THE SPIRITUAL BELIEFS OF NON-RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED YOUNG ADULTS

by

Betty Rideout

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1986
M.A., The University of British Columbia, 1990

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study describes the spiritual beliefs of young adults who have no religious affiliation, and examines how they assess and critically reflect upon their beliefs. An interpretative phenomenological analysis research method was used to describe and thematically organize their spiritual beliefs. Three themes emerged from this analysis: a description of spirituality, the narrative process of creating spiritual beliefs, and the outcomes of possessing spiritual beliefs. Participants describe and define spirituality in diverse ways. The more common definitions include a hopeful and benevolent perspective on life, a tentative acceptance of a higher power, belief in karma and a reverence for nature. One of the most consistent findings is the rejection of institutional religion. Participants choose spirituality to avoid the problems they perceive as being typical to institutional religion and utilize a type of marketplace approach to select spiritual beliefs. Spirituality is construed as a highly individualized narrative process which is related to identity. Spirituality also helps to provide a sense of meaning and purpose.

A second level of analysis examined how participants think about and critically reflect upon their beliefs. Elaborative coding, based upon King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model, was used to group participants’ assessment of their beliefs into stages, and then interpreted using the reflective judgment model. The findings show that participants’ personal epistemology influence their spiritual beliefs. Moving up the reflective judgment model, spiritual beliefs in the lower stages are explicit, relatively simple beliefs created largely from a dogmatic opposition to religion. Justification for beliefs is based upon unjustified opinion or description, and spirituality is not a central part of their lived experiences. Higher staged participants describe a greater understanding of and appreciation for a constructivist nature of
knowledge which contributes to spiritual beliefs that are more complex and grounded in their understanding of epistemology. This study demonstrates the importance of encouraging critical thinking skills in relation to spirituality.
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DEDICATION

To Christopher – who first introduced me to Robertson Davies

But what is religion? The dictionaries tell us that the origin of the word is obscure. It may come from a Latin word that means associating oneself with something in the past, or wearing it as a yoke, or it may come from another word that means to go over things again, to think matters through, to remember, to correct. It is in this second sense that I would describe myself as a religious man. To give the utmost serious consideration to the elements of life which confront one seems to me to be following a path that is not content with simplicities, and which cannot reject the innumerable things in life which suggest purposes and powers of which we have the most fleeting perceptions.
(Davies, 1996, p. 279)
Chapter One-Introduction

Overview

Young adults who are unaffiliated with any specific religion nonetheless are confronted with important questions having to do with the “meaning of life” and the nature of “the good.” Parks (2000) described questions such as these as being essentially spiritual. Current university curricula, particularly in the social sciences, are largely uninvolved in providing forums that encourage an examination of these fundamental questions. Research however suggests that growing numbers of young people are interested in spiritually-related concerns (Bibby, 2009). Increasingly, young adults describe themselves as spiritual while simultaneously rejecting established religious institutions in favour of a “marketplace” approach to spiritual beliefs (Roof, 1999). Young adults express a desire to know more about spirituality, but sources that can assist their inquiry with any type of critical reflection are limited.

The term spirituality is frequently used in both secular and religious contexts, and includes defining for oneself a concept of goodness (Alexander, 2001). Such a concept is essential in defining one’s ethics, goals and commitments, and in meaningfully grounding what is important in one’s life. A concept of goodness further helps to establish criteria with which to identify and assess the values required to make important decisions that are especially relevant in young adulthood; decisions related to meaning, career, knowledge, beliefs, and identity. Parks (2000) speaks of faith and spirituality as “the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience” (p. 7) Alexander has explained that spirituality, meaning of life and a search for the nature of the good are intertwined, and that “people are searching for spirituality today . . . because comprehensive visions of the good are conspicuously absent from modern culture” (p. x). Alexander has also stated that there are many
who “are searching today for a spiritual dimension in their lives that connects them to their past, or their culture, or their community, or their God. They are looking for identity and a sense of self, for community and belonging, for awe and wonder, and meaning in life” (p. 3). I believe that questions related to meaning of life are important for individual development, identity, and global citizenship. Yet few opportunities are available for religiously-unaffiliated youth which encourage the asking of these questions. By not providing such opportunities we miss available occasions to help young adults to identify and critically examine their assumptions about what is of value. By encouraging spiritual development in young adulthood, according to Parks (2000), we promote opportunities

... to discover in a critically aware, self-conscious manner the limits of inherited or otherwise socially received assumptions about how life works – what is ultimately true and trustworthy, and what counts – and to recompose meaning and faith on the other side of that discovery. The quality of this recomposition and its adequacy to ground a worthy adulthood depends in significant measure on the hospitality, commitment and courage of adult culture, as mediated through both individuals and institutions. (p. 8)

I have the privilege and responsibility of representing both individual and institutional influences in the lives of young adults. I teach historical and philosophical foundations of psychology to post-secondary adults. From teaching courses such as this, and others in the discipline of psychology, I have come to recognize the presence of a significant group of young adults who are eager to discuss spiritually-related questions in class; questions related to “meaning of life” issues, and who have had little opportunity to not only debate these questions, but to even pose them. In the social sciences, although there is certainly the desire to promote critical thinking skills, there is reluctance to apply those skills to questions related to ultimate meaning. Partly this is due to concerns about including religious topics in the classroom, a contentious issue with no easy answer.
Alexander (2001) has explained that there is an important connection between spirituality and liberal education because spirituality entails critically determining what is the nature of goodness and living by the ethical vision that goodness helps to define. The combination of spirituality and liberal education, according to Alexander, “prepares leaders and citizens to function effectively in a democratic society” (p. xi). Some curricula in the social sciences, such as history of psychology, include an examination of epistemology and the large philosophically-oriented questions on which psychology was founded. According to Bhatt and Tonks (2002) however, access to these courses are diminishing in university curricula. It seems then, that for young adults without religious affiliation, and who have a desire to inquire more deeply into spiritually-related topics, access to learning communities that can help them to engage critically with these questions is limited. Certainly spiritually-related topics are present in popular culture, but television programming and other public media typically do not promote critical thinking.

Related to these concerns are numerous studies which indicate rising rates of depression, especially among young people (Seligman, 1995; Swindle, Heller, Bescosolido & Kikuzawa, 2000). Alexander (2001) commented that “today’s spiritual seekers experience their moral intuitions as fragmented and ungrounded” (p. x). Some propose that increased depression rates are linked to a diminishment in young adults’ (ages 19 – 26) ability to derive purpose and meaning, particularly since involvement with religious groups has declined in this age group. Parks (2000) described the following concern:

Another and growing concern is that too many of our young adults are not being encouraged to ask the big questions that awaken critical thought in the first place. Swept up in religious assumptions that remain unexamined (and economic assumptions that function religiously), they easily become vulnerable to the conventional cynicism of our time or to the economic and political agendas of a consumption-driven yet ambivalent age. (p. xii)
The result is that young secularly-oriented young adults have had little opportunity to create for themselves spiritual meaning because spirituality, in any complex, meaningful way, is absent from Western popular culture, education largely eschews it, and these young people have rejected established religion.

This combination of lack of opportunity and a desire on the part of young people to inquire into spiritually-related matters demonstrates the need for spiritual education. For example, Altemeyer (2004) noted that interest in matters of a spiritual nature seem to have increased in popularity while, at the same time, participation in organized religion in Western nations is on the decline. Pargament (1999) noted that the number of entries under the descriptor spirituality in the Religion Index (1994), an on-line catalogue of journal articles, academic societies, library collections and research institutes all related to the topic of religion, have increased over the past ten years. Bibby’s (2009) survey of Canadian teens in 2008 showed that 54% describe themselves as having spiritual needs. It seems that increasingly young adults describe themselves as spiritual but not religious (Hewlett, 2008; Wuthnow, 1998).

Bibby (2001) observed that it is difficult to know whether the secular, materially-oriented emphasis prominent in Western culture has influenced this age group’s sense of spirituality. This difficulty is compounded by young adults’ approach-avoidance response to institutional religion. Bibby (2001) cited Cox, who explained this tendency well when he described the religious complexities of the earlier cohort named Generation X:

Their religious proclivities have remained a mystery almost as inscrutable as that of the Holy Trinity. Here is a generation that stays away from most churches in droves but loves songs about God and Jesus, a generation that would score very low on any standard piety scale but at times seems almost obsessed with saints, visions, and icons in all shapes and sizes. These are the young people who, Styrofoam cups of cappuccino in hand, crowd around the shelves of New Age spirituality titles in the local book market and post thousands of religious and quasi-religious notes on the bulletin boards in cyberspace. (p. 116)
Not surprisingly, young people of the current generation that Bibby described as “Millenials,”
show a similar reaction to the topic of religiosity. Bibby’s national surveys conducted in 1984,
1992, and 2000 indicated that, within the current generation of young people, eight out of ten
Additionally, 55% of females and 40% of males stated they have spiritual needs and when asked
to define these needs, give wide-ranging responses. Bibby (2002) noted that “the religious
identification landscape among Canadian teenagers has been changing significantly. There has
been a large decline in the proportion of teens which identify with Catholicism and
Protestantism” (p. 85). Bibby’s 2008 survey though showed that the percentage of Canadian
teens who say they never take time to “sit and think has doubled from 13% in 1984 to 26%

It seems that the current cohort of young people is less accepting of the absolute ideals
found in institutional religion (Bibby, 2009; Parks, 2000). Research in faith development theory
described rejection of authority as part of the developmental process, and choosing spirituality
over religion may also be part of this process (Parks, 2000). Pargament (1999) observed that:
“institutional religion has lost some of its authority as a source of indisputable meaning. Instead,
we find people searching for their own subjective meanings, picking and choosing from various
religious offerings – a religion à la carte” (p. 7).

