

Chapter 27

Developing Spiritual Identity: Retrospective Accounts From Muslim, Jewish, and Christian Exemplars

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Abstract This chapter considers developing spiritual identity in a sample of 45 Muslim, Jewish, and Christian individuals nominated by religious tradition for outstanding maturity. We suggest that developing spiritual identity is amenable to naturalistic study through a heuristic known as psychological realism. Study findings are presented from qualitative coding of retrospective exemplar interviews on identity precepts of *redemption*, *agency*, and *communion*. These findings are supplemented with grounded theory analysis to specify themes related to developmental process in spiritual identity. From this work, we propose that spiritual identity is developmentally understood as commitment consistent with a sense of self to interpersonal behaviors of transcendent, goal-corrected character emphasizing purpose, generativity, and social responsibility.

Introduction

Sayid (pseudonym) is a 32-year-old Sunni Muslim from the San Fernando Valley region of Los Angeles, a neighborhood rich with ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Sayid came to the United States about 10 years ago to pursue graduate studies in his field of civil engineering. A native of south-central Turkey, Sayid is single and deeply committed to local humanitarian concerns. He became involved in the research project as a nominated exemplar—identified by area Muslims on their own criteria for persons demonstrating exceptional spiritual maturity. The weight of spiritual experience in Sayid’s narrative is unmistakable:

The most important thing is that I’m not alone. I don’t feel alone. I know Allah and I know that the world and universe were not created by themselves—there is someone else. Allah is great in the universe. Allah created me and all human beings—people who can do things

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and learn. This vision is the most important thing to me, realizing that I am not alone in the world and I have been given meaning in this life. There is a reason that I am in this world. There is a reason that I am living this life. The reason is that I can learn from Allah to be a respectful human being, trying to follow him and become better educated in Islam. Islam is my preparation for the next life. The next life will not have any end, so this is very important to me.

Sayid's reflection presents a challenge for researchers interested to explore developmental processes associated with spirituality in general, and spiritual identity in particular. The recent bifurcation of religion and spirituality in social science reflects earnest effort to clarify potentially blurred elements of human experience (MacDonald, 2000; Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, & Wagener, 2005; Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Wishing to move beyond the scientific study of religion as a structured and institutionalized entity, spirituality offers an individual account of transcendent experience reflecting traits of awe and gratitude. In this sense, spirituality might be understood as "a search for the sacred, a process through which people seek to discourse, to hold on to and, when necessary, transform whatever they hold sacred in their lives" (Hill & Pargament, 2003). Sayid's narrative embraces sacred elements, expounding on spiritual experience through divine presence that offers security and hope. The depth of his reflection suggests that these ideas are firmly embedded in developmental process rather than the result of recent awakening. Yet Sayid seamlessly weaves spirituality into the regimented discipline of his religious practice as a Muslim. Full appreciation of Sayid's spiritual experience requires, at the very least, a basic role for religion as contextual influence. His example would seem to support criticism that attempts to separate religion from spirituality reflect the convenience of Western (particularly North American) interests to the exclusion of non-Western experience (Stifoss-Hanssen, 1999).

Keeping definitional concerns of spirituality squarely in view, this chapter outlines findings from a recent project to understand spiritual identity and its development. Psychological research on spiritual identity is sparse and skewed toward Christian perspectives (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell, 2006; Templeton & Eccles, 2005). Specifying the relationship between spirituality and religious practice will require study considering the experiences of non-Western individuals. Accordingly, this study took a naturalistic approach to spiritual identity through comparative study of nominated exemplars from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian contexts. The main goal was to construct a broad understanding of spiritual identity based on the experiences of individuals nominated for outstanding spiritual maturity on criteria established by these same religions. This objective reflected an interest to constrain normative theorizing about the nature of spiritual identity with the actual experiences of people widely recognized as spiritually exceptional, a principle known as *psychological realism* (Flanagan, 1991; Walker & Frimer, 2007; Walker & Pitts, 1998).

The chapter is organized into three sections serving the central study aim. The first section presents a rationale for naturalistic study of spiritual identity in exemplars along with a conceptual overview of identity in the developmental work

of McAdams (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 1997, 2006). The second section offers findings from qualitative coding of exemplar spiritual experience on McAdams' identity precepts of *redemption*, *agency*, and *communion*. The third section presents a grounded theory strategy designed to unearth themes related to the development of spiritual identity. Outcomes from two methodological moves are integrated toward a core definition of spiritual identity balancing theoretical assumptions with naturalistic observation.

