Faith Development Within Religion and Philosophy Courses at a College of the Lutheran Church

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/christy_moran_craft/13/
As part of a larger investigation into the spiritual climate at one college of the Lutheran church, we interviewed students to determine the meaningful experiences that they faced as students. Many experiences mentioned related to two specific religion and philosophy courses. The analysis of data provided by 10 students who had completed one of the courses of interest resulted in intriguing insights concerning the development of the cognitive dimension of the students’ faith.

The need for meaning in life is believed to be the central crisis of our times (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). The college years, in particular, are a critical time in which students search for purpose and meaning in life and ask related questions about morality, belief, and behavior (Garber, 1996).
Recently, scholars suggested that approximately three fourths of all college students reported that they were seeking purpose and meaning in life (Astin, Astin, Lindholm, & Bryant, 2005).

Some scholars have specifically focused on the concept of purpose in life in their work (Molasso, 2006; Moran, 2001). The concept of purpose in life relates to the identification of a reason for living life. To be sure, the identification of a purpose in life is relevant to college students in a number of ways. For instance, Moran (2001) found that purpose in life affects students’ desire to be actively involved in leadership roles. Moreover, having a purpose in life positively influences students’ physical health, psychological well-being, and overall satisfaction with life (Moran, 2001). On the basis of a review of the published research, Molasso (2006) stated that having a purpose in life contributes to the establishment of positive characteristics, strong values, and healthy mental attitudes among students. Given the importance of the identification of a purpose in life among many young adults, higher education faculty and administrators may be uniquely positioned to assist younger students, in particular, with this search.

Similar to purpose in life, meaning making is also discussed in the scholarly literature in higher education and is described as “trying to make sense of the ‘big picture’” (Love, 2002, p. 358). In the student development literature, the concept of faith development is often used as one way to describe this process of making meaning in life (Parks, 2000). Spirituality and religion have typically been conceptualized as forms of faith and/or of encompassing faith (Love & Talbot, 1999), but the process of faith development may not necessarily incorporate spirituality or religion (Love, 2002).

Because faith development is relevant to college students, it is important to investigate that phenomenon within all types of higher education environments. Parks (2000) suggested that higher education not only could, but should, be responsible for “teaching critical and systemic thought and initiating young lives into a responsible apprehension first of the realities and questions of a vast and mysterious universe and second of our participation within it” (p. 10). Parks (2000) believes that it is the duty of higher education faculty and administrators to attempt to facilitate the faith development of students. The purpose of this research study was to provide insights into how students’ cognitive dimension of faith was influenced by their participation in two religion and philosophy courses at one Lutheran church college.

**Faith Development in Higher Education**

Though theoretical models of faith development have been created (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000) and have been presented in a number of recent publications (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Stamm, 2006), few studies have been published addressing the faith development process among college and university students. Among the published studies is a cross-sectional and longitudinal mixed-methods study involving 240 randomly selected students from six Protestant Christian liberal arts campuses (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004). Similar to
psychosocial identity development (Josselson, 1987; Marcia, 1966), Holcomb and Nonneman found that faith development was facilitated by “crisis,” which they defined as “a prolonged period of active engagement with and exploration of competing roles and ideologies” (2004, p. 100). According to the researchers, an incident was coded as a crisis if it promoted significant reflection or if it represented a turning point for the student. In particular, the crises that facilitated faith development were categorized in one or more of three categories: (a) prolonged exposure to diverse ways of thinking (e.g., having beliefs challenged), (b) extensive multicultural exposure (e.g., being around people who live differently), and (c) general emotional crisis (e.g., experiencing some type of personal loss). The diverse and challenging higher education environment likely provides a context for crises in all three categories.

The idea that certain types of crises may facilitate faith development was echoed in another study that was conducted at a liberal arts college affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In that research, Radecke (2007) found that students who participated in a 2-week service-learning course experienced a degree of faith formation as a result of various “disorienting dilemmas” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 141), which served as catalysts for transformation. The disorienting dilemmas were related to the focus of the course, which was upon the images of Jesus Christ in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Radecke (2007) concluded that the key ingredients for faith formation were reflection and perspective transformation, which together led to the dissolution and recomposition of meaning in life.

