing on what you think of, say a Muslim writer in the 12th century if I'm a Christian or a secular humanist or a Buddhist. All that stuff plays. And furthermore, I think that what people say about themselves isn't always the best marker of who they are.

As Erving Goffman says in his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), “the ‘true’ or ‘real’ attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only directly, through his [her, or their] avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior” (2). If taken to be true, this means that how people self-identify is only one piece of a larger identity-puzzle. Beyond his remarks about the impossibility of any unadulterated objectivity in one’s research, Brandon also makes the notable remark that “what people say about themselves isn’t always the best marker of who they are.” When asking scholars to identify themselves demographically, one may get closer to the heart of one’s identity, but at the same time, someone could simply be paying lip service to who they believe they should be or who they’ve always been, even if that identity has shifted over the years. Here, there may be a difference in self-identification and belief. One’s decision not to disclose could be an issue of privacy, among other valid reasons.

Emily Cope and Jeff Ringer published a study called “Coming to (Troubled) Terms: Methodology, Positionality, and the Problem of Defining ‘Evangelical Christian’” in 2015’s *Mapping Christian Rhetorics* considering the issues of terminology and the labels attached to research subjects. On the one hand, there is an ethical obligation for the researcher to be precise and descriptive in their naming of identity groups (Cope & Ringer 118) so that readers have a clear understanding of who is being discussed. Simultaneously, it is ethically egregious to move forward naming or sorting an individual into a group in which they do not identify. Within their study, Cope recruited participants not by using the term evangelical but instead evoking more neutral terminology like faith. Cope keenly understood that the term “evangelical” was likely to garner negative responses and, perhaps, a lack of participants. Once participants agreed to meet

with Cope, she explained how she was defining the term “evangelical,” for the purposes of easy classification and 9 of 10 participants agreed to be defined as evangelical.<sup>5</sup>

Ringer conducted a separate study from Cope in which he utilized *emic terms*—terms individuals use themselves—as opposed to *etic terms*, or ones chosen by researchers (Cope & Ringer 104). Initially, Ringer asked his participants a set of questions “to ensure that participants met Bebbington’s<sup>6</sup> definition of evangelical” (114). He quickly abandoned this approach as he realized that “it would have locked participants into a set of responses and essentialize a definition of *evangelical* (author’s own emphasis) that may not align with vernacular forms of faith” (114). While questions of one’s self identification and how researchers choose to portray those identifications in their work are certainly not black and white, having candid discussions with research subjects can help mitigate ethical concerns of misrepresentation. While a deeper discussion concerning this topic may be beyond this study, I believe it is worth mentioning because labels may help researchers understand one’s identity better, but it may not tell the whole story. In cases such as these, the researcher may need to explore how identity groups define themselves, whether or not a subject fits that definition, and what a tension in self-identification and demographic definitional standards could mean. Furthermore, when scholars

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<sup>5</sup> There is a discrepancy between the literal definition of “evangelical” and the connotations surrounding the term. For instance, like those in the Cope & Ringer study, some may fit the standard definition of an evangelical without realizing it or do not affiliate with the term because of its negative public connotation.

<sup>6</sup> Bebbington’s quadrilateral, as outlined in *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989) defines an evangelical as someone who possesses the four following characteristics:

1. Biblicism—a particular regard for the Bible
2. Crucicentrism—a focus on the atoning work of Christ on the cross
3. Conversionism—a belief that human beings need to be converted
4. Activism—a belief that the gospel needs to be expressed in effort

make positionality disclosures, it may be useful for them to define what *they* mean by the term to which they identify (e.g. evangelical, spiritual).

A scholar's status as an insider versus an outsider can lead to questions concerning one's right to speak or write on behalf of others. Josh strongly believes that one needn't be part of a certain identity group to write about that group, as long as one takes on the topic with care:

One of the things I have encountered in my research that I dislike is what sociologist Rogers Brubaker [calls] epistemological insiderism<sup>7</sup>, which is the idea that only people who are members of a group may write about that group. Which has some pretty problematic implications. One being that those members of that group have to write about it, and they might not want to. They may want to do other things. It also means that there are some groups we wouldn't be able to study. White supremacist groups, or stuff like that.

Josh maintains that identity groups should only disclose their positionalities when they want to (not when they feel coerced to do so), because they may desire to remain private and to protect a vulnerable aspect of their identity that others could attack. In this sense, Josh suggests that “outsiders” should be able to write about identity groups outside of their own as a means of support for those who may not yet be ready to speak. One cannot presume to speak for another group, but as Josh explains in the quote above, they must vet their writing with members of the community of which they are speaking. Josh goes on to say:

I don't want this to be about my positionality. I don't want to do that thing, where I do a paragraph declaiming how I am this or that way. I feel like that drive toward positionality, the acknowledgment of it, is on the one hand very admirable, and on the other hand may be a breach of privacy. People have a right not to talk about their gender identity, their sexuality, their ethnic identity. If they want to. That is not something we're

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<sup>7</sup> Brubaker defines “epistemological insiderism” as “the belief that identity qualifies or disqualifies one from writing with legitimacy and authority about a particular topic...Epistemological insiderism not only stakes out certain domains as belonging to persons with certain identities; it also risks boxing persons with those identities into specific domains. It risks conveying the patronizing and offensive expectation that members of racial and ethnic minorities will focus their scholarship on race and ethnicity.” – “The Uproar Over ‘Transracialism.’” *The New York Times*, 18 May 2017.

allowed to demand from people. So I didn't mention it [his identity as a gay man within a published, academic article].