Naturalistic Study of Spiritual Identity

How might we approach the psychological study of developing spiritual identity? The notion of spiritual identity moves the self to center stage. Self psychology is endowed with an illustrious legacy evoking the influential writings of Sigmund Freud. More recent theory maintains that the self is formed on the basis of social reciprocity across a range of developmental variations in time, place, and role (Balswick, King, & Reimer, 2005; Damon & Hart, 1988; Harter, 1999). Core self-understanding or *identity* is constructed through cumulative experiences in relationships. Through childhood this knowledge remains concrete and relatively unsophisticated. Grade school children make straightforward assessments based on immediate, real-world contingencies such as "I am a fast runner" or "I am friendly to new kids in class." Concrete self-understanding becomes conceptually richer through adolescence with the onset of abstract thinking. Assessments might grow to include reflections such as "I am a generous person" or "I am able to help others see the glass half full." The developmental challenge for adolescent identity is for youth to maintain a stable sense of self through a variety of social contexts and requirements (Arnett, 2006; Balswick et al., 2005; Damon & Hart, 1988; Erikson, 1968). Parents of adolescents commonly recognize the challenge through rapid shifts in youth attitudes, affect, and language across contexts such as athletic teams, peers, religious groups, or classroom environment.

Consolidation of identity in adolescence and early adulthood is marked by the capacity for individuals to maintain a core self in spite of situational pressures. Young adults eventually construct an episodic understanding of the self-in-relationships that may include authority figures, romantic attachments, peers, and the divine. Identity reflects a variety of trait and goal-oriented features of self which are experienced between different social contexts and woven into a coherent account. Traits and goals become familiar to an extent that the individual is afforded a framework for constructing an identity narrative; stories which document abstract and concrete aspects of self-understanding (McAdams, 2006; McAdams & Pals, 2006). Identity may be conceptualized as a general developmental achievement, or related to particular aspects of behavior which necessarily reference the self. By way of example, *moral identity* emphasizes a suite of ethical and caring behavior associated with the developing self-in-relationship (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Balswick et al., 2005; Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Reimer & Wade-Stein, 2004; Walker & Frimer,

2007). *Spiritual identity* is a newcomer to research in developmental psychology, with contemporary studies limited to predominantly Protestant Christian samples (Kiesling et al., 2006; Templeton & Eccles, 2005).

Current efforts to pin down a definition of spiritual identity reflect difficulties with parsing individual aspects of identity from social contexts fundamental to the development of self-understanding. Templeton and Eccles (2005) argue that religious identity reflects a *collective* dimension of accepted beliefs shared with others through a particular community. Spiritual identity is defined in terms of *personal* experiences noted in beliefs, values, and behaviors related to the divine. This is similar to a proposal from Kiesling et al. (2006), who conceptualize spiritual identity as “a persistent sense of self that addresses ultimate questions about the nature, purpose, and meaning of life, resulting in behaviors that are consonant with the individual’s core values.” Both definitions place a premium on individual values in the construction of a spiritual self. Assuming these values to have transcendent qualities (in the sense of being related to ultimate concerns), the developmental character of a highly individualized spiritual identity becomes a tougher sell. Over time, spiritual experience is likely to incorporate categories of transcendent value reflecting a spectrum of relational influences. Parent, peer, and romantic relationships are laden with the freight of values and expectations for conduct which end up in the episodic register of narrative identity. Religious influence may implicitly permeate these relationships, even if removed by degree or generation from formal practice. The identification of spiritual identity with personal values cleanly separable from collective influences may prove difficult in real-world experience.

Challenges with the definitional issue reflect the highly diffuse and abstract nature of spiritual experience. Rather than expend further effort toward a definitive theoretical understanding of spiritual identity, an alternative strategy might utilize a “bottom-up” approach found in parallel research involving behavioral abstractions such as morality (Flanagan, 1991). Because researcher notions of self-referencing spirituality may differ markedly from the experiences of real people, it may be appropriate to begin with everyday conceptions in the interest of definitions that are *psychologically realistic*. Flanagan’s proposal is increasingly common in the literature on moral identity development, with study focused on everyday conceptions of ethical maturity in prototype theory and descriptive research on exemplars recognized for exceptional acts of justice, bravery, and caring (Colby & Damon, 1992; Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Hart & Fegley, 1995; Matsuba & Walker, 2004; Narvaez, Lapsley, Hagele, & Lasky, 2007; Reimer & Wade-Stein, 2004; Walker & Frimer, 2007; Walker & Reimer, 2005). In step with this trend, this study adopted the principle of psychological realism into research design with emphasis upon retrospective accounts of spiritual maturity in the experiences of exemplary individuals nominated from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian backgrounds. The project was premised on the identity theory of McAdams with the anticipation that ultimate definitions of spiritual identity would be shaped by real-world experiences of exemplars from different contexts of influence.