The integration of faith and intellectual development was the focus of a study conducted at the University of Oxford (Sabri et al., 2008). The purpose of that small-scale, qualitative study was to determine how first-year theology undergraduate students at Oxford experienced the relationship between academic study and faith. The researchers found that the academic studies of some students had a positive impact upon their faith, whereas other students experienced an “undermining” (Sabri et al., 2008, p. 49) of their initial faith-based motivation as a result of their course work. Moreover, some students in their study reportedly experienced “dissonance” (Sabri et al., 2008, p. 51) between their beliefs and those of their instructors, which resulted in their feeling hurt, offended, or angry at times. In spite of the negative emotional reactions to such dissonance, it ideally promoted some degree of faith development among students.

All of the aforementioned studies increase our understanding of how crises, disorienting dilemmas, or cognitive dissonance in general and in out-of-classroom experiences might facilitate faith development among students. None address faith development within classrooms that focus on faith-related topics (e.g., religion and philosophy) in the context of religiously affiliated institutions. In an effort to address this gap in the literature base, we designed this research study to investigate the following question: To what extent does participation in religion and philosophy classes impact the cognitive dimension of faith development among students at one college of the Lutheran church?
Conceptual Framework

Many concepts discussed in this study reflect those within the model of faith development proposed by Parks (2000). Parks’s model is linear in nature and is comprised of four stages: (a) adolescent/conventional, (b) young adult, (c) tested adult, and (d) mature adult. Certain forms of knowing (cognition), forms of dependence (feeling and affect), and forms of community (belonging) characterize each of these stages. The forms of knowing pertain to the cognitive dimension of faith and describe the relationship between self and authority. Because the cognitive dimension of faith development is the focus of this study, it is described in more detail below.

Two forms of knowing exist within the adolescent/conventional stage of Parks’s theory (2000). The first, authority-bound dualism, exists when individuals “cannot stand outside of their own perspective or reflect upon their own thought” (Parks, 2000, p. 55). Their perception of reality tends to be black and white and defined largely by authority figures such as parents and religious leaders. As they experience challenges to their ways of thinking, individuals move into the unqualified relativism form of knowing, at which time they recognize that “all knowledge is shaped by, and thus relative to, the context and relationships within which it is composed… and every opinion and judgment may be as worthy as any other” (Parks, 2000, p. 57).

In the young adult stage, probing commitment describes the primary form of knowing. During this time, individuals compare and evaluate various viewpoints when faced with them, whether in a formal educational setting or not, to construct their faith. Though Parks (2000) suggested that very few young adults ever reach the convictional commitment form of knowing that is the final stage in her model (mature adult), some reach the tested commitment form (tested adult), characterized by their knowledge “taking on a tested quality, a sense of fittingness” (p. 69). In this tested commitment form, young adults are no longer exploring their worldviews. Rather, they have a deepened quality of centeredness, in contrast to the ambivalence or dividedness of the earlier period.

The cognitive component of Parks’s theory (2000) was built upon the work of Perry (1968) and Fowler (1981). The forms of knowing and their development have a high degree of correspondence with the structures that Perry, Fowler, and other cognitive structural theorists have posited, which Love (2002) carefully articulated and analyzed. In spite of the similarities, “faith is differentiated from traditional cognitive developmental theories because it is the activity of seeking and composing meaning involving the most comprehensive dimensions of the human experience” (Love, 2002, p. 358).

According to Parks (2000), “pause, reflection, and conversation” (p. 154) collectively form the “practice of hearth” (p. 154) that is so critical to facilitating all dimensions of faith development. When individuals are provided a time and place in which to reflect and to dialogue with self and others, “adult faith is forged” (Parks, 2000, p. 155) even if such an experience “swamps an earlier faith and its hope” (p. 155). Such hearthlike atmospheres are believed by Parks to provide the ideal context for faith development.
Parks’s theory of faith development (2000) forms the conceptual framework for this study. Due to our focus on the classroom setting, only the forms of knowing were investigated in this study. As mentioned earlier, the following question guided this research: To what extent does participation in religion and philosophy classes impact the cognitive dimension of faith development among students at one college of the Lutheran church? The purpose of this study was to provide insight into how the cognitive dimension of faith develops within the context of an explicitly faith-related in-class educational environment (i.e., religion and philosophy courses at a religiously affiliated institution).