During our conversation, Josh explained that a friend of his called him an "idiot" for not disclosing his positionality in the article he submitted, but Josh maintains that nondisclosure was a rhetorical move on his part because he believes one shouldn't be forced into disclosing unless someone wants to and it's relevant.

Rob, a white male who graduated with his PhD in spring 2019 and who also identifies as gay and religious, faced similar pushback as Josh during conference presentations of a dissertation chapter about Megawati, the first woman president of Indonesia. He says, "I had somebody ask me the question afterward, basically, why are you as a white man who is not from Indonesia doing this work? And even granted that I had lived in Indonesia for fifteen years, still in this questioner's mind, that kind of work should really fittingly only be done by someone with greater proximity [to the subject matter]." In his dissertation, Rob distinctly discloses that he is writing about a Muslim, Indonesian woman while personally identifying as a Christian man. He explains, "I made a statement about my own positionality in a variety of regards, including both faith and sexuality, and how those experiences kind of shaped the interests that I had in the questions I was asking in the dissertation about the liquid nature of identity. So in the dissertation context, it's clear that I'm talking about Muslim Americans as somebody who doesn't identify as one." He remarks that there was contention between his dissertation committee about whether his disclosure is necessary. One faculty member said Rob's own disclosure takes away the focus from the subject matter and is unnecessary and according to Rob, saying, "This isn't about you. Don't make this about you." A statement such as this is thought-provoking because it seems as though scholars never have a clear sense of when disclosure will be deemed appropriate by their audiences, elevating one's risk to do so. Furthermore, there is a history of white saviors acting

“on behalf” of nonwhite people for self-serving purposes, further complicating the risk of someone like Rob writing about a nonwhite woman, even if for seemingly neutral purposes.

Brandon believes a scholar should be cautious and thoughtful when disclosing their positionality because “there's no end to disclosing standpoints, you know? I could disclose a thousand standpoints. I was born in Texas. I went to school in Arkansas. I'm a male. I'm white. A Christian. So, I don't know how much it gives. I suppose it gives something. I don't know how much it would give for me to say I'm a Christian. That doesn't necessarily tell you a ton.” For context, Brandon writes about historical religious rhetoric and admitted that writing about history in which one’s identity is somewhat removed can change the urgency to disclose one’s positionality. According to Brandon, “the fact that I'm studying historical work, right now at least, does make those opportunities or decision points [to disclose] less frequent...So yeah, I do think that helps. Or not helps, but makes it less necessary.” He also contends that the perspective one comes from may be more relevant in some situations than in others:

When [someone] says he's a Christian as a black man, it's a totally different message than when I disclose that I'm a Christian as a white man. And a woman would be the same way. And someone who's gay would be the same way. It just wouldn't always mean the same thing...there's just as much bearing on what you think of, say a Muslim writer in the 12th century if I'm a Christian or a secular humanist or a Buddhist. All that stuff [matters].

Taking together what Josh, Rob, and Brandon have said, it can be difficult discern when it’s appropriate for a scholar to disclose their positionality, as some audiences will seek a scholar’s disclosure for clarity’s sake and others will find it distracting. As many interviewees have noted previously, there is no clear “criteria” on the appropriateness of one’s disclosure.

## **Self-Distancing in Print: Scholars Indirectly Disclose or Disidentify in Academic Publications**

Three scholars who make an indirect disclosure of their identities in relation to their research subjects are Thomas Deans, Emily Murphy Cope, and Roxanne Mountford. Each of these scholars mention a relation, background, or experience attending religious services that indicate a level of authority about the topics they research, though it isn't made absolutely explicit whether or not these scholars still practice within a faith tradition from their published work alone. Sharon Crowley is the only scholar examined who made an outright disidentification from her scholarly research topic.

Thomas Deans, in *Mapping Christian Rhetorics* (2015), writes a chapter entitled "Sacred Texts, Secular Classrooms, and the Teaching of Theory." In this text, he discusses various approaches to addressing religion in the academic classroom setting. Deans writes:

I often share the anecdote of being at Catholic Mass a day after returning from an academic conference where I had delivered a paper analyzing the strands of writing, rhetoric, and literacy in John 7:53-8:11. By coincidence, that was also the gospel reading that Sunday...over the years I've heard a range of quite different homilies. (95-6)

Deans' admission about the sharing of an anecdote with his class suggests a firm footing in the Catholic tradition. He goes on to say, "I emphasize that we all abide in overlapping discourse communities, and occasionally those bump up against each other in revealing ways" (95).

Whether his students had a sense of him as a man of faith or not, the seed appears to be planted in his acknowledgment that his academic and faith identities aligned in recent history.

Furthermore, in publishing this chapter in a collection further underlines that Deans is not squeamish about other scholars and colleagues knowing that he acknowledges his own faith identity within his classroom. It is also worth noting that Deans says "over the years I've heard a range of quite different homilies," indicating not only a firm foundation in the Catholic faith, but

in its discourse, as well (faiths have different names for a talk on a religious moral or subject, in this case, the homily).