What features of identity theory are relevant to comparative religious study of spiritual maturity in nominated exemplars? The work of Dan McAdams at

Northwestern University offers a contemporary account of identity development in social context (McAdams, 1997, 2006; McAdams, Anyidoho, Brown, Huang, Kaplan, & Machado, 2004; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams & Pals, 2006; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). McAdams argues that a developmental objective of identity is the establishment of personal legacy framed through contributions to others. This notion of *generativity* might be practically understood through childbirth; a situation where suffering yields a positive outcome in a newborn child along with deepened purpose in the parental vocation. People with generative identities might mentor youth, publish a book, or volunteer with the homeless. Identity maturity is characterized by an episodic understanding of self as an agent of change and goodness across varied social contexts. In the interest of outlining a framework capable of describing generative identity through assessment, McAdams designed the *life narrative interview*, a set of semi-structured questions dealing with developmental history, critical events, life challenges, significant people, potential future, moral conflict, personal ideology, and overall life theme (McAdams, 1997, 2006; Walker & Frimer, 2007).

Life narrative interviews conducted with hundreds of individuals yielded three precepts of mature identity (McAdams, 1997, 2006). The first precept, *redemption*, characterizes life narratives where participants recount the transformation of negative circumstances into something positive. The individual is directly involved in the transformative process, particularly through personal risk in the interest of making the most from situational difficulties. The second precept, *agency*, reflects aspects of power, autonomy, mastery, and achievement. Agency might reflect underlying traits and goals related to accomplishment. This could be aimed at vocation but also include relational and principled actions given to the promotion of human flourishing. The third precept, *communion*, describes identity process given to the formation of community and other relational networks. Communion is most clearly evident through narrative affirming warmth, compassion, and intimacy. Together, these precepts anticipate an understanding of spiritual identity as a personally significant cache of experiences in memory, framed within relational and social contexts that make those experiences meaningful.

This study explored retrospective accounts of narrative spiritual identity in exemplars nominated for exceptional maturity from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian contexts. The main assessment instrument was a version of the life narrative interview. Responses to the interview were content analyzed at two levels. First, McAdams' (1997, 1998) life narrative interview coding scheme was applied to narrative content on precepts of *redemption*, *agency*, and *communion*. The first level of analysis was designed to consider comparative elements of narrative identity in spiritual experience between religious contexts. Second, the same interview responses were independently coded using the grounded theory approach to qualitative study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This analysis offered an opportunity to discern developmental features of spiritual identity and experience that might not be immediately visible through the three precepts of identity outlined in McAdams (1997, 1998). Findings from both analyses were then used to offer definitional insights for spiritual identity in developmental context.

To construct an account of spiritual identity consistent with a principle of psychological realism, three focus groups were convened from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religions, respectively. Focus groups were comprised of 6–12 leaders and clergy from each religion in the greater Los Angeles area. Leaders were invited from religious groups that were numerically well represented in the region, including Sunni Muslim, Reform Jewish, and Presbyterian Christian religions. Focus groups were conducted in English, asking individuals to identify nomination criteria that reflected spiritual maturity. Focus groups subsequently prioritized criteria, with similar descriptors collapsed into general statements. The resulting list of spiritual nomination criteria included (a) learning and being in continual process, (b) sense of (and acting on) responsibility for one's fellows, (c) sense of one's own faith that informs daily life, (d) God-consciousness, (e) believes in Qur'an/Torah/Bible as word of God and follows it in daily life, (f) lives life intentionally, (g) practices faith (e.g., prayer, fasting, observances, charity, declaration of faith, pilgrimage), (h) promotes peace among all peoples, (i) is actively engaged with God and others, (j) lives a joyful, balanced, and humble life, and (k) is interested in helping others grow spiritually in a quietly contagious manner.

Nomination criteria were provided to Muslim, Jewish, and Christian leaders that participated in the focus groups. Leaders were asked to nominate individuals from within their respective religion that demonstrated strong evidence of nomination criteria for spiritual maturity. Nominated exemplars included several religious leaders but mainly consisted of everyday individuals from area mosques, synagogues, and parishes. Nominated exemplars were contacted and invited to participate in the study. Interested exemplars were mailed consent forms and scheduled for a face-to-face interview. Participants were provided with a \$50 honorarium as a token of appreciation for study involvement.