**Method**

An instrumental case study design (Stake, 2005) characterized the nature of a larger study, of which this is just one component. The focus of that overarching case study was on assessing the correspondence between campus ministry services and the spiritual needs of the students, faculty, and staff at one college of the Lutheran church. Comprised of approximately 1,800 students, Lutheran College (a pseudonym) is a residential liberal arts institution that is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The college is located in a small midwestern town with a population of about 10,000.

**Procedure**

Students’ in-class experiences at Lutheran College, specifically those of a religious or philosophical nature, were the focus of this portion of the study. All Lutheran College students are required to take some courses from the Religion and Philosophy Department to meet the “Faith and Reflection” portion of their general education requirements. The Faith and Reflection course most commonly taken by first- and second-year students is Literature of the Old and New Testaments (RE 101). It is described in the college catalog (2008–2010 Academic Catalog) as “Content of Biblical literature. Historical setting of texts, unfolding drama of salvation, Bible's relevance for contemporary faith and life.” Students in their third or fourth year at Lutheran College frequently take Philosophy of Religion (PH 307) in order to meet the “Faith and Reflection” requirements of the college’s general education curriculum. The description of this course is as follows: “Survey and analysis of religious experience, existence of God, good and evil, logic of religious discourse” (2008–2010 Academic Catalog). Because RE 101 and PH 307 were most often mentioned in the interviews and focus groups as students discussed meaningful and challenging experiences, the focus of this portion of the case study was upon these two courses.

**Sampling.** Prior to our arrival at Lutheran College, we sent an e-mail message to the entire campus community requesting their participation in the overarching case study. The invitation for students included a statement about the $20 gift certificate to the Lutheran College bookstore that they would receive in exchange for their participation. Those who were willing to participate completed a demographic survey, the data from which assisted us in assuring maximum variation within the sample (Merriam, 2002).
For this portion of the larger case study, we focused on the perspectives of the 10 students who discussed the aforementioned religion and philosophy courses. All 10 of the students in our sample (100%) identified as Caucasian, compared to 88% of the college population as a whole. Furthermore, females comprised 40% of this sample, whereas they account for 53% of the entire student body. And somewhat similar to the college population (41% Lutheran, 25% Catholic), the sample for this study included a large percentage of students who identified as Lutheran (50%) and a smaller percentage who identified as Catholic (10%). Furthermore, the students represented a variety of academic majors. We created an "other" category to designate those whose academic major did not fall into one of the existing categories, who had more than one major, or who were undecided about their major at the time of data collection. Other demographic information about the 10 student participants is presented in Table 1.

### Data collection

For the larger case study, individual interviews and focus groups were conducted and observations were made to generate an in-depth, rich description of Lutheran College. Data collection was conducted by the coresearchers and began with an 8-day site visit and ended with a 4-day visit approximately 4 weeks later. All face-to-face individual and focus group interviews were held in a quiet study room in the library on campus; only one of us was present at each interview and focus group. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded. Data collection ended upon reaching saturation (Patton, 2002), when no new themes were forthcoming. To ensure confidentiality, we used pseudonyms for all participants.

The discussions about the religion and philosophy courses occurred as students spoke of their collegiate experiences. Though not every student explicitly mentioned these courses, we were intrigued by how often they were discussed in response to other questions, and we were interested...
in learning the students’ perspectives on those courses. For these reasons, we chose to analyze the data despite the fact that it was not a planned focus for our overarching case study. Most, though not all, of the comments about the two courses arose during the individual interviews. This portion of the study focused only upon the data related to the 10 students’ experiences in the religion and philosophy courses of interest.

**Data analysis.** To be attentive and responsive to emerging themes, theories, and gaps in the data, we followed Maxwell’s (1996) suggestion that the data analysis process begin while collecting data and involve tearing down and rebuilding the data (Creswell, 1998). With basic word processing software, transcriptions of all interviews and focus groups were used to develop codes that were systematically used to break down the data into meaningful units. After we individually analyzed the units of meaning, we worked in collaboration to construct the units of meaning into themes and patterns that were essential to understanding the critical issues within the study. Over the course of the analysis, codes were revised, patterns and their exceptions were identified, theories were tested, and the pieces were converged into a coherent framework.