Interestingly, Deans refers to Chris Anderson, the professor who donned his vestments in class, discussed in chapter 4. In response, Deans says:

Yet his conflation of literary and Christian interpretive habits, while intriguing, is not an angle I wish to pursue. I am also hesitant to adopt his degree of self-disclosure as a teaching strategy, not only because it cuts against my personal demeanor but also because I want the sacred text itself, not the teacher, to do the disrupting. (89)

Deans and Anderson are both professors at secular universities, UConn and Oregon State, respectively. As noted by Deans, Anderson's decision to enter the university space wearing tremendously visible religiously-symbolic clothing is perhaps on the extreme end of one's capacity for disclosure. Included in Deans' rationale for not choosing to pursue Anderson's "degree of self-disclosure" has to do with his personal demeanor as well as his desire for "the sacred text itself, not the teacher, to do the disrupting" (89). However, while Deans' degree of self-disclosure is less extreme than Anderson's there is still a degree of disclosure that he undertakes with his students that isn't simply allowing "the sacred text" to speak for itself. Deans' mention of homily subjects to his students is an anecdote that doesn't merely allow for an objective reading of a sacred text. This is not to say that Deans' anecdote isn't pedagogically beneficial for other reasons, but he seems to have a blind spot in terms of his own role in persuading how students might read a religious text in light of his disclosure.

Emily Murphy Cope, in a co-authored chapter with Jeffrey M. Ringer in *Mapping Christian Rhetorics* (2014) called "Coming to (Troubled) Terms: Methodology, Positionality, and the Problem of Defining 'Evangelical Christian'" shares methodological decisions of how to identify with research participants. In the piece Cope and Ringer write:

Because we both claim evangelical Christianity as part of our heritage, we had to consider our own positionality in relation to *evangelical* and the participants we hoped to recruit...Because we are insiders...our awareness...prompted us to research this population empirically. Our insider status also helped us to identify (with) other evangelicals, largely because we are able to “speak the same language” and foster trust with potential participants, which aids significantly in participant recruitment. (103)

As discussed in the previous section, Jeffrey M. Ringer has made clear in subsequent publications, he is still a current and practicing member of a faith community. Cope, on the other hand, whose language is paired here with Ringer’s is a bit less direct in terms of her current religious commitments (if any at all). Notable for its indirect identification are phrases like “we both claim evangelical Christianity as a part of our heritage,” “we are insiders,” and “our insider status” suggest a vast familiarity with the evangelical population, but does not unabashedly reveal a present commitment. Folks can have a religious heritage and have an “insider status,” as long as they are able to relate and engage in the discourse of the given community without having to actively engage in a faith. While the implication that Cope is likely a participating member of a faith community, there is still a degree of uncertainty from the text provided in this example.

Roxanne Mountford examines the role of women preachers in the American Protestant church throughout history in her 2005 *The Gendered Pulpit*. In the introduction to her text, Mountford reveals:

My childhood was filled with preaching. As the daughter of the choir director at a small evangelical church, a part-time job my father held until I was twelve years old, I was present for Sunday school, Sunday morning service, Sunday evening service, and Wednesday evening prayer meeting. (1)

She goes on to talk about her favorite hymn and summer revivals where she “accepted Jesus into [her] heart once again,” (2) suggesting that this acceptance was something she had done many

times before and was well acquainted with. Mountford summarizes her past experience in the church in saying:

Like many evangelically-trained academics, I left much of my forbidding religious upbringing at the front door of the university, applying the hermeneutics skills I learned in Sunday school to graduate studies...It wasn't until well onto my comprehensive exams, with rhetoric my chosen field, that I realized there was something in my background that wanted to be studied. (1-2)

A few pages later, Mountford casually mentions her "eighteen years I spent in church," (4) which, when taken altogether suggests that Mountford has quite an established background in the Christian evangelical tradition, but that she is no longer practicing. A reader could very easily make the cognitive leap that Mountford grew up in the Protestant church and left it behind when she entered college at eighteen years old.

Whether Mountford is still involved in the religious traditions of her youth, the disclosure about her past provides her with a sense of authority and ethos. The impression here is that Mountford might not still be practicing in the church, but she learned all she needed to know while she was there. Her history is enough to convince readers that she is knowledgeable about the research she is pursuing and provides explanation for what interested her in this topic in the first place. Unlike the previous scholars in this section, Mountford certainly sets herself up with much more distance from her research subject.

Sharon Crowley's 2006 *Toward a Civil Discourse* is the only instance of an outright disidentification from a scholar towards their research topic encountered in this textual analysis. In her book, Crowley considers the influence of Christian fundamentalism on American discourse. In the preface to her scholarship, she asserts:

I cannot accept either the principles or the specific teachings of apocalyptic discourse, and the more I study apocolyptism, the more intense becomes my desire not only to dissent from it but to warn others of the ideological dangers it poses to democracy. I raise

this point here because my status as an outsider to conservative religious thought brings to the fore the central issues raised in this book. (ix)

Crowley's disidentification is cemented by her use of terminology like "cannot," dissent," and "outsider." As opposed to many of the scholars who affiliate with or openly identify with the faith groups they study, Crowley's subject matter is a small, but overwhelmingly controversial subset of the general religious population in the United States. According to Pew's "Religious Landscape Study," 25.4% of Americans identify as evangelical Christian. While most fundamentalists are evangelical, not all (nor even the majority) of evangelicals are fundamentalist. In fact, it's difficult to discern just how many in the U.S. identify as fundamentalist and/or apocalyptic.<sup>8</sup> Because the term 'fundamentalism' carries with it a number of negative connotations, many who are fundamental in their beliefs may choose to eschew the descriptive terminology. Crowley recognizes the negative implications of fundamentalist, apocalyptic, and/or conservative religious thought and hence uses the opportunity of her preface to unmistakably dissociate herself from the baggage those terms carry.