Of 36 exemplars nominated from Reform Jewish leaders and clergy, 15 participated. This sample group averaged 45.0 years of age ($SD = 11.2$, range = 25–66). The sample self-identified as ethnically Jewish (82.4%), European (11.8%), or Latino/a (5.9%). Level of education included high school completion (5.0%), bachelor's degree (30.0%), master's degree (55.0%), and doctoral degree (10.0%). Out of 27 nominations from Sunni Muslim leaders and clergy, 15 participated. The Muslim sample averaged 34.5 years of age ($SD = 11.4$, range = 23–79). This sample self-identified as ethnically European (70.6%) or Turkish (29.4%). Level of education included high school completion (5.0%), bachelor's degree (35.0%), master's degree (35.0%), and doctoral degree (25.0%). Of 32 nominations from Presbyterian Christian leaders and clergy, 15 participated. The Christian sample averaged 56.9 years of age ($SD = 11.3$, range = 33–72). This sample self-identified as ethnically European (80.0%), Latino/a (15.0%), or American Indian (5.0%). Level of education included high school completion (15.0%), trade school or associate's degree (5.0%), bachelor's degree (10.0%), master's degree (50.0%), and doctoral degree (20.0%). Overall, nominated exemplars were well-educated individuals engaged in professional vocations. All exemplars were fluent in the English language.

Life Narrative Coding

The first qualitative review of narrative identity data made use of McAdams' (1997, 1998) coding scheme focused on redemption, agency, and communion. Understood in terms of participant self-understanding through the redirection of difficult situations toward positive outcomes, *redemption* is thematically decomposed into five elements including (a) sacrifice, (b) recovery, (c) growth, (d) learning, and (e) improvement. For this study, a team of three qualitative raters were trained to evaluate exemplar responses using the McAdams (1997, 1998) coding scheme. The McAdams coding manual emphasizes conservative identification of elements on the basis of presence "1" or absence "0." The first three elements of redemption (e.g., sacrifice, recovery, and growth) were not substantively present in exemplar narratives across all three religious contexts. However, the last two redemption elements (e.g., learning and improvement) were substantially represented in participant narrative. *Learning*, or the notion that participants gain wisdom from a negative event, is concerned with instrumental rather than psychological benefit. As an example, "father is dying" might be associated with a redemptive learning outcome in "father gives sage words of advice." Interrater agreement for this element was 93%. *Improvement* relates to the transformation of a bad situation associated with negative emotions to one that is positive in outcome and affective quality. As an example, "terrified of public speaking" might change into an outcome where the participant "improves and becomes an effective speaker." Interrater agreement for this element was 82%.

The redemption/learning element was most strongly affiliated with Christian exemplars (5) with somewhat fewer codes noted for Muslim exemplars (3) and Jewish exemplars (2). This pattern was exactly replicated for the redemption/improvement element, with 5 coded occurrences for Christians as opposed to 3 for Muslims and 2 for Jews. The McAdams coding regimen calls for restraint in making positive code identifications. As a result, these scores suggest that redemptive narrative is well represented in the Christian exemplar group. Within the confines of the coding scheme, notation of a category across one-third of a study sample is considered robust (McAdams, 1998). The prominence of redemption/learning and redemption/improvement in the Christian exemplar sample may reflect developmental and situational processes associated with spiritual identity. Relative to Muslim and Jewish exemplars, Christians report more stories of redemptive significance which reference the self. Redemption is deeply embedded in participant developmental histories, with accounts commonly focused on adolescence and early adulthood. McAdams (2006) suggests that redemption is a prominent feature of identity in the American cultural context, reflecting Judeo-Christian belief systems. This interpretation may require qualification given study findings that, as with Christian exemplars, Jewish exemplars were typically born and raised in the United States. Yet this group did not evince nearly as many redemption codes in identity narratives.

The difference on redemption observed between Christian exemplars with Muslim and Jewish exemplars may reflect particular influences related to religious

context. It is possible that Christian exemplars construct spiritual identity from a vantage analogous to a religious vision of redemption through belief in a messianic divinity (e.g., Jesus Christ). The Christian commitment to redemption through motifs of death and resurrection may provide a frame for identity process which prioritizes personal growth resulting from negative events (learning) with sometimes triumphal accounts of how these events form the basis for positive outcomes (improvement). Yet this basis for spiritual identity process could be overstated given that redemption/learning and redemption/improvement elements are moderately present in Muslim and Jewish exemplar narratives. A measured interpretation concludes that redemption is a noteworthy feature of exemplar spiritual identity, with potentially interesting valuations related to the priorities of particular religious contexts.

As with redemption, the *agency* aspect of power and achievement in narrative identity is supported by smaller elements of focused attention (McAdams, 1997). *Self-mastery* pertains to individual efforts to achieve physical, mental, emotional, or moral strength toward a measurable impact on other people. An example might include the recovering alcoholic's concerted effort to stay sober as a positive influence on his growing children. Interrater agreement for this element was 82%. *Status/victory* invokes work to achieve high status or position resulting in prestige. An example of this element might be a businesswoman's 15-year journey to rise through the ranks of her company to achieve a top management position. Interrater agreement for *status/victory* was 98%. *Achievement/responsibility* suggests self-sufficiency, freedom, and self-control. An example might consist of a college undergraduate's growing efficacy through successful management of a personal budget. Interrater agreement for *achievement/responsibility* was 87%. Finally, *empowerment* captured the notion of accomplishing goals affiliated with standards of excellence in efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness. An example might include the success of a middle-school math teacher through improved student achievement on standardized tests. Interrater agreement for *empowerment* was 89%.