**Trustworthiness**

Researchers who conduct qualitative inquiries must acknowledge their perspectives about concepts and issues relevant to the study. This approach lends transparency to the ways in which the data may have been affected by the researchers themselves. We are both middle-class, Caucasian women, affiliated with non-Lutheran Christian traditions. One of us identifies as an evangelical Christian, and the other identifies as a mainline Protestant Christian; we have both conducted research about religion in higher education. Students were not informed of our religious identities, so it is highly unlikely that our religious identities influenced the way that they responded to our questions.

We utilized several techniques, described by Patton (2002), to increase the trustworthiness of this portion of the overarching case study: triangulation, member checking, and the creation of an audit trail. First, triangulation was used to ensure consistency of the findings across multiple data collection methods (e.g., interviews and focus groups). Additionally, the strategies of analyst triangulation and member checking were utilized to increase the trustworthiness of the results; member checking involves taking the data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm or reject the credibility of the information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To this end, we solicited feedback on our initial findings during a follow-up campus visit. Finally, an audit trail was established. An audit trail is the maintenance of “precise records of who said what, when, where, and under what conditions” (Whitt, 1991, p. 45). We documented all research decisions throughout the course of the project and maintained files of all interview transcripts and data charts.
Limitations

Despite attempts to increase the trustworthiness of this research, some limitations remain. The first relates to our failure to collect information about the students’ ages. Having information about the age of each student might have been insightful as we made meaning of our results. Second, it is possible that the students in this sample may have chosen to attend Lutheran College in hopes of developing their faith. They may be more predisposed to faith development than other students who chose to attend Lutheran College for other reasons (e.g., small size or opportunities in athletics). Last, though students specifically spoke about the courses of interest, it is possible that other contextual influences (e.g., church attendance or peer relationships) also influenced the development of the cognitive dimension of the students’ faith. In spite of these limitations, this study provides new insights into faith development.

Results

As we interviewed students about their collegiate experiences at Lutheran College, we focused on their experiences in two core courses in the Religion and Philosophy Department (RE 101 and PH 307), and three themes emerged. First, students spoke of encountering new and challenging ideas. Second, they discussed their desire and ability to think analytically. And, third, they expressed how their beliefs had been clarified and their faith strengthened.

Encountered New and Challenging Ideas

Many students spoke of encountering new and challenging ideas as a result of their experiences in the religion and philosophy courses. Some students expressed surprise at the variety of Christian expression that exists. Rita (non-Christian, arts and humanities major) stated the following regarding how she changed as a result of her experience in the RE 101 class:

I think I'm way more tolerant. It's interesting. In high school, from where I was sitting, it [Christianity] was just kind of like a weird hippie oasis left over from the ’60s... I wasn't surrounded by Christians. I kind of lumped them all together. I realize now that there is kind of a difference in how they do things and what they believe, and I give more respect to the differences in the Christian faith and just for Christians as a whole because Christianity is actually... You know, it's got some pretty decent teachings in it.

Clearly, Rita did not identify as a Christian, but she was positively affected by the RE 101 course because it exposed her to differences and teachings within Christianity.

For others, being faced with beliefs that were different from theirs was a source of emotional distress. For instance, Dustin (Protestant non-Lutheran, arts and humanities major) spoke of his experience as being a “devastating time” that invoked a wide array of emotional responses:

I came and was confronted with ideas that I’d never heard or seen before and [I] didn’t know what to do. And, it was just an incredibly devastating time. I went through periods of just
being very angry and frustrated to kind of depressed and apathetic... not even knowing if I really believed in God to kind of where I’ve found myself now. Finding the sort of things that I believed in and then kind of finding out what I didn’t... RE 101 was a huge kind of catalyst for that process of finding out who I am and what I do believe in.

The fact that Dustin described the religion course as being a “catalyst” highlights the role it played in the development of his personal identity and beliefs.