## **Conclusion**

While evidence is lacking in terms of how negative perceptions of religious people originate, it is likely that nonreligious people and religious people alike have had negative experiences with religious people that have colored their perceptions of the group as a whole. Media portrayals of religious people as conservative and/or discriminatory can make it difficult

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<sup>8</sup> A fundamentalist is a person who believes in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture in a religion. An evangelical denotes a tradition within Protestant Christianity, specifically, emphasizing the authority of the Bible, personal conversion, and the doctrine of salvation by faith in the Atonement. An apocalypticist believes that the end of the world is imminent, perhaps even in one's own lifetime. Hence, a person need not be a Protestant Christian to be a fundamentalist. Many fundamentalists are apocalypticist, but not all evangelicals are. —*Oxford English Dictionary*

for a nuanced, layered, and complex identity to emerge. Scholars who fear being lumped into a very black and white image of what it means to be religious are likely to make moves to disrupt a narrative that may paint religious people as one in the same.

As demonstrated in this chapter, some scholars may own up to their identities as religious people, but will clarify and define what that means to them, so as to alleviate any confusion or misconceptions that they fit the bill of stereotypically conservative and/or discriminatory people. Others will self-distance from their religious backgrounds and/or completely disaffiliate from their research subjects. The published scholars in this chapter either spoke vaguely about their religious commitments (as past experiences) or explicitly expressed their identity as wholly different from that of their research subjects, rhetorical moves that nod to a distancing of the scholar from the religious commitments of their research subjects (whether intentionally or not). In the classroom, specifically, scholars consistently reported that positionality disclosure is inappropriate unless one-on-one with a student who would pedagogically or relationally benefit from such a disclosure. As for academic contexts outside of the classroom, some scholars speak to the assumptions they believe their audiences may have of them, which, depending upon the context, could be a result of scholars analyzing the discourse of their audience and determining them to be outsiders from their religious communities.

Tied in with a scholar's notion to manage assumptions and perceptions in the academy, is a consideration of self-preservation and fears of having to perform the role of a "religious person" as motivators for scholars who choose not to disclose their positionalities or who only do so on a limited basis. Further, worth consideration of managing assumptions and perceptions in the academy, is the fact that many participants found it relevant to consider the ethics and appropriateness or who gets to write about whom in a discussion about positionality disclosure.

This discussion of appropriateness is a piece in the puzzle towards understanding why some scholars do feel the need to disclose their positionalities towards their research—because doing so indicates their purpose and vested interest to their audiences. In other words, admitting one’s identity as a religious person studying religious topics marks them as someone not seeking to speak on behalf of a community of which they are not a part, but rather to build trust with that community and gain ethos as someone intimately aware of the discourse community about which they study and speak.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Afterword: A Self-Disclosure**

The process of writing this dissertation has shaped my own thoughts and opinions about positionality disclosure. It wasn't until close to the end of my writing process that I decided to disclose in some shape or form. But I toyed with questions, as I began to write about disclosure, like: Is it appropriate for me to self-disclose in a dissertation about the positionalities of others? Or because I'm implicated in the group of which I've studied (a scholar of religious topics, who also identifies as religious), would it be remiss for me to ignore such a disclosure? It was always my intention to keep my own positionality disclosure out of the body of the dissertation because I didn't want my audience to constantly be comparing the author's experience and disclosure with that of my participants. However, given the intimate nature of this study, I have come to the conclusion that my own positionality disclosure is in order. Like my participants, unwittingly, I enact coming out discourse to describe my experience of self-disclosure in academia.

In May 2019, I interviewed Felicity, a white graduate student in the Midwest who grew up religious but is uncertain about her faith now. During this interview, Felicity turned some of my questions back on me and asked me about my own experiences as a researcher of a religious-based topic. She turned toward my project and my role as a researcher with regards to this study. In doing so, I found myself opening up a lot more than I imagined, which provided insight into my own feelings about positionality disclosure. Included below is a transcript sample of the discussion Felicity and I had demonstrating the fluid, complicated nature of positionality disclosure. During our interview, I speak specifically to disclosure within my own dissertation, an incredibly unique context, further modeling the importance of context in each consideration of disclosure:

**Lauren:** I've kind of been playing around with writing my introduction and just thinking about, "Oh, well, should I disclose my positionality on this project about peoples' positionalities?"

**Felicity:** That's awesome.

**Lauren:** So now I'm just like blowing my own mind. \*laughs\* I don't really know what to do because I realize that I struggled with this a lot, because in my Master's program, it felt to me that I was in a half-hostile environment. And so I was like, "I wanna prove to myself that I'm smart and if they find out this other part of me about my faith, then they won't think I'm smart and so I just completely buried it. And then that felt completely disingenuous and I felt like I wasn't being myself. And so when I started my PhD program, I think I slowly started "coming out," in a way, because I just felt like I'm not doing justice to all aspects of my identity and that felt like there was a hole, you know? It felt like there was something missing. Obviously, I don't feel 100% myself in the academy, because there's some elements of my faith that I'm not just going to be like, "Well, let's pray, guys." And similarly, in the church, I think, there are some things that I still haven't come to terms with that I don't feel comfortable...I wouldn't feel comfortable at all disclosing my political leanings in the church.