There are a number of influences that are likely contributing to the changing face of
religion. Bibby (2001) suggested that increased attention from the popular media to spiritually-
related issues might be a factor, at least in part. Another macro-level influence is post-modern
theory, especially in its appreciation of relativity (Hunt, 2002). The Western ideal of
individualism also contributes to a growing interest in an individualized spirituality. Related to
this is the influence of globalization and pluralism which has augmented the expanding religious marketplace. Hunt (2002) commented that in particular Eastern mysticism has been imported and merged into the Western sensibility, contributing to the type of religious syncretism seen in the new age movement and spiritual discourse. So, while older forms of institutional religion are currently waning, human appreciation for discourse around meaning and the possibility of the divine do not go away, they just change form. Pargament (1999) commented that those who are unhappy with their current religion do not just leave, rather they leave and seek out a new religious home, and increasingly that home is called spiritual rather than religious. This movement towards spirituality has a host of implications, particularly when related to young adults.

Rationale

Parks (2000) described faith as a central human phenomenon which differs from the traditional understanding of the term. It is:

. . . more adequately recognized as the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience. Faith is a broad, generic human phenomenon. To be human is to dwell in faith, to dwell in the sense one makes out of life – what seems ultimately true and dependable about self, world, and cosmos. (p. 7)

Spirituality is important to individual development that is grounded in a thoughtful consideration of what is goodness and a desire to enact responsible global citizenship. Clearly, religious/spiritual beliefs matter, and their practice have tangible effects. Marty (1996) said that spirituality is the new cool. If this is so, how and what do young adults choose? Young people may have a need for spiritual growth and meaning, but without the structure and guidance that religions can provide, and or the assistance in framing and assessing questions that university curricula provide, may be alone in satisfying this need (Tisdell, 2001). Since young adults increasingly are describing themselves as spiritual but not religious, how effectively are young
non-religiously affiliated adults able to create a well-founded, critically-aware personal faith? How effectively are they able to examine socially informed assumptions about faith and create and recreate something so central to identity? Relativism seems to be the post-modern default position in epistemology and so, as Parks (2000) commented, it does matter how we think. An uncommitted relativist position is a tiring road to travel. Swan and Benack (2002) described how, for young adults, the transition to committed relativism occurred with a great deal of angst and often personal crisis. They stated that:

The dissolution of certain dualistic knowledge, for these young men, seemed to bring about depression, self-hatred, self-fragmentation, and meaninglessness. Having lost a basis for guaranteeing “right” choices, they seemed unable to make any choices at all, to have lost meaning and vitality. This picture of the depressed, intellectual, cynical, existential late adolescent is not a new one. It is a staple of Western adolescent fiction, for example. What was compelling to us was the extent to which this “existential crisis” and its accompanying affect seemed to correspond to the move from dualistic to relativistic thought. (p. 179)

Adding to the confusion here is the conundrum created by the lack of an agreed upon definition of spirituality. Additionally, Bourgeault (2003) suggested that the new spirituality, which is influenced by post-modern theory, comes with its own, more interpretive epistemology. Consequently research within spirituality is challenging from both evaluative and descriptive perspectives. What then does spiritual but not religious really mean? What are these spiritual beliefs, and how are these beliefs evaluated, particularly in an age group that is smack in the middle of learning about the nature of knowledge and justification? As educators it is valuable to have an awareness of common themes in young adults’ spiritual beliefs. Themes shared in common can help to indicate the presence and potential influence of broad social trends such as the wide acceptance of relativism. Other trends, such as the increase in secularization and consumerism, are also likely an integral part of how young people make sense of spirituality.
My assumption is that religiously-unaffiliated young people create their spiritual beliefs largely alone and unaided, except perhaps by what is floating around in popular culture. I suspect that they articulate and evaluate their beliefs vis à vis venues such as the popular media, venues that typically don’t promote cognitive skills such as analysis and critical thinking. Taylor (2004) described this problem best through his observation that our modern epistemology contributes to spiritual beliefs that are tentative and uncertain, and this condition is actively ignored because the pluralistic nature of Western society makes that the easiest choice. Alexander (2001) proposed that we are in the midst of a spiritual crisis which has been precipitated by what he described as the unravelling of Enlightenment ideals. I suspect that both perspectives have merit, particularly considering Taylor’s observation that Western epistemology enables scepticism best.

A popular essay topic in the psychology classes that I teach asks students to identify their values and explain how values are influenced by epistemology. Part of the popularity of this topic seems related to students’ desire to identify and describe their beliefs about “meaning of life” questions which share origins with religion and spirituality. Students commented that it was not until they were exposed to readings and discussion related to these questions that they began to recognize how important an influence their epistemological perspectives were. They also expressed surprise at the extent that socio-cultural influences had upon both their epistemic processes and their personal beliefs that they had hitherto assumed were uniquely their own. Their enthusiasm for tackling a demanding academic requirement was a surprise to me, and I began to wonder what it was about this particular essay topic that generated such interest.

Many of the students who seemed most involved in these essay topics had little experience with faith-based communities and possessed beliefs that could be described as
secula
r-
humanist. I found myself characterizing this group of young people as having a kind of “outsider” spirituality. I suspected that their hunger to define and defend their spiritually-related beliefs was born out of a desire to elaborate upon their sense of identity. My belief, which reflects what much of the discourse on spirituality suggests, is that young people are spiritually hungry and as a result are searching for spiritual meaning and a rationale to support that meaning (Estanek, 2006; Parks, 2000; Watson, 2003). Complicating this search for spiritual meaning is that a significant proportion of adults, one third according to West’s (2000) study, are uncomfortable or shy speaking about spiritual experiences.

A search of online databases (Academic Search Premier, PsychINFO, ERIC, JSTOR, and ProjectMuse) and Google Scholar revealed very little research that explores the search for spiritual meaning on the part of young people who have no religious affiliation. Much of the research on religion and spirituality is a comparison of outcomes between groups who identify themselves as religious or non-religious. There is also a significant body of research on religion and spirituality, but this tends to presume a religious orientation, and since growing numbers explicitly describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, this particular group of young people seems to have been overlooked. Additionally, as Hill and Pargament (2003) commented, the findings in the discourse on spirituality and religion have not been widely disseminated, in part because most of the research findings are published in specialized journals and so are not well-represented in text books or educational curricula.

While there appears to be increasing interest in religion and spirituality (Alexander, 2001; Bibby, 2009; Parks, 2000; Roof, 1999; Singleton, Mason & Webber 2004; Todd, 2008; Wuthnow, 1998), little attention has been paid to identifying and elaborating upon the spiritual philosophies of young adults who might be described as having a secular-humanist stance, or an
eclectic mix of spiritual beliefs, and who explicitly describe themselves as non-religiously affiliated. How young people evaluate religious beliefs has been the source of significant research (Fowler, 1981, 2001; Oser & Scarlett, 1991; Parks, 2000; Streib, 2001, 2003, 2005). But the same examination has rarely been undertaken with young people who describe their beliefs as spiritual but not religious, and who consequently do not have the support of a religious community. Research has been conducted utilizing varying epistemological perspectives as predictors of personality differences (Wilkinson & Migotsky, 1994), and to describe different religious-cognitive styles (Desimpelaere, Sulas, Duriez, & Hutsebaut, 1999), but there is relatively little research in the area of personal epistemologies applied to spirituality (Dale, 1995, 2005).

Bryant, Choi and Yasuno (2003) proposed that: “college is a critical time when students search for meaning in life and examine their spiritual/religious beliefs and values” (p. 726). Alexander observed that: “not only does spirituality, which is acquired through education, need critical thinking as a cornerstone, education also needs to be grounded in a spiritual vision so that it, too, can be meaningful” (p. xi). One important aim of education is to promote critical thinking, so that “justified behaviour will follow rational belief” (Alexander, 2001, p. 171). This, according to Alexander however, is not the end point of education, but rather it is to encourage critical assessment of spiritual beliefs in order to produce a critically-assessed ethical vision.

The outcome of curricula which encourages such an examination helps young people to:

. . . understand that she matters, that what she thinks is significant, and that what she does can make a difference. Such a person is not afraid of the world, or scared of intellectual challenges, or frightened by new ideas. She is open to the possibility of a better tomorrow, confident, hopeful, and optimistic. By the same token she is deeply committed to a vision of the good, either the one in which she has been educated, or another that she has chosen with the tools that she has acquired through the educational process. (p. 188)
To enact this educational outcome we must emphasize critical thinking skills. Education that encourages examination of epistemological perspectives and promotes critical thinking about “meaning of life” questions can help to avoid narcissism and the many problems associated with dogmatism and fragmented values. According to King and Kitchener (1994) “one of the most important responsibilities educators have is helping students learn to make defensible judgments about vexing problems” (p. 1). Kuhn and Weinstock (2002), in their article *What is Epistemological Thinking and Why Does it Matter?* pointed out that our current intellectual climate fosters extreme relativism, and this fostering “inhibits intellectual development beyond the multiplist level” (p. 139). The multiplist level is somewhat equivalent to King and Kitchener’s (1994) quasi-reflective level. These authors stated that it is very important to identify real-world cognitive activities related to knowledge construction and evaluation. An important goal then for educators is to both help students to transfer critical thinking skills to their own lives and to recognize and critically reflect upon the complexity present in most real-life problems. Clearly this application is relevant to young adults’ spiritual beliefs.

Alexander (2001) stated that the social sciences and humanities tend to ignore questions related to ultimate meaning. Hill and Pargament (2003) observed that “religion and spirituality are understudied in psychology and related disciplines” (p. 65). Describing what spiritually-related beliefs young adults without religious education, affiliation or commitment hold, and how they critically evaluate those beliefs, is useful simply because this group has been understudied. Perhaps these young people experience their beliefs as well-integrated and grounded, but, based upon my teaching experience with this age group, I believe that this is a source of confusion for them. This confusion may be compounded because of their isolation from faith-based
communities and the lack of discourse within the academic world on religion and spirituality. As well, because this group operates outside of religious discourse, and because spirituality falls outside of traditional academic topics, it might also be one of the last areas of personal belief they feel confident about expressing and examining. If so, it seems probable that their insight into how they define and justify their beliefs also contributes to their sense of purpose and well-being (Alexander, 2001; Parks, 2000).