Several other students spoke of an increased “openness” to the new ideas they encountered in the religion and philosophy courses. A salient facilitator of that increased openness for Melissa (Protestant Lutheran, arts and humanities major) was the discussion of different perspectives in her religion class:

I’ve definitely become more open to different ideas in class. I’ve learned so much about the Bible and changed a lot of my opinions. The Old Testament doesn’t have any historical proof.

Ryan (Protestant Lutheran, undecided major) had a similar experience, and he began to question his interpretation of the Bible as a result of the diversity of views expressed in his religion class:

I’m more accepting of views. RE 101 really kind of opened up my eyes to say, “You know, it may not be appropriate to hate the LBGT [lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender] community” because it [the Bible] doesn’t really say that... Just being more accepting of views and being able to listen to people. From day one, it [RE 101] was a great thing. It was like, “Wow! You are actually letting me build my faith rather than me having been put in a church and told, ‘This is what we do.’”

Equally as interesting are Ryan’s insights about gaining the ability to be a better listener to other people’s perspectives and his appreciation for being given the opportunity to “build” his faith rather than simply being told what to believe.

**Gained the Desire and Ability to Think Analytically**

For many of the students in this study, being presented with new and challenging ideas led to an increased desire and ability to engage in analytical thinking. For Dylan (Protestant Lutheran, arts and humanities major), feeling threatened by beliefs that challenged his led to an increased desire to think analytically about those beliefs:

It [PH 307] was very challenging to my beliefs. I felt threatened. And the more I got into it, the more interested that I got. And the whole philosophical mindset—reading a certain text and digesting it.

Dylan became so involved in what he calls the “philosophical mindset” that he became more interested in engaging in analytical thinking.

A number of students in this study spoke of their newfound desire and ability to think analytically by stating that they were taught, in the religion and philosophy courses, to question their...
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espoused beliefs. According to Louis (Protestant non-Lutheran, arts and humanities major), only by questioning beliefs is one able to eventually “defend” and “justify” them:

It dug into the Bible, and the literature caused me to question the text. I really hadn’t questioned [it] before. It was just a great eye-opening class. You just say, “Hey, look at this. Question it. Don’t just accept it at face value.” You have to question what you believe in order to gain a deeper meaning of it and be able to defend it, to justify what you believe.

Louis became convinced, as a result of participation in one of the religion and philosophy courses, that accepting certain beliefs at “face value” is not how one gains an in-depth understanding one’s beliefs.

Other students elaborated upon the necessity of questioning prevailing ideas and belief systems. For instance, Anne (Protestant non-Lutheran, social science major) shared her conviction that every belief must be questioned, regardless of the source (e.g., professors or peers):

I’m questioning things a lot more than I used to and not just—you know—what I read in class or what my professors say, but also what my friends tell me. I’ve learned to question. It’s hard for me to take at face value what people tell me. Learning to question and learning to analytically think about what’s going on, what’s being told to you.

According to Anne, the ability to question and to think analytically seemingly go hand in hand and must be practiced, rather than simply accepting as truth, or taking “at face value,” what others are professing. For Anne and many others, the process of questioning information from other sources became important as a result of their experiences in the religion and philosophy courses.

Clarified Beliefs and Strengthened Faith

In addition to encountering new, different ideas and developing the desire and ability to engage in analytical thinking, many students gained clarity about their beliefs. This clarification resulted in the strengthening of their faith. The students credited these changes to their experiences in the religion and philosophy courses.

Some students described how their new knowledge of multiple viewpoints resulted in more established beliefs. Virginia’s (Catholic/Eastern Orthodox, science/technology/engineering/math major) statement aptly captures this sentiment:

You’re exposed to a lot of different viewpoints rather than your little niche when you’re in high school. And, I’m just more set in my beliefs. . . with a knowledge of other ones.

A number of students spoke about how their faith had been strengthened by virtue of the fact that they were able to “maintain” their beliefs amid the challenges posed. For these students, such as Anne, the process of becoming more analytical led them to develop the ability to understand more fully their existing beliefs.
Coming in with the faith that I have challenged me in those [religion and philosophy] classes. It's maintaining your faith while recognizing that there are challenges out there and addressing those challenges good enough so you know what you still believe.