**Felicity:** Yeah, really good point. It goes both ways.

**Lauren:** That is a question that I'm still working on. Still struggling through.

**Felicity:** I would even be intrigued to read that. The struggle of that. That's fascinating. Think about the layers of that.

**Lauren:** Yeah, there's a part of me that's like, "Would it be too crazy to just not say it and then reveal it at the end?" I don't know. There's something rhetorical there of like, "Were you thinking about this the whole time?"

**Felicity:** I love that. What did you assume about me?

**Lauren:** Exactly.

Going through the process of disclosing with Felicity, along with three other participants, allowed me to come to the conclusion that positionality disclosure can be a form of self-healing. I didn't disclose my own positionality to the majority of my research subjects because it didn't feel pertinent or relevant at the time. However, there were certain instances when subjects turned my questions back on me that very naturally led to my disclosure. I was afraid of "naval-gazing," to borrow a term from Ben, and making the study too much about me and not enough about what

other people had to say. I was afraid of pushback like Rob's dissertation chair member who told him to "stop making his research about him" and because of my introverted personality, I tend to shy away from drawing too much undue attention to myself. However, as displayed in my conversation with Felicity, there are certain contexts you can't account for—I couldn't have anticipated that my own self-disclosure would arise from participants turning my questions back on me or how cathartic having the space to answer those questions was for me as a researcher and a person of faith.

Certainly, feelings of self-healing may not resonate with all scholars, particularly those who inhabit multiple intersections of oppression. That said, for myself personally, there is something freeing about being able to put my own experience into words and to find empathy in the responses of others. As suggested in chapter 4, self-disclosure can promote close relationships (Mikulincer and Nachson) and encourages reciprocity. According to professor of Psychology and Communication, Lynn Miller, and professor of Psychological Sciences, David Kenny, "as one individual discloses more intimate information, [their] partner...also discloses more information" (713). An unacknowledged benefit of my self-disclosure with Felicity is a sense of comfort for her to open up and share more than she may have had I not disclosed, which I experienced with Ben and Liam, the other participants I disclosed to, as well.

Returning to the concept of self-healing, I don't mean to suggest that before disclosure, I experienced harm from my colleagues in academia. Instead, I mean to highlight my own fears and insecurities and that self-disclosure for me allowed for me to: experience a more integrated feeling of my own self-identity; form allies in the subfield of religious rhetorics and in Rhetoric and Composition in general; as well as experience a renewed sense of self confidence and a strengthening of my self image.

It wasn't until my PhD program that I felt comfortable admitting that I was a Christian to my professors, colleagues, and peers. As an undergraduate, I questioned my faith. Did I just believe in some old man in the sky because I had been told to all my life? I concluded a world without God, for me, was one that I couldn't make sense of. In my Master's program, I had come to terms with my faith, but still wasn't comfortable admitting it. I was amongst a group of peers, about half of whom were confidently sure that no gods existed. Though our world views differed, I respected these peers and understood their reasoning for a lack of god. In fact, their reasoning made a whole lot more sense to me than my own notion that evidence wasn't necessary to believe in an unquantifiable, celestial presence. Moreover, far-right, evangelical views on abortion, same sex unions, and transgender rights are often conflated with Christianity as a whole. Because of my faith, I felt that I might be perceived by my peers and professors as intolerant and for lack of a better term, stupid. So, I kept quiet. Even though I experienced fears and insecurities about what others thought of me, I never experienced any persecution.

Along with the fears and trepidations I felt in expressing myself as a person of faith amongst my peers, I also encountered challenges with how to present myself as a teacher. In my first year of teaching at a large, public state university in the South, I was a 23-year-old Master's student. I was teaching the second (intermediate) part of a yearlong first-year writing course when a student (who I will call Frank) who had taken the first half of the course with me, and who had succeeded, asked to write a persuasive research essay in which he proved that the Old Testament proved the New Testament right. I tried to dissuade him away from the topic, but he was adamant that he had to write on this topic. His excitement was palpable. Because the student had gotten A's on his essays leading up to this point, I gave him a yellow light to move forward but told him he was going to have to bring in peer-reviewed sources from religious journals or

elsewhere to make his case convincing. I told him, “You can’t just use the Bible as your sole piece of evidence.” And he agreed.

Draft after draft, conference after conference, Frank kept bringing me drafts with no peer-reviewed sources. I wrestled with whether or not to tell Frank that I was a Christian, so as to sympathize with him and let him know I wasn’t being critical of his work because of the subject matter. Ultimately, I didn’t say anything. As a young woman, I had already experienced students testing my authority, and I felt it more important at the time to maintain a sense of credibility than to be vulnerable with a student whom it might have benefitted. Seven years removed, I still don’t know if I made the right choice.

---

Studies beginning in the late 1990s have suggested that self-disclosure offers health benefits. Social psychologist James Pennebaker, in his text *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (1997) empirically studied hundreds of college students and confirmed that the talking and writing about personal experiences can improve both physical and mental health. Pennebaker writes “when disclosing deeply personal experiences, there are immediate changes in brainwave patterns, skin conductance levels, and overt behavior correlates of the letting-go experience. After confessions, significant drops in blood pressure and heart rate, as well as improvements in immune function, occur. In the weeks and months afterward, people’s physical and psychological health improved” (56). Again, while Pennebaker specifically nods to the expression of trauma, his statements about “deeply personal experiences,” suggest that any identity expression that has been previously hidden could provide the discloser with improved mental and physical health. Pennebaker’s research claims that those who self-disclose more have

a greater reduction of biological stress affiliated with inhibition and are also allowed the benefit of expanding their perspectives.