**Research Goal**

Alexander (2001) observed that fostering critical thinking is crucial to what he described as intelligent spirituality. Encouraging the development of an effective spirituality helps to transcend dogmatism and encourage an authentic identity (Alexander, 2001; Fowler, 2001; Parks, 2000). A critically aware spirituality helps young adults to articulate their understanding of goodness, identify values to which they are committed and from which they can evaluate important questions related to their lives and communities. A starting point for this development is to first identify what the beliefs are of young adults who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, and who have no religious affiliation. While I suspect their goal is to approach questions of a spiritual nature independently, they have not had the support and benefit of a religious tradition or learning community. Alexander (2001) noted that encouraging critical thinking is the best means to help avoid the narrow path of religious indoctrination or the wider path of overwhelmingly diverse spiritual messages and practices. How we can promote a critically aware faith when topics such as these are avoided in the social sciences and increasingly young adults are rejecting the institution of religion is problematic.

My research goals are twofold: first, to provide a description of young, non-religiously affiliated adults’ spiritually-related beliefs from which shared themes can be accessed.
Representing their beliefs thematically will help to show commonalities in participants’ beliefs that may be an outcome of social trends such as the dominance of a relativist epistemology, the increase in secularism and a marketplace view of spirituality. The second research goal is to interpret how participants’ evaluate and justify their beliefs using a theory of knowledge from within the theoretical area known as personal epistemology. Personal epistemology is typically defined as an individual’s informal assumptions about the nature of knowledge, particularly knowledge related to ill-structured problems (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). These assumptions about knowledge influence how people justify their beliefs. Research in personal epistemology literature suggests this justification process often follows a developmental progression. A number of models have organized these assumptions into stages that are ordered in terms of the complexity and effectiveness of justification for poorly-defined problems. Hofer and Pintrich (2002) pointed out that these models share the same sequence: “movement from a dualistic, objectivist view of knowledge to a more subjective, relativistic stance and ultimately to a contextual, constructivist perspective of knowing” (p. 7).

Both the spiritually-related beliefs, and the epistemic assumptions individuals have about these beliefs, have wide-ranging influences, including how individuals derive meaning and their confidence in and integration of their beliefs. For example, Kuhn and Weinstock (2002) noted that age, life experience, and education alone do not seem sufficient cause for movement to the last stage commonly described as evaluativist. The evaluativist position is described as “the view that reasoned argument is worthwhile and is the most productive path to knowledge and informed understanding, as well as to the resolution of human conflict” (p. 138). Other than a small proportion of highly educated individuals, most people tend to operate from an epistemic position of relativism. Kuhn and Weinstock (2002) proposed that this is so because of the
current competing set of values of social tolerance and acceptance, values which they suggest are reflected in adages such as “live and let live” (p. 139). These social values diminish movement beyond epistemic judgments based on extreme relativism. As an example, their research suggested that choosing a political candidate is often “treated as a matter of personal taste and opinion, rather than comparison on the basis of positions supported by reasoned argument” (p. 139). This perspective seems in keeping with Alexander’s (2001) observation that fostering critical thinking skills in relation to spirituality is an important educational goal.

Most research in personal epistemology literature has tended to focus on global theoretical models, but recently research has begun to explore more domain specific areas, such as the epistemic beliefs of jurors (Weinstock, 1999). Other research has examined discipline-specific epistemology, such as students’ epistemological beliefs about math or science (Bell & Linn, 2002). A significant amount of research has described normative personal epistemologies and related them to levels of education (King & Kitchener, 2002).

Last, the current research topic will assist educators by providing a thematic representation of a group of young, religiously-unaffiliated adults’ spiritual beliefs. This research will also help to illustrate how these young people think about and critically reflect upon their spiritual beliefs. Awareness of commonalities can help to remind educators of the importance of emphasizing the powerful influence of epistemology and other social trends, and has the potential to help support the continued presence of history of psychology courses in university curricula. Additionally, the current research topic can help to promote a critically aware spirituality in a group that has been largely overlooked and that seems eager to engage with spiritually-related topics. Such development has wide-ranging influences related to one’s identity, community, global perspectives, ethics, and responsibilities. My research questions will
also help to elaborate on the description of spiritual beliefs in a group that has been understudied, contribute to more specific research in spirituality and personal epistemology, and help expand upon research related to the encouragement of critical thinking skills in university-aged adults.
Chapter Two-Review of Relevant Literature

The present study raises the following two questions: what are the spiritually-related beliefs of young adults who are not religiously affiliated and how do they assess their beliefs? While each question is informed by a separate body of scholarly literature, these questions also share an intersection with research on spirituality and personal epistemology. This chapter reviews the difficulties inherent in defining spirituality. Some of these difficulties include changing perceptions of what religion and spirituality refer to (Estanek, 2006; Roof, 1999; Taylor, 2007). Various definitions of spirituality are described in this chapter. A new discourse on spirituality produced from socio-cultural influences on religion and spirituality is briefly described. Chapter Two includes a short review of faith development and related-theories, along with relevant empirically-derived research and criticisms of these theories.

Faith development theory shares a number of assumptions about development with the theoretical body known as personal epistemology. Perry’s (1970) research on epistemological development in male undergraduates was the first to empirically examine how one’s personal epistemology can have wide-ranging influences. Personal epistemology is the study of how individuals evaluate ill-structured problems and construe the nature of knowledge and knowing. A number of competing theories have evolved within the study of personal epistemology. Chapter Two, and in greater detail, Appendix F, include an overview of one theory, King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model, from personal epistemological theories. Research which provides a rationale for utilizing a personal epistemological theory as an interpretive tool is also included here, along with a summary of empirically-related research and concerns about the reflective judgment model. Lastly, studies which share similarities to the present study are described, in particular research that is described as spiritual but not religious, the applications of
the reflective judgment model to other areas, and pedagogical implications of spirituality. Gaps in the research are identified, along with a description of the current study’s specific aim.

**What is Spirituality?**

Defining spirituality poses a conundrum, in part because the root word seeks to describe one’s understanding of non-matter and because, as William James explained, it is ineffable. Watson (2003) commented: “it is in the nature of spirituality to be elusive” (p. 10). Wuthnow (1998) observed “if my analysis is correct, interest in spirituality will not wane . . . but it will be increasingly difficult to determine precisely what spirituality means” (p. 14). The Oxford English Dictionary defined spiritual as: “1) of or pertaining, affecting or concerning the spirit or higher moral qualities, especially as regarded in a religious aspect. Frequently in expression or implied in distinction to bodily, corporal or temporal; 2) Of belonging or relating to concerns with sacred or ecclesiastical things or matters and distinguished from secular affairs” (p. 622). Spirituality is defined as “the quality or state of being spiritual: spiritual character” (p. 625). Wittgenstein (1958) proposed that words ultimately derive meaning from their usage; current references to spirituality appear to be evolving a usage that operates outside of traditional religious influences.

The word “spirit” has a long history, and this history has contributed to a labyrinth of perspectives about its definition. Definitions of religion and spirituality have evolved over time, but increasingly definitions of spirituality presume an independence from religion. Pargament (1999) explained that spirituality is often used to refer to one’s personal and affective religious experience. This definition is of spirituality is used in contrast to religion which is understood to refer to the organization, ideology and community of religion. Estanek (2006) undertook a recent literature review to help define the word spirituality, and drew two conclusions: “1) the
new literature on spirituality can be considered a new discourse, and 2) that no one definition of spirituality informs this emerging discourse. Instead, the definition itself is part of the hermeneutic process” (p. 272).

**How Religion Informs Spirituality Historically**

Historically, the definition of spirit reaches back, within Western discourse, to early Greek culture. Cooper (1997) included, in the complete works of Plato, a dictionary of 185 philosophically significant terms that were likely in use during Plato’s time. The explicit word spirit is not included, but related words such as: *psuchē* and *pneuma* are. *Psuchē* is defined as: “soul: that which moves itself; the cause of vital processes in living creatures” (p. 1678). “*Pneuma* is defined as: wind: movement of air in the region of the earth” (p. 1678). Some early Greek philosophers argued for the presence of a universal mind, or *nous*. Many argued for some type of animating or life principle, a first principle that was divine. *Pneuma* and *psuchē* came to represent a belief in an inner animating spirit, and *nous*, a universal mind, or universal life-organizing principle was understood as a controlling presence. Singleton, Mason and Webber (2004) traced how Greek philosophers began considering, within the West, the separation of body and mind by arguing for the continued presence of an immaterial mind, ultimately accessible through universal ideas or forms. These authors observed that: “spirituality in this sense was the basis of the distinctively human attributes: thought, language, rationality. Thus, spirituality/rationality defined humanity” (p. 249). This influential perspective contributed to the belief that immaterial elements define humanity more completely than do bodily elements. The Judeo-Christian tradition also perceived humanity as containing within it a spark or breath of life, created by the Judeo-Christian God. Singleton, Mason and Webber noted that in “the New Testament, Paul (1 Cor 2:14) coins the new word *pneumatikos* (the person animated by the in-
dwelling Spirit of God) and sets this person in contrast to the *psychikos* (the person existing on the merely natural level)” (p. 250). This historical privileging of spirit over body is important to consider since most current definitions of spirituality include some reference to a transcendent figure.

During the Enlightenment period the historical privileging of spirit was reversed and the establishment of reason as the primary epistemological perspective began. Later, Romanticism responded with a stance on spirituality that encouraged an embracing of an aesthetic sensibility, something outside of reasoned debate, and this stance helped influence perspectives on modern spirituality, seen in, for example, Maslow’s (1970) depiction of peak experiences. Post-rationalist definitions of spirituality refer to personal or tacit epistemologies and are “perhaps far more influential on how life is understood and lived by ordinary people” . . . unlike “the narrow confines of Enlightenment rationality (discursive, abstract, conceptual)” (Singleton, Mason & Webber, 2004, p. 251).