The *self-mastery* element of agency was evenly distributed between spiritual exemplars from different religious contexts. Muslim exemplars were coded for 3 instances of this element, with 2 noted for Jewish exemplars and 3 for Christian exemplars. The *empowerment* element was similarly spread across groups, with 3 coded instances in Muslim exemplar narratives, 1 for Jewish exemplars, and 3 for Christian exemplars. Distribution of these elements in narrative suggests a moderately important place for self-mastery and empowerment in spiritual identity. To an extent, this finding may be an artifact of the nomination criteria for spiritual maturity derived from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian focus groups. Based on the criteria, spiritual exemplars are expected to demonstrate other-oriented maturity which includes personal discipline upholding excellence in attitude and behavior. Nomination criteria loosely reflect an aspect of spiritual leadership in exemplarity which seems well-served by the self-mastery and empowerment elements.

Some disparities were observed in coded outcomes on *status/victory* by religious context. Muslim exemplars scored highest on this agentic element (4), followed by Christian exemplars (2), and Jewish exemplars (0). This came as a surprise given

that educational and vocational achievement between exemplar groups was roughly equivalent. While the element of status/victory is presumably available to all study participants by way of personal achievement, Muslim spiritual exemplars made more powerfully self-referential claims on this dimension than Christian and Jewish exemplars. The disparity became wider for the *achievement/responsibility* element, with coded notation for half the Muslim sample (8) as opposed to Jewish (2) and Christian (2) samples. It could be argued that highly agentic identity is reflected in the spiritual experience of Muslims who recently emigrated and quickly mastered vocational challenges in a foreign setting. But it seems equally plausible that these findings are attributed to the religious context of the Muslim sample. Spiritual identity for this group is potentially associated with values enjoining hard work with personal responsibility. *Status/victory* and *achievement/responsibility* elements were reflected in the developmental histories of Muslim exemplars, implying deep roots for identity processes that long preceded relocation to North America.

The final evaluated identity precept was *communion*. Four elements of communion were considered for exemplar participants. *Love/friendship* pertains to positive emotions experienced in the context of close, interpersonal relationship. An example of this element might be recounted through a mail carrier's friendship with an elderly resident known over years of brief, daily encounter. Interrater agreement for this element was 89%. *Dialogue/sharing* references intimacy through good conversation and mutuality including non-verbal cues. An example of this element might be a "breakthrough" conversation between a mother and her mildly estranged 15-year-old daughter. Interrater agreement for this element was 91%. *Care/support* describes how an individual cares for another or is cared for by another. An example might include a middle-aged woman's commitment to care for her Alzheimer's ravaged father. Interrater agreement for this element was 89%. *Unity/togetherness* is affiliated with a personal sense of harmony or synchronicity with other individuals, groups, or even the world at large. An example of this element might be captured by a former executive's move to non-profit work with the urban poor. Interrater agreement for this element was 91%.

Trends for the communion aspect in exemplar narrative identity were readily noted by religious context. The most pervasive incorporation of communion elements was observed in the narrative identities of Jewish exemplars. Overall, these exemplars evinced moderate to strong references to communal elements in spiritual identity. Jewish exemplars were coded for *love/friendship* (3), *dialogue/sharing* (2), *care/support* (3), and *unity/togetherness* (5). These findings were aligned with qualitative notation that Jewish exemplars identified strongly with family and community. Exemplar spiritual identity routinely referenced ethnic and cultural aspects of Jewishness. Experiences of the divine were framed on relational understanding, reflecting spiritual encounter that was collectively shared. This should not diminish the importance of individual spiritual experience for Jewish exemplars. Nevertheless, these exemplars seem to construct spiritual self-understanding in a way that prioritizes collective values and relational commitments.

Reviewing findings from other religious groups, Muslim exemplars scored high on two of the four elements from the communion motif. Muslim exemplars coded

on *caring/help* (6) and *unity/togetherness* (4). Christian exemplars did not code strongly on communion, with the exception of *love/friendship* (4). Findings from the communion aspect raise noteworthy implications regarding summary understanding of spiritual identity. Of the three religious contexts considered through the study, Christian exemplars were least oriented toward the communion aspect in McAdams' (1997, 1998) scheme. This aligned Christian exemplar self-understanding with spiritual identity definitions emphasizing personal or individual values—an unsurprising outcome given that these definitions were premised upon studies of mostly Christian individuals (Kiesling et al., 2006; Templeton & Eccles, 2005). The prominence of communion in Jewish and Muslim exemplar self-understanding, however, underlines a broader notion of values orientation in spiritual identity. For these exemplars, spiritual experience is interpersonally situated. The divine is known in part on the basis of shared experiences with other Jews and Muslims. In addition, personally significant spiritual experiences precipitate other-oriented behaviors in caring and/or intimacy. The inclusion of non-Western exemplar perspectives in this study suggests that spiritual identity is “collective” as much as “personal,” directly reflecting values originating in social and religious contexts.