Anne's statement implies that the goal of analytical thinking is to hold onto an espoused faith while also becoming more knowledgeable about it.

For students like Kevin (Protestant Lutheran, arts and humanities major), the process of analytical thinking involved a period of time in which he almost rejected his faith:

I think a lot of classes I've taken in college, like Philosophy of Religion, have really made me analytical of my faith just to the point of almost being agnostic about it. I mean, I think in the end you come out with a stronger sense of your faith and being able to answer the tough questions from other people.

According to Kevin, a benefit of having a strengthened faith is having the ability to answer “tough questions” posed by others about that faith.

Other students spoke about the “doubt” they experienced while developing a strengthened faith. Nathan (Protestant Lutheran, arts and humanities major) assumed that the professors of his religion and philosophy classes wanted the students' faith to be strengthened, rather than dismissed, as a result of invoking doubt:

The professors—and this isn’t a bad thing—they make students doubt everything they believe in just to strengthen their faith. I took Religion 101 last year, and it did a number on me right away. … It definitely contributed to me doubting almost everything I believed in.

Other students expressed similar sentiments concerning the professors' desire to strengthen the students' existing faith rather than challenging their faith in an effort to lead them to dismiss it.

**Discussion**

The results of this study support those of related studies concerning the contextual influences upon faith development. Consistent with similar research, environments characterized by challenge and support (Sanford, 1966) provided the context for the development of faith (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004; Radecke, 2007; Sabri et al., 2008). In this study, challenge was present through the existence of differing beliefs as well as the direct challenges to preexisting beliefs. Statements from the participants in this study suggest that the religion and philosophy courses that were the focus of this investigation provided an opportunity to practice “hearth,” the “pause, reflection, and conversation” (Parks, 2000, p. 154) discussed above. In their study of spiritual struggles, Bryant and Astin (2008) determined that students need reassurance that their struggles are legitimate. Perhaps, in this study, the dialogue that occurred within the religion and philosophy courses provided such an opportunity. Students could have, for the first time, felt justified in their struggles related to faith, thus facilitating the freedom necessary to allow their questions to emerge. The
reflection and conversations in the practice of hearth created an environment that validated students’ beliefs.

According to Bryant and Astin (2008), students in evangelical, Roman Catholic, and other Christian church-affiliated institutions experience significant spiritual struggles during their college years, which result in cognitive dissonance. They suggested that students in religiously affiliated institutions might feel challenged as a result of religious issues being treated “as academic subject matter to be debated, investigated, and perhaps even critiqued” (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 21) in a context where such challenge is not expected. Though it might seem harmful to students, spiritual struggle is positively associated with open-mindedness and growth in tolerance (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Hill & Pargament, 2003). It is not surprising, then, if one considers the religion and philosophy courses as settings for spiritual struggle, that students in this study regularly commented upon the degree to which they are now more open and tolerant of others’ beliefs as a result of being exposed to new and challenging perspectives. What is left unanswered is whether openness and tolerance are precursors to the development of the cognitive dimension of faith or whether they are outcomes of such development. It is possible that they are both.

**Relationship Between Self and Authority**

Perhaps what is most intriguing about the findings of this research is the relationship between the students and various authorities as sources of knowledge in the lives of the students. As mentioned earlier, the cognitive dimension of faith focuses upon the relationship between self and authority (Parks, 2000). The findings of this study suggest that though the students involved were encouraged to question all authority figures as sources of knowledge, most continued to maintain a level of dependence upon certain authorities.

**Questioning authorities.** Some of the students alluded to the importance of questioning authorities as sources of knowledge. Much of the discussion in this regard focused on the critical analysis of the students’ “inherited faith” (Parks, 2000, p. 5). Inherited faith is that which is built upon the students’ initial understandings of sacred texts, the teachings of parents, and childhood religious experiences. Dylan, among other students, stated that RE 101 challenged his existing beliefs. In discussing the importance of questioning authorities as sources of knowledge, the students most often discussed the Bible. Students such as Melissa and Louis mentioned the need to question the Bible as a credible source of knowledge. Only one student (Anne) commented on the importance of “questioning” what her professors say in class.