**Spirituality Defined**

Defining spirituality, in part because of its long and important tradition within the West, and its appropriation by varying paradigms, has led to what Singleton, Mason and Webber (2004) described as an “almost impenetrable thicket of conflicting theories and definitions of spirituality” (p. 248). Some authors have argued that this thicket can be pruned by identifying those definitions that insist upon a merging between spiritual and religious. In that case, spirituality is usually understood as the enactment of one’s religious beliefs. Some examples have included defining spirituality as a communication with God or a belief in a “force greater than oneself” (Love & Talbot, 1999, p. 362). Hill and Pargament (2003) observed that increasingly spirituality is “used to refer to the personal, subjective side of religious experience,”
with the “sacred [being] the common denominator of religious and spiritual life” (pp. 64 – 65). Pargament (1999) noted that spirituality is often used to refer to a “search for meaning, for unity, for connectedness, for transcendence, for the highest of human potential” (p. 6). DeSouza (2003) cited the following definition: “a search for the sacred in the everyday” (p. 271). Hay and Nye (1996) observed that definitions of spirituality fall within a kind of sliding scale: one end suggests a “‘delicacy of awareness’ such as ‘a musical or poetic sensitivity.’” At the other end of the scale would be ‘mystical experience’ in which a person discovers ‘their oneness with the rest of reality or, if they are religiously devout . . . aspires to or have achieved mystical union with the Godhead’” (p. 7).

Singleton, Mason and Weber (2004) were the authors of an extensive examination of spirituality in Australian youth and young adults. Their study, which took place over a three-year period and included both qualitative and quantitative measures, was presented in a series of three reports. In their preliminary findings, these authors observed that including belief in a transcendent referent was essential to a definition of spirituality since the root word, at least in terms of how it has been used in the Judeo-Christian sense, refers to the spirit of God within the individual. Hunt (2002), in his review of Religion in Western Society, described this type of definition as a minimum or ‘substantive’ definition: “at its simplest, religion is the belief in the supernatural” (p. 7). There is a controversy though around definitions since sociologists have pointed out that definitional boundaries contribute to how demographics are assessed. Interestingly, by the time of Mason, Webber and Singleton’s (2005) second report, which included interviews with 91 participants, their definition of spirituality broadened to include “even those secular worldviews which themselves may repudiate all notions of ‘spirit’, ‘spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’” (p. 9). In Mason, Webber, Singleton and Hughes’s (2006) last report, which
included survey-interviews with 1619 participants, they expressed surprise at the numbers of 
Generation Y participants (born between 1976 and 1990), who identified themselves as having 
no religious affiliation (51%) and yet 22% expressed belief in God. The authors also cautioned 
against depending upon the restricted information taken from surveys and census data since 
participants might agree that they believe in God, but not enact that belief. They argued that:

. . . a residual belief in God (for example) if it is unsupported by other beliefs or by 
identification with a religious community, and is not expressed in values and practices, is 
so far from what is meant by ‘belief’ or ‘religious faith’ in the strong sense, that it is 
debatable whether it is meaningful to describe it as a religious belief at all; it would 
probably be better to describe such ‘beliefs’ as inconsequential opinions on matters 
religious. (p. 5)

This seemed to reflect the earlier substantive definition of religion.

Estanek (2006) undertook a literature review on spirituality within scholarly sources, and 
while no age group was defined within this review, it was concluded that there was a 
developmental element to spirituality. Since spirituality was developmental, educational 
counselors were encouraged to explore how spiritual development might be fostered in youth 
and university-aged adults. Fifteen different sources were included in the literature review. 
Estanek identified the following interpretations of what spirituality meant: spirituality and 
religion were not the same even though the two terms were frequently used interchangeably, 
choosing to be spiritual and not religious was a tacit critique of religion, spirituality involved 
deriving meaning and purpose, spiritual development referred to a movement toward greater 
authenticity and interrelatedness, a movement to outside oneself, and spirituality was often 
experienced in ways that were unconscious and symbolic. Estanek’s review also noted that 
spirituality is often explicitly chosen over religiosity as a way to reject one’s inherited religious 
tradition, and that spirituality may be used as a way of expressing one’s self. Spirituality was
also described as a kind of connection between individuals, similar to the idea of “field” within quantum physics. One last finding from Estanek’s study which is useful to note was the large proportion of individuals who identified their spirituality as New Age, which is very different from the findings of Mason, Webber, Singleton and Hughes’ (2006) three-year review of Australian youth and young adults. Mason et al.’s study expressed surprise at how few individuals seemed to fit within the definition of New Age.

Zinnbauer et al. (1997) polled 346 American individuals drawn from a wide range of religious backgrounds. Their study was largely comprised of a forced-choice questionnaire, but the study also included respondents’ own definitions of religiousness and spirituality. The most common definitions of spirituality were grouped into five content categories and included: feeling of connectedness with a higher power, personal beliefs such as a belief in a higher power or other personal values, integrating one’s beliefs into daily life, a desire to attain an internal affective state such as comfort, anxiety reduction, or security, and a desire for personal growth, actualization or self control.

Other studies which sought to define spirituality included the following: spirituality and religion were interrelated but not the same, spirituality was an awareness of an interrelatedness of all things through what many refer to as a higher power, spirituality was about deriving meaning and purpose, spiritual development was a movement toward greater authenticity, and spirituality was about how individuals create knowledge through unconscious and symbolic processes (Tisdell, 2003). Wuthnow (2007) described spirituality as a residual, watered-down religiousness as well as being a complex, individual quest for meaning, identity and authenticity. Roof (1999) described the “new” spirituality as a kind of marketplace approach to spiritual values. In the spiritual marketplace one could pick and choose those spiritual values that
matched and best contributed to one’s narrative identity. This spirituality was creatively syncretistic, was a type of quest and the culmination of the quest was a kind of self-actualization. DeSouza (2003) described spirituality as an individual’s “movement towards Ultimate Unity in an ever-swirling spiral built with layers of accumulated learning and experiences which span a lifetime” (p. 276).

Singleton, Mason and Webber (2004) proposed winnowing the thicket of definitions of spirituality by organizing them vis a vis their methodology. They pointed out that very few studies have undertaken a review of definitions based upon methodology, and as such proposed that their qualitative approach utilize a “stipulative” definition, stating what the term meant in their research project, rather than utilizing a lexical or essential definition. A stipulative definition also enabled operationalization.

Moberg (2002) cautioned against the “widespread use of the noun “spirit” and the adjective “spiritual” to denote an ever increasing expanse of expressions” (p. 47). The growing prominence of this difficulty in definition has contributed to a tendency to mistakenly presume universality “when in fact they are based upon the evaluative criteria of only particular groups” (p. 47), and important differences exist in research methods and operational definitions that have contributed to the confusion

**Changing Demographics**

Diminishing church attendance rates in Western-European Protestant countries suggest an increase in secularization or alternate religious practices such as spirituality (Altemeyer, 2004; Bibby, 2009). Roof (1999) cautioned that the assumption of increasing secularity may be misleading because decline in religious affiliation may not signal increased secularity but rather a blurring of the boundaries between religion and spirituality. The large empirical study
conducted by Zinnbauer et al. (1997) showed significant overlap between the two terms. Some sociologists have argued that the decline of religion, described as the secularization thesis in sociology, is a myth promoted by the West’s commitment to secularization. The presumption of increasing secularization is compounded by the difficulty present in definition and measurement. For example, a simple measure of religious belief is typically based on church attendance. Utilizing attendance as a sole measure of religiosity is problematic because attendance might reflect a multitude of other attributes. Reporting demographics are also potentially misleading since polls frequently use survey-based instruments, which can be ineffective in accurately measuring a complex and inter-related phenomenon such as religious/spiritual belief. Hunt (2002) observed that if religion is not defined as a belief in the supernatural then it is quite possible that religious interest, broadly defined, is not diminishing at all. He explained:

Indeed, the current orthodoxy in sociological thinking seems to be that although there appears to be a decline in institutional expressions of religiosity, most obviously of Christianity, religious activity is far from completely marginal and that there is an observable growth of parallel, yet contrasting, types of religion. (p. 12)

There is little doubt though that increasing pluralism in the West has contributed to a type of marketplace approach to religious and spiritually-related ideas which compete within a diminishing demographic (Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). If religiosity is measured by belief in God and church attendance, there is considerable statistical evidence to suggest decline. Bibby’s (2009) Canadian demographic study showed a downward trend among adolescents who identified themselves with a religious organization, from 88% in 1984 to 68% in 2008. Bibby’s study also showed that increasing numbers of Canadian adolescents are describing themselves as atheist, from 6% in the mid-1980’s to 16% in 2008. Wuthnow (1998) commented that “growing numbers of Americans say they are spiritual but not religious” (p. 2). The National Study of Youth and Religion (2003), conducted in the United States, stated that 14% of young people
have no religion, and 7% identify as “other”. This is significantly lower than what Mason et al.’s (2006) Australian study indicated, but likely more in keeping with American religious sensibility.

What this decline in religious affiliation suggests is a changing expectation about the roles of religion and spirituality, and not necessarily a decline in the desire for what religion provides. For example, nine out of ten Canadian young people have reflected on “ultimate” questions such as life’s origins and purpose, have asked why there is suffering, and wonder what happens after death (Bibby, 2009). And, according to Bibby, while Canadian adolescents are affiliating themselves with religious organizations in fewer numbers, 54% still say that they have spiritual needs. Hunt (2002) observed that the movement away from a collectivist expression of religion to an individualistic expression means that identity is linked in a different way to one’s religious affiliation. In the past, for the most part, one’s religion was part of one’s birthright. Since religious/spiritual involvement has become increasingly voluntary though, people’s religious choices become one more piece of their self-created identity, keeping in mind that the very idea of a self-created identity is influenced by discursive, narrative and social influences. This movement to an individualistic expression in religion and spirituality is likely reflecting a new discourse in the area of spirituality.