Grounded Theory Coding

As a complement to the McAdams (1997, 1998) scheme, exemplar response data were analyzed in a second methodological move using grounded theory. Grounded theory is a systematic approach to qualitative data reliant upon first-level coding of *conditions*, *interactions*, *strategies*, and *consequences* (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First-level codes are applied to identity narrative through a process known as *constant comparison* whereby each code is referenced against all other codes by transcript. This process is continued until reaching a point of *theoretical saturation* or the cessation of new first-level code categories. The resulting list of first-level codes is subsequently applied to remaining interview transcripts. First-level codes are conceptually assessed for overlap and subsequently collapsed into higher-order categories known as *axial codes*. Axial codes are subjected to a similar process of recombination, resulting in themes. For this study, interview data were subjected to grounded theory coding by a single rater to evaluate aspects of spiritual identity potentially residing outside redemption, agency, and communion from the first methodological move.

Grounded theory analysis yielded five themes covering developmental aspects of spiritual identity across Muslim, Jewish, and Christian exemplar data. In order of prominence across the entire data set, themes included (a) *relational consciousness*, (b) *vocational identity*, (c) *stewardship*, (d) *tradition*, and (e) *divine as omnipotent*. We have outlined each theme in detail, offering a definition and brief comment on origins through the coding process. Exemplar quotations provide theme illustration, with summary comment on religious differences and developmental implications toward an improved understanding of spiritual identity. For reasons of space, we are unable to include quotations from all three religious contexts on a given theme.

Theme 1: Relational Consciousness

Spiritual identity narratives revealed a core developmental theme familiar to researchers involved with children's spirituality (Hay & Nye, 1998; Nye & Hay, 1996; Reimer & Furrow, 2001). *Relational consciousness* was defined in this setting as an interrelation of individual, interpersonal, community, and divine relationship that constitute a harmonious whole; particularly through devotion to the divine. The relational consciousness theme was constructed from lower-level codes emphasizing community, relationship, family, group membership, connection, and spiritual communication. In the reflection of a 42-year-old Jewish exemplar:

It means that I have community. It means that I'm never alone in the world—that not only do I have a system of beliefs; I have a group of people who are committed to me and responsible to me as I am to them. It means I have an obligation to change the world for the better. It also means that I have a relationship with God that is unique. Family! I think for me the focus includes the family unit; the family within the community. For me, I have a looser definition of family . . . for those who are not just my immediate family but those people I'm connected to not only as friends but through the synagogue. You know, this is my extended family. The development of that unit through religious life is something that I think is above and beyond any other part of my spiritual connection.

A 56-year-old Christian exemplar kept her account of relational consciousness succinct:

I think probably establishing a relationship with God comes first. Everything else flows from that. It's all about establishing and maintaining a relationship with God in daily life.

In the former instance, the relational consciousness theme captured broadly communitarian experiences of spiritual identity reminiscent of communion aspect coding on Jewish exemplars (McAdams, 1997). The relational consciousness theme was also present through Muslim exemplar narratives, although it may be slightly less central to Muslim experience. Consistent with other developmental research, relational consciousness was recounted by exemplars as a significant aspect of spiritual awakening in childhood. These early accounts tended to be somewhat self-centered, characterized by experiences of awe or gratitude that were personalized or involved a few close confidants. With time and development relational consciousness grew to emphasize unity and oneness with the divine, often referencing group membership and solidarity. For those who did not have a strongly religious upbringing, relational consciousness seemed to debut shortly after resolution of core belief systems in early adolescence.

Theme 2: Vocational Identity

Exemplars take their vocations seriously, closely integrating their work with spiritual experience and understanding. We attempted to capture the issue as a function of *vocational identity* or a spiritual calling to divine service that consolidates personal efficacy, purpose, and generativity. Underlying code categories for this theme

included obligation, acceptance of life circumstances, sense of being chosen, guidance, responsibility, and calling. Vocational identity was a touchstone for deeper existential reflection in the narrative of a 35-year-old Muslim woman:

Why are we here? Why am I the person I am right now? Why am I not somebody different? What is my purpose? Where is the purpose of all things that are created? I find prospective answers to those questions in my spirituality. I think that is the most important part; it really explains why you are created, what your life should be like. What kind of life you should live—what you are supposed to do.