**Dependence upon authorities.** In spite of the discourse and dialogue about questioning authorities as sources of knowledge, the findings suggest that many of the students in this study continued to depend upon certain authorities to some extent. For instance, Ryan alluded to his continued dependence upon the Bible as a source of knowledge when he relayed his newfound belief that “the Bible doesn’t say to hate the LBGT community.” By implication, Ryan’s statement suggests that the Bible is the standard by which various beliefs and values should be judged.
Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that many of the students continued to depend upon the authority of their professors. Numerous students made comments alluding to what they had been taught by their professors: to “build their own faith” (Ryan), to “question the text” (Dylan), and “to doubt everything” (Nathan). Clearly, these students viewed their professors as credible sources of knowledge because they were willing to do as the professors instructed or modeled in terms of questioning possible sources of authority. Would the students have determined, on their own, that they should question authorities had their professors not explicitly or implicitly encouraged them to do so?

**Authority-Bound Relativism**

According to Parks (2000), authority-bound dualism is the first stage within the lowest form of knowing. In this form, young adults get knowledge from various types of authorities outside of themselves. Parks suggested that “culturally-confirmed roles and personalities” (2000, p. 55), such as experts and religious figures, are common sources of authority from which young adults get their knowledge. The transition from this form of knowing to unqualified relativism involves, according to Parks, the recognition that every opinion is as worthy as another and in unqualified relativism the locus of authority shifts from others to the self.

For many of the students in this study, the role of authority figures remained salient in the context of these two courses. Though the students no longer viewed their professors as all-knowing, they displayed an “unexamined trust” (Parks, 2000, p. 55) in their professors. For instance, several students assumed that their professors were challenging their beliefs and perspectives so that those beliefs might be maintained, if not strengthened. Though there was no evidence in this research to suggest that this was the motivation of the professors, such a belief certainly demonstrates an unexamined trust in their professors. This unexamined trust is an expression of the “conformist way of knowing” (Parks, 2000, p. 56) that is still reflective of authority-bound dualism as opposed to unqualified relativism. This may indicate a transfer of authority in which more credibility is granted to professors than to previous sources of knowledge, rather than reflecting a complete dismissal of authority figures as unique sources of knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, students submitted to their professors’ authority that they should analytically question every other potential source of knowledge. In fact, many students spoke of the development of the desire to engage in analytical thinking as an outcome of their experiences in one of the two courses. If students are instructed by their professors to consider that every opinion is as worthy as another, which Parks (2000) believes is reflective of unqualified relativism, have students really progressed to the unqualified relativism form of knowing? Or are they still reflecting authority-bound dualism in that they are accepting the directives of some authorities without questioning that knowledge?

The results of this research suggest that a developmental stage might exist between Parks’s (2000) authority-bound dualism and unqualified relativism stages. Because students in this
research reported an increased openness and acceptance of other viewpoints, they may no longer be classified as dualistic thinkers. They displayed relativistic thinking to some extent, yet they were still dependent upon authorities such as professors. For these reasons, authority-bound relativism may best describe a stage in the development of the cognitive dimension of faith that precedes that of unqualified relativism. Perhaps in this stage students are transitioning from dualistic to relativistic ways of thinking but remain somewhat dependent upon authorities, such as professors, as they do so.

Implications for Research and Practice

Given the findings of this study, several implications are worthy of consideration. First, some questions remain that relate to the institutional context within which this study was conducted. Could it be that the authority-bound relativism that emerged as a distinct stage in the faith development of these Lutheran College students was related to the institutional context? Is there something unique about being at a religiously affiliated institution that might encourage students to maintain a level of dependence upon authorities? Is this same authority-bound relativism evident in students at secular institutions? Additional research is needed to explore the role of institutional context upon the faith development process.

Other unanswered questions relate to the extent to which the reported development of the cognitive dimension of students’ faith resulted in changes in these students’ actions outside of the classroom setting. For instance, many of the students reported increased openness and tolerance toward diversity. Does this mean that they now demonstrate more sensitivity to diversity issues in nonclassroom environments on campus? When they encounter new ideas outside of the classroom, perhaps while in informal conversations with peers, do they engage in analytical thinking? To what extent are the developmental outcomes found in this research made manifest throughout the rest of the students’ collegiate careers? As a result of being changed intellectually, do these students then become change agents on campus? Future research is needed to explore these and other related questions.