**New Discourse within Spirituality**

Many researchers have suspected that current definitions of spirituality set it apart from its religious origins (Huitt & Robbins, 2003; Lindholm, 2004; Marler & Hadaway, 2002). Estanek’s (2006) literature review on definitions of spirituality showed that: “1) the new literature on spirituality can be considered a new discourse, and 2) that no one definition of spirituality informs this emerging discourse” (p. 272). What distinguishes this new discourse
from earlier writings on spirituality? Perhaps very little, but the difference might be that interest in this topic has developed to the point where it has begun to be perceived as its own tradition with its own discourse. Marion (2004) suggested that: “more and more people, especially the young, are calling themselves spiritual and are interested in growing spiritually but are not necessarily interested in organized religion” (p. xvii). This new discourse is important because of its wide-ranging influence on popular culture and is exemplified in the increased interest in yoga, meditation, crystals, television and film programming around spirituality. Oprah’s enormously successful television, magazine and internet programming dedicated to spirituality is an example of this. Other examples in Western popular culture include a fascination with angels, magic, vampires and witches. Gockel (2007) pointed to Telus ads, which used the pan-religious theme of interconnectedness. And, while attendance at traditional western religious institutions is diminishing, involvement and interest in spirituality, new age practices, and eastern pluralistic religions are growing. This interest might relate to the increases seen in the United States in Pentecostal, charismatic and fundamentalist religions. Hunt (2003) pointed out that these religions share features with the new discourse on spirituality such as a personal, emotional experience of God, personal access outside of religious institutions to the divine, and the use of religious practices for healing and development. The new discourse is represented by writers such as Tolle (1999), Norris (1997), Bourgeault (2003), and Marion (2004), who share a non-dogmatic, pluralistic and yet individual and interpretive spirituality. For example, Bourgeault (2003) merged Sufism, Benedictine monasticism, string theory, and the Judeo-Christian tradition to explain spiritual practice through wisdom teachings, derived from the Old Testament apocryphal book of Wisdom. These practices contributed to a participative knowledge of the divine, which, Bourgeault explained, had more to do with the “how” of Judeo-Christian doctrinal
teachings than the “what”. Marion (2004) interpreted Wilbur’s work on spirituality and consciousness through a Christian lens. He described a stage theory of spirituality in terms of levels of consciousness. Marion overlapped individual stages of development with stages of human history and linked consciousness with spiritual appreciation. Marion’s interpretation shares similarities with Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory because both authors construe spirituality as something that is developmental, increasingly nuanced, complex, and interpretive.

**Traditional Models of Religious Development – J.W. Fowler**

Fowler (1981) conducted interviews with people of wide-ranging backgrounds asking questions related to faith, meaning and purpose. This research provided the foundation for a stage-related faith development theory. Numerous articles that examine spirituality in youth and young adults speak to a developmental aspect (Clarke, 2006; Huit & Robbins, 2003; Lindholm, 2004; Love & Talbot, 1999; Mason, Webber, Singleton, Hughes, 2006; Parks, 2000). Developmental approaches generally assume an innate quality that is progressive but dependent upon an appropriate environment for its enactment. Fowler (1981) proposed that faith operates as a universal in human culture. By faith he referred to the human need to construct meaning: “We do not live by bread alone, sex alone, success alone, and certainly not by instinct alone. We require meaning. We need purpose and priorities; we must have some grasp on the big picture” (p. 4). Faith operates in patterns that help to create and sustain our identity, relationships, growth and ethical development. Faith is how we relate to an ultimate environment, and he proposed that humans operate through “faith as relating” and “faith as knowing” – which are relational and epistemic stances on our environments. A summary of Fowler’s faith development model is located in Appendix E.
Relevant Empirical Research – Faith Development Theory

Fowler’s (1981) original research was based on 359 interviews. Streib (2004) pointed out that in the years following there have been approximately an additional 1,000 faith development interviews, helping to build an impressive research network. Over eighty dissertations with a primary focus on Fowler’s faith development theory have been published. Approximately half of the dissertations are empirically based (Streib, 2004). A search through Dissertation Abstracts International produced the following two examples. Kereky (2008) examined the effect of Ignatian spiritual exercises in children aged 10 – 12 in Ohio through pre and post measures of faith based upon faith development theory. Hiebert (1993) inquired into whether type of education (liberal arts, professional, and religious) might have an effect on faith development. Hiebert’s study surveyed 796 freshmen and seniors in three Winnipeg area schools. The results showed very little variation in the entire sample, so differences seen between groups were insignificant, although there was a slightly higher score seen in liberal arts students. Much of Fowler’s specific work has been engaging in critical commentary within theological and developmental academic discourse. There has been no longitudinal research to date.

Criticisms of Faith Development Theory

Day (2001) cited five concerns with faith development theory. These concerns are largely related to presumptions inherent in the larger cognitive-developmental paradigm. Day questioned the centrality of what he described as the epistemic subject, which diminishes the powerful effects of dialogical and narrative influences. Day also questioned the presumption of universality in developmental structures. He began by citing the controversy Gilligan (1982) initiated in response to Kohlberg (1984).
A more specific concern regarding faith development theory is drawn from Day’s findings that religious and moral judgments are indistinguishable. Day explained that faith development theory is based on a presumption that moral development must precede religious development. Utilizing an empirical measure of Oser and Reich’s (1990) faith development theory, which is a revision of Fowler’s theory, along with an empirical measure of moral development, and working with several hundred participants, Day found that moral judgments and religious judgments were so similar they were virtually indistinguishable. Day concluded from this that faith reasoning is equivalent to the same type of cognitive activity one sees in moral judgments. Related to this criticism is Day’s belief that participants, for the most part, have little interest, at least at the kind of structural level that faith development theory presumes, in the kinds of meaning of life and religious judgments that Fowler (1981) and Oser and Reich (1990) presume to be universally developmental. If this is so, then alarmingly faith development theory is not sustainable. Day (2001) stated that:

. . . on these grounds we conclude that the very notion of deep structures of religious thought or preoccupation with meaning in faith, may be as much an artifact of those who produced the concepts as of anything sustainable on grounds of rigorous research and sound data. However disappointing it may be to certain psychologists of religion, plenty of people are simply not concerned with the issues we seem to want them to be thinking about, and if they are, it is not at all clear that the ways they would talk about them beyond the bounds of developmental protocols would at all fit the schemes of canonical structuralist conceptions of faith, religious judgment, or development. (p. 177)

Day also suggested that upper level stages do not meet the criteria for stages in the Piagetian structuralist sense. Another concern which is commonly raised in relation to epistemic theories is that Fowler’s highest level is largely theoretical and is based on a small handful of unusual and outstanding individuals. Additionally, faith development stages may not reflect stages per se but cognitive differences amongst individuals that may be better explained as
personal style, influenced by the context of the moment. Last, while Fowler (1996) has included the importance of narrative influences in his later work, Day argued that this emphasis on narrativity is only a surface interest while his structuralist goal of finding fixed stages remains paramount, even in the process of the interview itself, which tacitly encourages participants to describe themselves developmentally.

Streib (2004) commented that Fowler’s primary concern since *Stages of Faith* (1981) was published has been dialogue and reaction to his work from theologians and religious educators. Significantly less reaction has come from developmental or educational psychology particularly in relation to theory construction and the research methodology of faith development theory. Streib observed that more empirical research is critical for the furthering of faith development theory, in particular cross-cultural and ideally longitudinal research.

**Related Religious Stage Theories**

Parks (2000) elaborated on Fowler’s work by introducing an additional stage between adolescence and adulthood. Her research examined faith, and used this term in a non-traditional way to describe “the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience” (p. 7). Seeking faith is developmental and includes four interacting levels: self, other, world and “God.” “God” is deliberately included in quotations to indicate that God may not represent a supreme being but an idea or a rejection of that idea. Parks’ work merges her interest in young adult development, in particular cognitive development such as Perry’s (1970) forms of thought, with Fowler’s study of faith development.

Streib (2005) provided an interesting alternative to religious stage theories by proposing that there are likely a diversity of religious cognitive stances held by a person at any one time.
Streib’s (2001) religious styles, like Fowler (1981), included the development of the self, but situated it more with narrative identity by referring to Ricoeur (1988) who analyzed: “our interwovenness within a fabric of stories as the ground for identity” (p. 147). Streib (2001) defined religious styles as:

Religious styles are distinct modi of practical-interactive (ritual), psychodynamic (symbolic), and cognitive (narrative) reconstruction and appropriation of religion, that originate in relation to life history and life world and that, in accumulative deposition, constitute the variations and transformations of religion over a life time, corresponding to the styles of interpersonal relations. (p. 149)

Religious styles seem to overlap and are not distinctly stage-like. Streib compared religious styles to geological layers. While these layers may be out of sight they still exist and the movement of psychic development contributes to their reappearance. When we are unable to develop under healthy conditions these earlier styles reemerge and occupy an unquestioned and unreflective place in our identity. The healthy identity, Streib argued, is constantly revisiting and re-attending to earlier styles: “The ability to play with and deal with - reflexively and sometimes ironically - one’s own and others’ earlier styles is the indicator of a healthy integration. It means to tell and retell, to read and rewrite the story of one’s own life in terms or symbols of religion” (p. 153).

Streib (2001) has attempted to address some of the criticisms of Fowler’s work which, especially Fowler’s earlier work, seemed more representative of traditional western religion and less reflective of the religious diversity seen in post-modernity. Streib’s revisions are strengthened by having been built upon Fowler’s many years of research, research which has been, as Streib observed, an “indispensable explanatory tool” (p. 143). Nonetheless Streib’s model, which is based upon a long tradition of empirical, qualitative research, is still a relatively new formulation and is untested.
Research in faith development has sought to both categorize and surface a developmental process in religious thought. Interestingly, the assumption that development is linear, progressive and universal has been retracted in part by Fowler himself, although he still makes a case for faith stages being “invariant, sequential and hierarchical” (Streib, p. 146). Fowler (2001) observed that the most “vulnerable feature of formalist stages theories such as Piaget’s, Kohlberg’s, and FDT lies in the tendency to overtrust the structuring power of the formally describable operations of knowing and construing that constitute the stages” (p. 169). Fowler described the influence postmodern thought has had on this theory:

I argue that whether contemporary persons in postindustrial, high technology, and culturally plural societies know it or acknowledge it or not, we participate in practical postmodern consciousness. In this connection I present FDT [faith development theory], as an account of the person’s move from a first naivete to critical consciousness, and then to a postcritical second naivete, offering parallels to premodern, modern, and postmodern forms of social consciousness. (p. 163)

At the same time though, Fowler pointed out that postmodern theory was largely created outside of psychological empirically-based practice, and consequently the post-modern call for a de-centered self, seems, as he observed, somewhat naïve when related to individuals who experience, for example, borderline personality disorder. Fowler (2001) cited Flax (1990) who noted: “Persons who have a core self find the experience of those who lack or have lacked it almost unimaginable” (Flax, p. 165).