For a 40-year-old Christian exemplar involved in community service, the issues are similar even if the language is different:

For me, service is a fulfillment of a calling. I can expand on that, but it's like breathing for me because I grew up in the church and that was an expectation for me as a child. I became a Christian at ten and the calling grew from my personal faith journey. It was there in college and still later again—a response to God's grace. Will I accept the calling? To be a Christian means to surrender to God's call in your life, to be God's child and to serve God, however that works out in your life.

Most exemplars reported a deep sense of fulfillment in their present vocations, resolution we would attribute to the consolidation of vocational identity. Vocation became a tangible, visible extension of spiritual commitment and experience. The vocational identity theme was evenly distributed throughout narrative responses from all three religious contexts. Interestingly, the theme did not show up in developmental accounts of early childhood. Vocational identity seems relegated to processes associated with late adolescence and early adulthood. This makes good psychological sense in that vocational concerns tend to be abstract and require sophisticated reflection prior to enactment through behavior. We note that exemplars as a group are unusually invested in vocational projects designed to “make a difference” or otherwise help others flourish.

Theme 3: Stewardship

The remarkable maturity of exemplars interviewed for the study was evident in a deep sense of spiritual responsibility and obligation. We labeled this intuition as *stewardship*—not just in a financial understanding, but where the individual realizes that he/she must consistently live in a manner that attends to the concerns of the divine, the community, other individuals, and the environment. Stewardship was derived from core notions of submission, respect, discipline, love, compassion, grace, honesty, and peacefulness. In the reflection of a 30-year-old Muslim exemplar:

Well, the words “Islam” and “Muslim” come from the same root. The root of the word means *submission*. You submit to God without questioning what he is asking from you. You just do it, whether it's the daily prayers or wearing the scarf or fasting or giving to charities or visiting Mecca. I am doing it because God wants me to do it. The other meaning of “Muslim” is peace. Peace between people and in the universe; not cutting the tree or destroying the little animal because we believe that every created being has a way of saying

Allah's name. The cat is saying "meow," but actually is saying one of the names of Allah the most compassionate. You try to understand the relationship between the creatures and see the value of each thing in the universe.

Stewardship took a different turn in the account of a 41-year-old Jewish exemplar:

I think there is a saying which Rabbi Hillel made. "If I am for myself only, then what am I? If I'm not for myself, who will be?" Take care of yourself so that you can treat others with honesty, kindness, and compassion.

The stewardship theme was present for exemplars from all three religious contexts, although it was particularly pronounced in Muslim experience. As with the vocational identity theme, stewardship was not developmentally evident until late adolescence when exemplars began to fully differentiate themselves at a spiritual level from parents. Many exemplars made comments to the effect that, when acting responsibly on behalf of others, they were serving as stewards for the divine and the creation. Stewardship grew to become a lifetime mission for exemplars, defining their ongoing behavior and self-understanding on the basis of keeping in step with the divine.

Theme 4: Tradition

The spiritual identity of nominated exemplars was characterized by commitment to religious tradition. The *tradition* theme was variously understood as *hadith* (Muslim), *Torah* (Jewish), or *scripture* (Christian); knowledge handed down through oral or written sources that helped to maintain culture, promote religious practice, and build community. Underlying code categories for this theme included study, worship, ritual, shared language, values, and culture. The tradition theme was present in Christian and Muslim exemplars, with overwhelming prominence in Jewish exemplar narratives. In the reflections of a 36-year-old Jewish exemplar:

The first thing that I think about is my Jewish identity . . . a certain responsibility to history. This is not really a documentary history like the Roman Empire or something, but the idea that I am receiver of ancient tradition passed down from generation to generation. I'm duty bound to honor that tradition and sometimes there are specific ways that I'm duty bound to act and within that way of life comes an opportunity to express my own individuality.

Tradition was similarly evident in the account of a 47-year-old Jewish exemplar involved with the Simon Wiesenthal Center:

It's important for me to be engaged in healing the world and the community—engaged in that tradition, carrying on the tradition, passing on the tradition to my children in a real and meaningful way so that they grasp it.

Tradition was developmentally rich and pervasive. Jewish exemplars recounted moments of instruction from parents on matters of observance, holidays, and kosher laws at very young ages. Interestingly, most of the Jewish exemplars in this study

did not keep kosher at the time of interview. The accoutrements of tradition offered a kind of scaffolding for spiritual identity, with developmental rites of passage that deepen unexpected experiences of the divine. Jewish exemplars related nearly every aspect of personal spiritual experience back to the tradition of their heritage. The tradition theme clearly converged with Jewish prioritization of communion in the McAdams coding section of the study.