One implication for practice relates to the impact of the classroom context in which the cognitive dimension of faith may develop. Because faith development need not be linked to religion or spirituality, secular institutions are also appropriate venues for discussions about “big-enough questions” (Parks, 2000, p. 166) that characterize one’s faith or sense of meaning making. The hearthlike atmosphere of the RE 101 and PH 307 courses at Lutheran College provided safe venues in which students’ perspectives about faith-related issues were drawn out. Higher education faculty and administrators must be intentional about creating hearthlike environments, or those characterized by “pause, reflection, and conversation” (Parks, 2000, p. 154).

Hearthlike environments can be developed both in and out of the classroom. When these types of environments are created—whether in the classroom, in residence halls, within student
organizations, or during student activities—students will truly feel that it is permissible to think aloud and to discuss the big questions in life. Such environments can be developed by designing learning experiences in such a way that students are required to reflect upon significant life issues. Chickering (2006) aptly communicated the importance of such reflection when he stated, “Contemplation is the cerebral metabolic process for meaning making” (p. 143). Journaling could also be utilized, in combination with contemplation, as a method to encourage the development of a hearthlike environment.

The classroom environments in this study were characterized by a diversity of ideas that challenged, either covertly or overtly, students’ inherited faith. Those challenges, coupled with support from the professors, provided a fertile environment for faith development to occur. Classroom environments that prompt critical, analytical thinking can facilitate the development of students’ faith in the cognitive dimension. In his discussion of the impact of the curriculum upon faith development, Chickering (2006) emphasized the importance of “integrating pertinent pedagogy, experiential learning, and human interactions” (p. 113) in an effort to “raise questions about authenticity, purpose, and meaning” (p. 129) that will facilitate critical, analytical thinking. To be sure, higher education faculty and administrators should not fear cognitive dissonance on the part of students. Rather than shying away from potentially controversial discussions, they should capitalize on the diversity of perspectives represented by the students with whom they work as well as engage them in conversations in which their existing beliefs can be challenged.

For faith development to occur, students must truly feel supported by higher education faculty and administrators. There is a fine balance between encouraging students to question their inherited faith and supporting their current perspectives. Perhaps one way for higher education faculty and administrators to express that support is by communicating to students their goal underlying the process of challenging their perspectives. For students who would initially interpret such challenges as being antagonistic or attempts to derail their faith, a statement about the goal of facilitating development may be all that is needed to establish the trust necessary.

Furthermore, if a goal of facilitating faith development among students is to assist in their transition from others as authority to self as authority (Parks, 2000), the results of this study should be important to faculty and administrators in higher education. The students in this study relied upon certain authorities as sources of knowledge even though they had begun to demonstrate more relativistic, rather than dualistic, thinking. With this in mind, higher education faculty and administrators should consider how they might encourage students to become critical thinkers about others’ beliefs. This attempt to encourage such thinking must be accomplished without implicitly exerting their authority in the process. Students need to recognize the value of critically thinking about others’ ideas without being told, by an authority figure, that they should do so.
One way in which to challenge students’ perspectives concerning authorities is simply to ask them how they know those authorities are credible. Having students reflect upon what makes certain authorities more or less credible is a first step in assisting them to think critically about the degree to which they will depend upon the knowledge of those authorities. In this process, higher education faculty and administrators should encourage students to challenge their perspectives as authorities as well. Both in and out of the classroom, higher education faculty and administrators could facilitate discussions of the limitations of external authorities as sources of knowledge. They could ask questions such as these: How do you decide who is a credible authority figure? How does the authority of others relate to your authority in making decisions about what to believe? How do you know that what I am telling you, or encouraging you to think or to do, is credible and trustworthy?

In conclusion, helping students to develop a faith that they have critically formed and reformed is an essential aspect of the educational experience. This process of faith development is not necessarily religious or spiritual in nature. The facilitation of such development should be a concern for educators in all types of higher education institutions, not just those that are affiliated with a particular religious tradition.

References


Faith Development in Religion and Philosophy Courses