Problems with Stage Theories

Slee (2004) observed that cognitive stage theories have undergone significant criticisms from numerous fronts. Clore and Fitzgerald (2002) “failed to find sound empirical evidence for Fowler’s stages” (p. 104) and they proposed that development is likely based more on differentiation and integration, which over time yields a synthesis of beliefs along with numerous contradictions. “More developed persons don’t repudiate prior stages; they discover new ways
to adopt earlier ways of knowing” (Clore & Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 105). Identifying individuals by inclusion in a particular stage of development is likely an oversimplification as is concluding that these perspectives are both linear and progressive. Chandler, Boyes and Ball (1990) proposed a functional rather than a structural ordering. Streib (2001) made a strong case for modifying the traditional structural developmental model and noted that traditional cognitive-structural theories of development “are due to an all too optimistic interpretation of the project of modernity” (p. 155). One last note here, while structuralism is currently on the waning side of the present social science paradigm, particularly among those researchers who view identity as largely a narrative, discursive and social construction, postmodern thinking is a reminder to the importance of plurality and humility, and so it is unwise to completely forsake the possibility for structures (Fowler, 1996). Fowler (2001) noted that the structuring model in faith development theory is only part of the construction of the self; a more complete model needs to include cultural and social environment.

**How to Assess Spirituality?**

Alexander (2001) argued that we are in the midst of a spiritual vacuum as a result of the current questioning of Enlightenment rational influences. He suggested that:

. . . the spiritual awakening of the past few years is a result of unproductive ways of thinking and living associated with the Enlightenment project; that our most cherished beliefs can be based on presuppositionless foundations unassailable by skepticism, that our conceptions of the moral life can be rationally justified, and that it is possible to erect a completely neutral society that embraces competing conceptions of the good life. Questioning these assumptions has destabilized the concepts of identity, community, morality, meaning and transcendence that constitute our modern vision of life. (p. 26)

Researchers who examined religion and spirituality have proposed that postmodern perspectives have left young people a confusing labyrinth of choices, and have expressed concern over the current mix and match approach to spirituality. Others have asked whether the image of a
labyrinth is an apt metaphor – perhaps this generation might flourish under a sensibility that supports pluralism and ambiguity (Roof, 1999; Tisdell, 2003). Mason, Webber, Singleton, and Hughes (2006) concluded that Generation Y are “what their parents and Australian culture have made them . . . [and] have taken strongly to two ‘late modern’ principles: that an individual’s views and preferences, provided they harm no-one else, should not be questioned or constrained, and that spiritual/religious beliefs and practices are purely personal lifestyle choices – in no way necessary” (p. 35). Possibly the common denominator here is the ability to critically examine one’s beliefs in order to promote a mature, well-founded belief system.

**Personal Epistemology and its Application to Spiritual Beliefs**

Supporting critical thinking skills has long been a primary goal for educators, and this is especially true for the age group this study targets. Traditionally, critical thinking entails acquiring information and evaluating that information in order to reach a justified conclusion. How readily are young adults who are not informed by established religious perspectives able to articulate and evaluate their spiritual beliefs? What is the complexity of these beliefs, how integrated are these beliefs and how do they justify their truth value? Western intellectual tradition since its inception has struggled to define and offer proofs of religious tenets. Many have concluded that evaluating religious faith with the same critical thinking skills of reason and empiricism we use to evaluate positivistic data is an incommensurable task. Tillich (1973) observed that: “The question of the existence of God can be neither asked nor answered. If asked, it is a question about that which by its very nature is above existence, and therefore the answer—whether negative or affirmative—implicitly denies the nature of God” (p. 237). Possibly it is the sheer ineffability of this question, or, as Kearney (2001) described, the consideration of the possibility of the impossible, that makes questions such as these so seductive and so demanding.
of all our human faculties. For young people without religious affiliation assessing the validity of beliefs that are not grounded in scripture and doctrine must demand an especially challenging cognitive and emotional syncretism. Assessing belief is tricky business. Alcock (2006) framed this nicely in his article on *The Nature of Belief*:

No matter how rational we like to think that we are, and no matter how much we pride ourselves on being able to think critically, ultimately many of even our most deeply held beliefs are not verifiable in any practical sense, but are necessarily rooted in our trust in others, and in our confidence in their intelligence and wisdom. Our faith in the accuracy of our beliefs is often, as William James put it, faith in someone else’s faith. (p. 13)

Presumably young adults with no religious affiliation assess their spiritual beliefs without religious guidance. Their ability to assess their beliefs effectively might be limited for multiple reasons. For example, Watson (2003) explained that spirituality is a general potential that “needs the language of a specific religious tradition to be communicated because we do not learn any means of communication in general” (p. 15). Do young people draw upon the kind of critical thinking strategies that education seeks to provide them with to assess the big questions spirituality provokes, questions that might seem to fall outside of the realm of traditional academia? Are they able to assess and justify their beliefs, and “do their beliefs have the epistemic (or other) virtues of being (a) complex, (b) integrated, (c) justified?” (Vokey, personal communication, Feb. 7, 2007). Assessing spiritual beliefs rather than perhaps beliefs about mathematics or science education is a challenging undertaking. Frye (1990), cited by Baxter Magolda (2002), cautioned that “Naming patterns is like charting the prevailing winds over a continent, which does not imply that every individual and item in the landscape is identically affected” (p. 93).

Epistemology is concerned with forms of knowledge and how we know something to be true. The body of research that falls under the heading of personal epistemology concentrates on
“how the individual develops conceptions of knowledge and knowing and utilizes them in developing an understanding of the world. This includes beliefs about the definition of knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, how knowledge is evaluated, where knowledge resides, and how knowing occurs” (Hofer, 2002, p. 4). Regardless of the situation we are appraising, we are influenced by the beliefs we have about knowledge. How we assess what we read in the morning paper, the human Genome project, or whether there is a soul, depend, at least in part, upon how adequate our personal epistemological theories are.

Traditional rationalist-empiricist epistemology has been evaluated generally within systems of well-defined logic. Some researchers though have speculated that epistemological stances representing philosophical assumptions such as: “realism, romanticism, constructionism, empiricism, rationalism, pragmatism and many more,” may operate as sources of individual differences, and a number of epistemological-style inventories have been developed as a result (Desimpelaere, Sulas, Duriez & Hutsebaut, 1999, p. 125). Epistemology applied in this way is generally referred to as personal epistemology, since it relates to how epistemologies are individually utilized to evaluate truths.

The theoretical influences for personal epistemology were Piaget’s (1965) genetic epistemology and Perry’s (1970) research on the epistemological development of college students. Currently there are five main models of personal epistemology. The first was the foundational work by Perry in the 1950’s and 60’s which, utilizing a longitudinal study, examined Harvard undergraduates’ epistemological development. Perry explained that originally he suspected that personality differences may have been responsible for the divergent responses to knowledge that he observed in students. For example, some individuals expected education to be a kind of received knowledge and were frustrated when they were expected to
critically examine curriculum. What he came to describe was a developmentally-structured sequence of hierarchically occurring stages based upon epistemological perspectives. Perry’s research uncovered a kind of intellectual journey in the form of how Harvard students understood the nature of knowledge. Perry described the beginning of this journey as a kind of fall from grace. Students early in their progression saw knowledge as a binary – good or evil, or absolutes in the nature of truth. The progression moved through nine stages, although the first and last stages were theoretical extensions of Perry’s research findings. These nine stages, which Perry described as positions, moved from the naive realism of the early stages to a more complex differentiation of the nature and justification of knowing. Moore (2002) described this as: “this particular progression traces a fall from a world of Absolutes and Truth into a world of contexts and Commitments in which one must take stands and choose as a way of making meaning in one’s life through identity choices” (p. 19).

Research by Desimpelaere, Sulas, Duriez and Hutsebaut (1999) examined epistemological styles and religious belief. Their study used three measures of epistemology similar to Perry’s (1970) stages of dualism (Stages 1 – 3 in the reflective judgment model), relativism (Stages 4 – 5 in the reflective judgment model) and commitment (Stages 6 – 7 in the reflective judgment model). Desimpelaere et al. found that these epistemological stages correlated to religious dimensions known as orthodoxy, historical relativism, and external criticism. Their study used surveys for both the epistemological and religious styles, and while some of their correlations were as expected, their discussion noted the limitations of simple measures of religion and the difficulties with operationalizing “psycho-epistemology.” The authors noted that: “Psycho-epistemology may well be impossible to capture fully, even in a good questionnaire, since it is such a personal variable” (p. 132).
King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model was influenced by Perry’s (1970) original work. Perry contended that changes after the contextual relativism position (Stage 5) were not qualitatively different. After examining the scoring rules utilized by Perry, King and Kitchener came to believe there were structural and epistemic differences that occur after relativism. This is a continuing debate in the area of personal epistemology, especially since so much of this research is carried out with an undergraduate population, and the higher order positions tend to be found in older, post-graduate-level educated individuals.