Theme 5: Divine as Omnipotent

All exemplar participants noted the power of spiritual experience in general and the divine in particular. The *divine as omnipotent* theme was constituted from belief that the deity possesses ultimate power over the universe and its inhabitants. Far from a cosmic Santa Claus, the divine as omnipotent offers insight on practice of forgiveness, healing, and protection. This theme was often referenced through spiritual understanding of divine presence. Divine as omnipotent was particularly prevalent in Christian exemplar narratives. A 46-year-old Christian exemplar noted:

I have a better relationship with God now because I feel that God doesn't have to do things the way I want. But I feel that God is at work whether I understand or not what's happening. I don't expect really, I don't expect a lot from God. I think God has given me so much that he doesn't have to do what I think he should.

The divine as omnipotent took a slightly different cast in the account of a 33-year-old Muslim exemplar:

I think one thing that is most important is that you have to be aware that you are always being watched and kind of behave accordingly. Allah is always watching—if I say something wrong then he knows about it. I think that this forces you to live a more organized life. It's all about the love of God and fear of God. The balance of those two things plus being watched by Allah. You can always maintain that balance. You have to fear God but at the same time you have to know that he loves us and we love him.

The divine as omnipotent theme was found in every section of the interview, often in conjunction with good or bad circumstances. In the main, life's greatest uncertainties seemed associated with a strong spiritual sense of divine omnipotence and agency. Developmentally, this theme was particularly noteworthy in transitional life stages, when exemplars felt they had done something wrong, or while enduring a difficult time. Spiritual identity at this level is reliant upon an ongoing sense of divine foreknowledge and wisdom regarding human affairs. Prayer might be important, not to influence the divine but rather to more fully recognize and affirm divine prerogatives. An outsider might consider this fatalistic, but exemplars routinely reported liberation when basking in the knowledge that the divine was effectively "in charge."

Spiritual Identity Revisited

How might spiritual identity be theoretically constrained given outcomes from naturalistic study of nominated exemplars from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian contexts? Spiritual experience is ubiquitous across cultures and peoples. The propensity for people to use relational language to describe that experience suggests a complex interchange between self and social context in the development of spiritual identity. While exemplars often describe spiritual identity process with language that references the divine as a social “other,” we quickly note that their understanding of spirituality also lives beyond what is immediately tangible and visible. Exemplar knowledge of the divine features aspects of self-understanding that incorporate values learned from various social networks along with teachings, holy writings, observances, and pilgrimages. Findings from this study suggest that exemplars incorporate these values into a relational partnership with the divine that powerfully shapes spiritual experiences relevant to self-understanding in identity. The origins of this partnership may be found in earlier (developmental) accounts of human others in social situations, growing to embrace the divine on spiritual terms.

This is reminiscent of a proposal from the great attachment theorist, John Bowlby, who argued that secure children developmentally alter their perceptions of caregivers with a growing appreciation of what things must be like for the parent. On the basis of newly acquired capacity for perspective taking (e.g., theory of mind), children and parents are able to construct shared identities reflecting deeper security in reciprocity and mutual negotiation (Bowlby, 1969). He defined this process in terms of a *goal-corrected partnership*. The prominence of themes like relational consciousness may reflect capacities for perspective taking on the part of exemplars who find security in a spiritual “other” such as the divine. Even if the divine transcends physicality, individuals may through prayer and ritual construct spiritual identity in a goal-corrected sense; a partnership reflecting dynamic give-and-take. Indeed, exemplars from all three religious contexts spoke extensively about their perceptions of the divine’s current expectations for behavior, relationships, and vocation. Manifestations of organized religion (e.g., worship, prayer, ritual, observances, and pilgrimage) may further support the development of such a goal-corrected spiritual identity.

In fidelity to the principle of psychological realism central to the study, we offer a definition of spiritual identity on the basis of naturalistic investigation of nominated exemplar experience. Thus, spiritual identity is *commitment consistent with a sense of self to interpersonal behaviors of transcendent, goal-corrected character emphasizing purpose, generativity, and social responsibility*. This definition recognizes the developmental role of human and spiritual “others” in the formation of episodic self-understanding narrative, prioritizing values shared along personal–collective axes of influence. Underlying features of the definition break with the developmental literature to the extent that personal spiritual experience is reframed by contextual influences and shared understanding (Kiesling et al., 2006; Templeton & Eccles, 2005). The definition retains a distinction between religious and spiritual experience—recalling the uniquely sacred dimensions of spirituality which are not

religious, yet reflect religious influences (Hill & Pargament, 2003). Returning to the case study at the beginning of the chapter, Sayid's spiritual identity is richly imbued with the presence of the divine. The depth of this goal-corrected experience is the "glue" which keeps Sayid enjoined with the ritual and practice of Islam.

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