The more upfront someone is with their identity expression, the greater the likelihood of someone challenging that identity. As previously discussed in this chapter, my own conclusions about the benefits of self-disclosure come from a limited and deeply privileged perspective. I am a white, able-bodied woman who also identifies with the United States' majority religion, Christianity. I have also had the advantage of a strong social network and financial resources to pursue my career aspirations. For me personally, I have determined that my positionality disclosure provides me with the benefits expressed above, but it also allows for the benefit of expanding my perspective. While diversity of participants is limited in this study, it was something I sought and will continue to seek in subsequent work. My interactions with two people of color, two atheists, and a Bahá'í woman in this study, allowed for an understanding of intersectionality on my part that I previously would not have been able to fully connect. While I believe that positionality disclosure in regards to religion is the right choice for me, I don't make indictments on those who do not believe it is the right choice for them. There are experiences in the lives of some of my participants that I will never encounter, and I cannot claim to speak on behalf of the "correctness" of their decision to disclose their positionalities and when and how it is appropriate.

In terms of positionality disclosure with my research participants, I initially chose not to disclose unless asked. The excerpt of myself and Felicity at the opening of the chapter came from Felicity discussing "feeling out" one's audience before disclosing because of worries that some may assume that one "fully identifies with the worst of it all...the extreme end of what that might mean." She then went on to ask, "Have you had that too, then? That experience?" Guided

by feminist research methodology (Kirsch, 1999; Kirsch and Royster, 2012), I decided that being upfront and honest about my own experiences with Felicity could lead to a greater sense of reciprocity and trust. In my interview with Liam, the telling of his faith journey reflected my own and I disclosed that with him as a means of relationship-building. It would have felt disingenuous not to share my own experiences with the opportunity of building a bond based upon mutual trust and understanding.

---

For those confronting the decision to disclose their positionality, consider the risks and rewards, your context, and your reason for disclosing. Positionality disclosure in one place and time for one individual may not be right for another. Positionality disclosure is a deeply personal decision that one should feel a great sense of agency and confidence in doing. Similarly, if one decides that not disclosing their positionality is the right decision, that should be a choice wrought by agency and not a feeling of needing to keep silent. While there is no one-size-fits-all set of guidelines for how, when, and where one should disclose, I propose a set of guidelines, modified from the “five W’s” most often utilized in journalism, to gather information and problem solve. The “five W’s” are the questions *who? what? when? where? why?* and sometimes *how?* and derive from classical rhetorical origins by rhetors like Augustine in *De Rhetorica* and Cicero in *De Inventione*. These modified “five W’s” can serve as a mode of problem solving when it comes to a consideration of the appropriateness of one’s positionality disclosure in a given context.

#### *When Is a Scholar’s Religious Disclosure Appropriate?*

In terms of a scholar’s religious positionality disclosure, there is no “right” or “wrong” time to disclose. Instead, scholars should consider a feeling of *kairos* if motivated to disclose.

They should feel like disclosure is the appropriate move to make and not one made under pressure or duress. Maintaining a sense of high agency as opposed to low agency in the role of disclosure is essential to scholars feeling in control of their narrative and how they get to express their identity.

#### *Where Is It Appropriate to Disclose One's Religious Positionality?*

As with timing, there is no “right” or “wrong” location for a scholar to disclose their religious positionality, although participants in my study were nearly unanimous in stating that disclosure to a classroom at large is inappropriate. Instead, scholars in my study recommend having one-on-one conversations with people in which questions can be asked and a relationship can be built. As evidenced in my study, speaking about religion in large groups can have an alienating effect, especially on undergraduate students who are more likely to shut down than open up about such a topic with their instructor and classmates. In all cases, the best instances of positionality disclosure for my participants was a result of having one-on-one conversations in which a dialogue occurs. Like the question of timing, scholars who are considering disclosure should contemplate their impulse and if it may do more good than harm. If there is any question in the scholar's mind that a disclosure could be harmful in some way (to the audience or to one's self), that scholar should take pause and only move forward with a sense that there is something greater to be gained than any potential risk could pose.

#### *What Are the Motivations for Scholars to Disclose (Religious Positionality)?*

Largely, participants in my study indicated that ethos-building and coming across as authentic and transparent was the greatest motivator for a disclosure of religious positionality. In the case of my participants, ethos can be gained by disclosing a personal background or experience that implicates that scholar as an insider to the group that they are studying. When

researching with student subjects, a religious disclosure that identifies scholars with their subjects' religious commitments lends a sense of trust to the subjects that the scholar is not there to exploit them and their beliefs. Furthermore, some scholars are driven to disclose their religious positionalities as a means of ally-formation. In disclosing their religious positionalities, scholars may be granted not only relationships with colleagues and peers who have similar identities or interests, but with students who may be struggling to express their own identities in a coherent way. Finally, some scholars will disclose their religious positionalities as a means of clarifying or defensively self-posturing their identities. These clarifications and defensive self-posturing serve scholars with the opportunity to shape their own narratives and tell their stories as they believe them to be authentic. Because portrayals of religious people in popular media don't always reveal the most flattering sides of the faithful, when scholars pause to clarify, they are given agency to disrupt (un)popular narratives about religious people as narrow-minded and bigoted.