Reflective judgment, King and Kitchener (1994) explained, differs from critical thinking. Dewey (1933) was one of the first individuals to consider how thinking about many real problems, rather than academically-drawn problems, cannot be answered using formal logic alone. In real-life problems there is always controversy and uncertainty. King and Kitchener suggested that helping students to identify these problems, raise awareness of their assumptions about the nature of knowledge, and help them learn how they apply these assumptions, are important goals for educators. Assessing “real-life” problems are tricky though since often we are not entirely sure what the problem might be, where we draw boundaries around it and information available is often incomplete and unverifiable. As well, most people are unclear as to what kinds of problem-solving strategies are best utilized or even are aware of their assessment process. Compounding the problem of assessment is the likelihood that most people find constant ambiguity disconcerting, especially if their assumptions about knowledge, and this has ties to self-esteem, is that they be completely right (Wade, Tavris, Saucier & Elias, 2007). Complicating this process even more is that assessment is largely enacted in a tacit, or even unconscious manner.
The reflective judgment model assesses “a person’s knowledge about the limits of knowing, the certainty of knowing, and the criteria for knowing” (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 12). As an individual’s assumptions about knowledge progresses, that person becomes better able to use reflective judgment, which is being able to “evaluate knowledge claims and to explain and defend their points of view on controversial issues” (p. 13). King and Kitchener (1994) described the developmental progression as follows:

This developmental progression in reasoning is described by seven distinct sets of assumptions about knowledge and how knowledge is acquired. Each set of assumptions has its own logical coherency and is called a stage. Each successive stage is posited to represent a more complex and effective form of justification, providing more inclusive and better integrated assumptions for evaluating and defending a point of view. Further, each set of assumptions is associated with a different strategy for solving ill-structured problems. Specifically, the more advanced sets allow greater differentiation between ill-structured and well-structured problems and allow more complex and complete data to be integrated into a solution. (p. 13)

King and Kitchener’s model has been revised a number of times based upon cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. Perry’s original model, for the most part, was linear and hierarchical. Later, Perry came to describe the epistemological progression as recursive and less structural. Perry’s model is generally referred to as a “soft” structural model, which has always been clearly contextualized within a Western educational system (Moore, 2002). King and Kitchener argued for the continued use of stages because there is an internal logic, or, as they described it, a network of epistemological assumptions, in each stage that is an important precursor for movement to the next stage. A significant body of research in personal epistemology has demonstrated that people’s epistemic assumptions generally change in a developmental way. King and Kitchener (2002) pointed out though that it is a mistake to presume that individuals are clearly in or out of a particular stage, in fact it is quite common to code individuals’ reasoning at more than one stage. Patterns of thinking though do seem to
cluster in stages, and this stage-related pattern is supported by the rarity of more than two stages being coded (less than 1%) in an individual. This pattern may be an artifact of the scoring method, but the consistent theoretical body on the topic of personal epistemology supports the presence of stages. King, Kitchener, and Wood (1994) characterized development as:

. . . waves across a mixture of stages, where the peak of a wave is the most commonly used set of assumptions. While there is still an observable pattern to the movement between stages, this developmental movement is better described as the changing shape of the wave rather than as a pattern of uniform steps interspersed with plateaus. (p. 140)

A summary of the reflective judgment model is located in Appendix F.

**Relevant Empirical Research – Reflective Judgment Model**

The reflective judgment model was developed through interviews with over 1,700 individuals from both student and non-student groups. A 10-year longitudinal study initiated in 1977 to 1987 included 80 participants whose ages ranged from 16 and 28, and who resided in Minnesota. This and other longitudinal studies is, according to King and Kitchener (1994), one of the research-based features that sets the reflective judgment model apart from other epistemological theories since the reflective judgment model is one of the few with supporting longitudinal data.

Kitchener and King’s (1981) early research in 1977 began with cross-sectional data from their original sample of 80 individuals. They then retested this group three more times until 1987 when the study was completed. Both their cross-sectional and longitudinal data showed changes in mean scores across educational level and age as they had predicted. Doctoral level candidates changed relatively little, which they presumed indicated a ceiling effect. Gender differences were seen in one problem and the authors proposed that this was likely due to educational differences. King and Kitchener (2002) cited 14 cross-sectional studies that
examined gender differences in reflective thinking. They reported that: “half of these studies reported no differences; the pattern of the other seven studies was mixed” (p. 48).

Other longitudinal studies of reflective judgment (Brabeck & Wood, 1990; Polkosnik & Winston, 1989) supported King and Kitchener’s (1994) original findings. King and Kitchener (1994) noted that “these findings offer strong support for the claim that the ability to make reflective judgments changes developmentally over time” (p. 156). The potential for test-retest validity problems in longitudinal studies was countered by adding an additional problem to the last round of interviews. King and Kitchener (1994), cautioned about the generalizability of these studies since participants were drawn exclusively from the United States.

Cross-sectional studies also help to avoid test-retest problems and are better able to sample across diverse geographical regions. King and Kitchener (1994) described the results of a number of cross-sectional studies that tested approximately 1500 students throughout the United States, and the findings reflected those from the longitudinal studies cited above. Two studies by Dale (1995, 2005) assessed reflective judgment scores of students and faculty at two Christian theological colleges. The findings from these studies are reported in the Research in Common section in this chapter.

**Criticisms of the Reflective Judgment Model**

Other reviewers of epistemic development, such as Chandler, Hallet and Sokol (2002) have raised concerns about developmental models. They described findings on epistemic development, such as those reported by King and Kitchener (1994), as a kind of Procrustean bed in which one size apparently fits all. These authors proposed the “serious possibility that the sweep of development is more spiral than linear,” and that similar claims about the course of epistemic development have been made for widely varying ages (p. 24). Duell and Schommer-
Aikins (2001) distinguished between unidimensional models, for example, Perry’s model, which proposed that as cognitive complexity develops, so do other dimensions, and multidimensional models, which do not assume an innate developmental factor. Duell and Schommer-Aikins have observed that existing models likely overlook epistemological belief patterns that simply have not been identified yet, particularly when one attempts to factor in culture and gender. Consequently, these authors recommended a multidimensional approach that makes no assumptions about development following a linear pattern, or even assumptions about separate beliefs. “In short, we suggest that future epistemological researchers attempt to look beyond their own personal framework and beyond the conventional” (p. 446). For example, participants might describe non-cognitively mediated ways of knowing that might be overlooked by researchers who operate from more traditional, empirically-oriented paradigms. And, while it is clear that research interest in personal epistemic styles and their relationship to belief formation and human variation has been strong, Hofer and Pintrich (1997) and Chandler, Hallett and Sokol (2002), observed “there is very little agreement on the construct under study, [or] the dimensions it encompasses” (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, p. 89). This lack of agreement reflects concerns about construct validity. The truth about how we know something to be true is an elusive one and challenges researchers’ confidence about validity.

*Why Reflective Judgment?*

Research acknowledges the elusive nature of personal epistemology (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Concerns have been raised about both hierarchical, age-related progressions of epistemic stances and developmental stages in religious belief, such as those proposed by Perry (1970), King and Kitchener (1994) and Fowler (1981). Moore (2002) described four general areas of concern related to developmental progression: “the assumption of universality, . . . the alleged
“inevitability” of development as depicted by such models; the lack of specific attention to historical and sociocultural contexts, and the potential for “pigeonholing” learners with stage (position) labels” (p. 25). Clore and Fitzgerald (2002) raised concerns about the existence of true structural stages in Fowler’s model. It is possible that the presence of developmental progression described in research may be based in part upon a tacit assumption of some kind of innate movement toward greater potential, which seems to be an assumption that is commonly entrenched within the Western sensibility. Research also shows that agreement on definitions of spirituality is equally elusive (Singleton, Mason & Webber, 2004). My research focus includes both the areas of spirituality and personal epistemology and the intersection between the two, which means that my research is interested in areas that are challenging to convey accurately.

At the same time though the volume of research which describes development in both spiritual and epistemological perspectives needs to be acknowledged. Perry’s work, as well as Kitchener and King, continues to be championed. Perry’s original 1970 book was reissued in paperback in 1998, and authors such as Moore (2002) argue that Perry’s work has been misrepresented: that his work is better described as a “soft” structural model, that he never made assumptions about universality, and that Perry himself came to see the intellectual journey his theory described as more recursive and fluid than rigidly structured. Fowler (1996) noted that we do a disservice to dismiss all developmental change as cultural constructions. Organisms do change over time, and very often these changes are predictable and stage-like. King and Kitchener (2002) observed that:

*Both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have shown that people’s epistemic assumptions change over time in a developmental fashion from early adolescence to adulthood. Furthermore, there is a growing body of research suggesting that people’s concepts of how to justify beliefs when faced with ill-structured problems change concurrently as part of an underlying developmental structure.* (p. 38)
Kitchener and King’s model continues to be popular. Reflective judgment has been used to assess how individuals solve problems in disciplines such as business or psychology, or more specific issues such as sexual orientation (2002). Unlike some of the other models, the reflective judgment model has been developed on college-aged adults. It is supported by over 30 years of research, including longitudinal and cross-sectional research. Compared to other models it has the merit of being parsimonious. Additionally, according to Moore (2002), models such as women’s ways of knowing and the reflective judgment model do not claim to have included every epistemic assumption possible within the models – what they describe is what they have observed so far. Lastly, Moore (2002) commented that Perry’s work, which the reflective judgment model builds upon, is still relevant and represents the kind of synthesis and reconstruction that some postmodern theorists describe.

Research in Common and Resulting Gaps in Literature

The following research areas share attributes in common with my study: spiritual but not religious, Parks’ (2000) additional epistemological stage for young adulthood, applications of the reflective judgment model to real life problems, and pedagogical implications of spirituality.

Pargament (1999) responded to a proposal that the APA division of the Psychology of Religion be renamed the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. He suggested that the evolving use of the terms religion and spirituality more accurately reflect changes in how the two words have come to be used rather than reflect actual socio-demographic changes. For example, Pargament pointed out that some new spirituality measures look very much like old measures of religiosity only they have been renamed as spiritual. Research on individuals who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious has largely concentrated on definition and on identifying contributing factors to the changing demographics in religion (Hewlett, 2008; Marler &
Hadaway, 2002; Pargament, 1999; Redden, 2005; Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). Most of these studies originated in the United States and used populations that were both spiritual and religious. Roof’s (1999) work traced the baby boomer generation’s spiritual quest. This generation has individualized religion and remade religion institutions into a spiritual marketplace. Researchers also have warned against polarizing spirituality and religious. For example, Zinnbauer’s et al. (1997) survey of 11 diverse groups in the United States indicated that 78% described themselves as religious, and 90% rated themselves as spiritual. Pargament (1999), who was an author in the Zinnbauer et al. study, commented that the majority of people in the Zinnbauer et al. study defined themselves as both spiritual and religious. This suggested that most people really didn’t draw much distinction between the two terms, although that was not to say that they all agreed on what spiritual was.