#### *How Should a Scholar Disclose Their Religious Positionality?*

The way a scholar decides to disclose is up to them, but to reiterate the point I made a couple of paragraphs previous, participants in my study overwhelmingly expressed the benefit of one-on-one conversations with colleagues, peers, and students. One-on-one conversations provide scholars with an opportunity to answer questions, clarify confusion, and to assert their own identities through narrative.

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Positionality disclosure, like identity, is messy, complicated, and complex for every individual. That said, the best takeaways are an enhanced sense of listening and understanding to those who are different from us and a reminder to check one's biases and prejudices, and assumptions. If listeners detect a sense of resistance when listening to someone speak about their

identity, particularly if religious (or atheist), they should pause to question that resistance. *Why am I experiencing this feeling of resistance? What assumptions do I carry about someone's identity? Are they founded?* Similarly, if someone considering positionality disclosure feels resistance, they should ask themselves similar questions. *Why am I experiencing this feeling of resistance? Do I have past experiences that make my feelings of resistance valid?*

In an ideal world, everyone would feel comfortable talking about all aspects of their identities in any context. But because we all face fears about how we may be perceived, there will always be contexts in which it may feel more or less comfortable to self-disclose. Keeping in mind our own fears and insecurities can remind us how others struggle with certain aspects of their identities and that simply listening without judgment can be the best mode of support for someone disclosing their positionality. Furthermore, if someone does not express the desire to disclose their positionality, granting them the freedom of that decision allows for that person to play an active role in their disclosure in the future, if they choose to do so. In either case, no one should be forced or shamed into disclosing an aspect of their identity they do not feel comfortable sharing.

While disclosing positionality can make a scholar of any identity feel vulnerable, scholars of religious topics are a group that have been investigated in Rhetoric and Composition with less vigor, likely because many of these scholars identify with the nation's majority Christian faith. That said, scholars in this population still experience fears that their chances of getting work or of advancing in their work within academia will be affected because of the topics they study and their closeness to those topics of study. They fear that colleagues and other academics will view them as intolerant, anti-intellectual, or politically conservative when they are not. Some scholars likely choose not to disclose their positionalities in certain contexts because they fear they will

be viewed through a stereotypical lens that erases difference of experience and identity and the critical power that comes with those differences. Taking the opportunity to listen to the narratives of scholars of religious-based topics who identify with their research subjects, reveals that there is a complexity to identity (as a scholar and/or as a religious person, and so on) that can be applied to a multitude of identity intersections.

The subfield of religious rhetorics calls for further inquiry in terms of the specific methodological challenges of this group of scholars and the work that they produce on religious topics. While the field generally celebrates positionality disclosure with regard to research methodologies, scholars of religious topics in this study largely expressed feeling lost as to criteria pertaining to when, where, and how these disclosures are most suitable and appropriate. Leaning upon queer theory to inform the fluidity of expression in the context of religious identity is a valuable foundation for the subfield of religious rhetorics to start thinking about and to continue thinking about religious identity as a complex phenomenon without explicit, defined boundaries. Further, the research presented in this dissertation proves that identity is not a static entity and to listen to another's narrative is a means of breaking down preconceived notions and prejudices, along with expanding our own understandings of what it means to be human.

## APPENDIX A

### IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL

#### University of New Hampshire

Research Integrity Services, Service Building  
51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585  
Fax: 603-862-3564

26-Mar-2019

Short, Lauren  
English,  
12A Adams Circle  
Durham, NH 03824

**IRB #:** 8062

**Study:** Faith, Disclosure, and Professionalization in Rhetoric and Composition

**Approval Date:** 25-Mar-2019

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 104(d). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol.

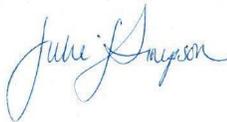
Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects*. (This document is also available at <http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources>.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Note: IRB approval is separate from UNH Purchasing approval of any proposed methods of paying study participants. Before making any payments to study participants, researchers should consult with their BSC or UNH Purchasing to ensure they are complying with institutional requirements. If such institutional requirements are not consistent with the confidentiality or anonymity assurances in the IRB-approved protocol and consent documents, the researcher may need to request a modification from the IRB.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed Exempt Study Final Report form and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact Melissa McGee at 603-862-2005 or [melissa.mcgee@unh.edu](mailto:melissa.mcgee@unh.edu). Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,



Julie F. Simpson  
Director  
cc: File  
Beemer, Cristy

## APPENDIX B

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your job description?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about your research?
3. Has any of your research been driven by a personal connection to the subject matter?
4. Can you speak to any moments in your time as a scholar when you've disclosed your positionality towards your research (e.g. as a grad student, while teaching, in writing, at conferences, within your department, etc.)?
5. Do you believe it is important for a scholar to disclose their positionality?
6. Have you personally experienced any challenges in the professionalization process based on your research topic?
7. Have you been given any advice about how to navigate professionalizing yourself, good or bad?
8. Do you attend panels on religious topics at professional conferences? What is your experience with that like?
9. Have you ever feared disclosing your positionality towards your research? Why or why not?
10. Is there anything else that you'd like to share or other potential participants you would be willing to direct me to?

## APPENDIX C

### PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your gender?

Answer choices:

Non-binary

Female

Male

Choose not to disclose

2. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

Answer choices:

Middle Eastern or North African

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Native American or Alaska Native

Asian American

Hispanic/Latinx

Black/African American

White/Caucasian

Multiracial

Other

Choose not to disclose

3. What department are you in?

Open response

4. Where did you attend/are you attending graduate school?

Open response

5. What year did you graduate/do you anticipate graduating?

Open response

6. What was/is the title of your dissertation (if applicable)?

Open response

7. What would you say is your primary area of research?

Open response

8. Would you categorize yourself as religious and/or spiritual? Explain.

Open response

## APPENDIX D

### RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Lauren Short and I am a fifth year PhD student in Composition. I am working on a study for my dissertation to discover how scholars of religious topics within the field of Composition and Rhetoric speak to their positionality to their research and how this affects and/or has affected their professionalization process. I am curious to understand why scholars may choose to disclose (or not disclose) their positionality to the study of religious topics and how they go about doing so. To gain this understanding, I will interview participants for insight into their practices. This should take no more than an hour of your time.

I am looking for at least 10 participants to partake in my study. You are invited to participate in as little or as much of this study as you like. Please note that attached is an Informed Consent Form if you so wish to participate in this study. If you have any questions you would like me to answer before you sign the Consent Form and send it back to me, I would be more than happy and willing to do so. The Consent Form addresses confidentiality terms and conditions.

I appreciate you taking the time to read this letter and hope that you will consider participating in this study. I have been interested in this issue for a long time and have not had any data to work with in my previous work.

Please contact me with and questions or concerns at [ls2010@wildcats.unh.edu](mailto:ls2010@wildcats.unh.edu).

Best,

Lauren J. Short

## **APPENDIX E**

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

#### **RESEARCHER AND TITLE OF STUDY**

My name is Lauren Short and I am a fifth year PhD student in Composition at UNH. I am currently beginning this study for a project called “Faith, Disclosure, and Professionalization in Rhetoric and Composition.”

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?**

This consent form describes the research study and helps you to decide if you want to participate. It provides important information about what you will be asked to do in the study, about the risks and benefits of participating in the study, and about your rights as a research participant. You should:

- Read the information in this document carefully, and ask me or the research personnel any questions, particularly if you do not understand something.
- Not agree to participate until all your questions have been answered, or until you are sure that you want to.
- Understand that your participation in this study involves you being interviewed about your faith and political identity that will last about 45-60 minutes.
- Understand that the potential risks of participating in this study are a breach of confidentiality, though such a risk is minimal.

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

This study seeks to discover how scholars of religious topics within the field of Composition and Rhetoric speak to their positionality to their research and how this affects and/or has affected their professionalization process. I am curious to understand why scholars may choose to disclose (or not disclose) their positionality to the study of religious topics and how they go about doing so. The anticipated number of participants is a minimum of 10.

#### **WHAT DOES YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY INVOLVE?**

Your initial correspondence with me will be through email, in which we set up a time for a Skype or phone interview. If you agree to participate in this study the procedure will occur as follows:

Participants will be asked to reflect on their work with religious topics and disclosure (or nondisclosure) of one’s positionality to the subject matter, as well as the role of disclosure (or nondisclosure) in one’s professionalization process in an interview with me.

This process will likely last no more than one hour and will take place via Skype or phone. If you participate in a phone or Skype interview, I will be located in a private study room on the UNH-

Durham campus or in my private, single-occupancy apartment in Dover, NH.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OF PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

There is minimal risk in participating in this study.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

There are no explicit benefits for participating except the opportunity to reflect on your scholarly practices.

**IF YOU CHOOSE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY, WILL IT COST YOU ANYTHING?**

There is no cost to participate in this study.

**WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

**DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Your consent to participate in this research is entirely voluntary. If you refuse to participate, you will not experience any penalty or negative consequences.

**CAN YOU WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY?**

If you consent to participate in this study, you may refuse to answer any question and/or stop your participation in the study at any time without any penalty or negative consequences.

**HOW WILL THE CONFIDENTIALITY OF YOUR RECORDS BE PROTECTED?**

I seek to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with your participation in this research. Voice-recorded interviews will be stored in UNH Box and will be destroyed after transcription. Transcripts of interviews will be kept in UNH Box. Any communication via the Internet poses minimal risk of a breach of confidentiality. Only myself and my faculty advisor, Dr. Beemer will have access to participants' personal data. Material will be used for my dissertation, conference presentations, and article publication in a disciplinary journal or other scholarly publications. In these instances, participants' identifying information will be removed for these purposes and participants will be presented by a pseudonym unless permission is given to attribute quotes by name.

There are rare instances when I am required to share personally-identifiable information (e.g., according to policy, contract, regulation). For example, in response to a complaint about the research, officials at the University of New Hampshire, designees of the sponsor(s), and/or regulatory and oversight government agencies may access research data.

I am also required by law to report certain information to government and/or law enforcement officials (e.g., child abuse, threatened violence against self or others, communicable diseases).

**WHOM TO CONTACT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY**

If you have any questions pertaining to the research you can contact Lauren Short (ls2010@wildcats.unh.edu or 502-767-6546) to discuss them.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject you can contact Melissa McGee in UNH Research Integrity Services, 603-862-2005 or Melissa.mcgee@unh.edu to discuss them.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ CONSENT/AGREE to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Subject      \_\_\_\_\_ Date

I, \_\_\_\_\_ CONSENT/AGREE that my identity may be used

in public renderings of this research study, including professional conferences and journals.

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Subject      \_\_\_\_\_ Date

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