An important feature of spirituality though does seem to be contained in its opposition to religion, and a number of studies have concerned themselves with the growing group of individuals who seem to define their spirituality by opposing it to religion. (Hewlett, 2008; Marler & Hadaway; Roof, 1999). None of these studies though has examined how these individuals would rate on an epistemological or faith-based developmental scale. One study of note examined New Age practices. This study concluded that individuals who described themselves as New Age utilized an epistemological stance described as “individualism” (Partridge, 1999). Truth was understood to be something that was produced, authorities were mistrusted, and the self was construed as the ultimate authority.

Pintrich (2002) observed that agreement on the definition of personal epistemology remains in question since there are a diversity of labels presumably all measuring the same construct. Mechanisms of cognitive change also remain in question, with some models
emphasizing the influence of context more. Bendixen (2002) argued that epistemic doubt is crucial to change, while other models emphasize the importance of meta-cognition. Different methodologies also have produced different findings. For example, research generated through interviews showed that beliefs about the nature of knowing, such as beliefs about knowledge and beliefs about learning and intelligence, are intertwined. Other researchers though argue that these dimensions are related but independent. For example, Schommer’s (1990) research, which used factor analysis on questionnaire data, showed distinct dimensions. Wood and Kardash (2002) pointed out though that problems present in the design of the questionnaire can influence factor analytic findings. The methods used are also potentially problematic. Traditionally qualitatively-based research has used interviews, and other commonly used methods have included correlational results from questionnaires. Interviews and self-report are prone to the problem of social desirability, correlational data is limited in its predictability, and if the same methods are used repeatedly then the same errors can be repeated over time. Using multiple methods might help to address this, but again this is problematic since those researchers who emphasize contextual influences on epistemology are reluctant to utilize standardized questionnaires. Pintrich (2002) proposed that different methods be used across different research programs to address problems of internal and external validity.

Parks (2000) was interested in how young adults struggle with life’s big questions and incorporate this struggle into identity. She believed that young adulthood is a period of development that warrants further study. She noted that:

When we shift from just “being a life” to “knowing we have a life,” we achieve an undeniably different form of consciousness. New possibilities and responsibilities appear for both self and world. How a young adult is met and invited to test and invest this new consciousness with its emerging new capacities will make a great difference in the adulthood that lies ahead. (p. 6)
This is an age group that is neither adolescent nor adult and which shows nascent critical awareness but has yet to reconcile meaning into a committed identity. Parks suggested that an additional stage, called probing commitment, has been overlooked in developmental models such as Perry’s (1970) and Fowler’s (1981). These models do not describe the tentative and fragile probing that Parks believed is present in young adulthood. Parks proposed elaborating on Perry’s model to include stages after “unqualified relativism” that reflect the type of unconsolidated exploration common to young adulthood. These stages are described as: probing commitment in the young adult, tested commitment in the older, tested adult, and convictional commitment in the mature adult.

More specifically within the realm of the reflective judgment model are several studies of interest – one by King and Baxter Magolda (2005) which applied the reflective judgment model to intercultural maturity, two by Dale (1995, 2005) who applied the reflective judgment model to seminarians, a study by Weinstock (1999) which examined personal epistemological level and juror reasoning, and Love (2002) who compared spiritual and cognitive development.

King and Baxter Magolda (2005) used an assessment of personal epistemology to examine intercultural differences. Their framework utilized and built on Kegan’s (1994) model of mature individuals, and applied this to intercultural maturity. Kegan’s model included three dimensions of development, which were cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal. King and Baxter Magolda elaborated on this model to produce a 3 x 3 matrix framework that linked the three domains of development (cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal) to three levels of development. The cognitive trajectory followed epistemological assumptions that are present in the reflective judgment model, with the initial level overlapping with the pre-reflective level, the intermediate with quasi-reflective, and mature thinking with reflective judgment, although the
authors also made reference to other models in personal epistemological literature. This model was, at the time of publication, not yet subjected to empirical analysis, but provided an interesting elaboration on how cognitive complexity interacts with identity and important socio-cultural issues such as multiculturalism. For example:

Kitchener and Fischer (1990) argued that the ability to understand abstract concepts (e.g., White privilege) emerges with the ability to engage in abstract mapping; this ability coincides with Stage 4 of quasi-reflective thinking in the Reflective Judgment Model, where knowledge is first understood as an abstraction (King & Kitchener, 1994). In other words, the capacity to examine one’s identity through the lens of privilege requires at least an intermediate level of cognitive development (p. 581).

King and Baxter Magolda’s research is relevant to the present study because it showed that dimensions of young adult development, such as ownership of opinions and cognitive complexity, can contribute to the conclusions they draw about multiculturalism. This could also be asked about conclusions drawn about spirituality.

Dale (1995) proposed that postmodern Western assumptions about divine-revealed truth are treated with suspicion, in particular suspicion about foundational claims in theology. A foundationalist epistemology is grounded upon essential divine truths, which do not require justification. Foundationalism, assessed from an epistemological model such as the reflective judgment model, would rank essential divine truth claims at a pre-reflective level. Dale hypothesized that postmodernism has influenced seminary students’ epistemology. To test this hypothesis she assessed reflective judgment levels in seminary students at a conservative Christian college in the United States. She also asked how seminary students assess ill-structured problems related to their profession. Some examples included contextualization of biblical teachings, the role of the church in society, and Christian teachings in relation to biotechnology. Dale hypothesized that there would be a negative correlation between students’ scores on the Reflective Judgment Interview and references to faith. Some students did score
significantly lower on the creation/evolution problem included in the reflective judgment interview than they did on the secular-based problems such as the problem of adding chemical additives to food. She also hypothesized a negative correlation between faith and reflective judgment scores, and this finding was not supported. Dale suggested that:

   Since there was not a significant negative correlation between students’ references to their faith and their RJI scores, it appears students are learning to integrate their faith, and students’ faith did not hinder their reflective judgment (p. 63).

   King and Kitchener (2002) commented on Dale’s (1995) study. King and Kitchener suggested that the lower score on the creation/evolution problem might indicate that some educational environments are not conducive to the development of reflective judgment in some areas. They added:

   Furthermore, the greater students’ tendency to believe in God’s revealed knowledge, the lower their scores on the creation-evolution problem. Interestingly, although the faculty scored significantly higher than the undergraduates, there was considerable variability in the faculty scores, with some scoring at the quasi-reflective level. (p. 47)

   In 2005 Dale repeated this study with graduate level students registered at a Christian seminary. In this study, there was no statistically significant difference in student’s scores between the religiously oriented dilemma and dilemmas that were secular.

   Research on personal epistemology and domain specific beliefs, such as the nature of knowledge related to science and mathematics, has shown that people can have different expectations about knowledge depending on the domain under scrutiny (Bell & Linn, 2002). Personal epistemology has also been shown to have applications in an important task such as juror reasoning (Weinstock, 1999). This study showed that participants who scored in lower stages tended to draw conclusions about their verdicts with absolute certainty and saw fewer alternative possibilities or interpretations of evidence.
These studies provide fruitful examples of epistemological perspectives on real-world problems, and are especially relevant to how a topic such as spirituality is construed. Pintrich (2002) in relation to findings on these epistemological perspectives observed:

For example, general models of personal epistemology might include a position on the continuum for “personal experience” as an important aspect of the nature of knowing, while a scientific epistemology might discount this position on the continuum in favor of the use of scientific data and reasoning. In this case, individuals could have different personal “epistemologies” depending on whether a scientific domain was activated or a more general epistemological perspective was evoked in the context. (p. 392)

Love’s (2002) study compared spiritual development theories (Fowler, 1996; Helminiak, 1996; Parks, 2000) with cognitive development theories (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1970). In reviewing each of these theories, Love concluded that each type of theory, spiritual and cognitive, shared an interest in how their respondents derived meaning. Love encouraged future research to identify specific ways spiritual development theories contribute to human development.

The last area related to the present study is pedagogical implications. A large volume of research has been dedicated to the nexus of cognitive development and its pedagogical importance, and is beyond the scope of this study. However, research such as Love (2002), Parks (2000), and King and Baxter Magolda (2005), has examined spirituality and cognitive development or, in the case of cognitive development and multiculturalism, made similar suggestions for the implications of research in this area. Parks’ (2000) encouraged student affairs professionals to reflect upon their own spirituality, to recognize the spiritual aspects of day to day life, and work to create opportunities for spiritual development at the College level. Love (2002) suggested encouraging student judicial systems, mentoring communities, and working to move the importance of spiritual development into the mainstream of college
campuses. King and Kitchener (2002) make seven recommendations for fostering reflective judgment in the classroom. King and Baxter Magolda (2005) proposed the importance of encouraging epistemological development in order to foster issues such as respect for diversity. Last, Swan and Benack (2002) cautioned about the potential for psychological distress in the movement from a simple dualistic epistemology to a more complex relativistic one.

**The Current Study**

The obvious gap in the literature is the group this study worked with, which were young adults who described themselves as spiritual but without religious affiliation. Secondly, one of the reasons it seemed little research has undertaken assessment of spiritual beliefs is because of the problem of definition. To help address this problem my research asked participants to first define their spiritual beliefs. These definitions were then represented thematically to illustrate commonalities amongst their beliefs. Once defined and organized thematically, this study was able to explore the concern of whether young non-religiously affiliated adults are able to produce a well-founded, complex and critically aware spirituality given the concerns raised about the prominence of relativism and the mix and match approach to spirituality.

**Specific Aim - Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to both identify the spiritually-related beliefs of college-aged individuals who had little or no religious affiliation and to represent these beliefs thematically. This research also sought to examine how participants critically reflected upon their beliefs by using the reflective judgment model as a template to organize and interpret those beliefs. Participants were young adults between the ages of 19 – 26 who were currently registered in university-level classes.

More specifically this study’s research questions were:
1. What spiritually-related beliefs do non-religiously affiliated young adults have? What spiritually-related beliefs do they share in common?

2. How do the participants assess those beliefs? How do they make judgments about their beliefs in a critically reflective way?
Chapter Three-Research Methodology

This study examined two research questions: what are the spiritual beliefs of young adults without religious affiliation, and how do they assess these beliefs? Since the first goal of this research was to describe spiritual beliefs, and the second goal was to examine how participants think about and critically reflect upon their beliefs, this study opted for a qualitative research method, more specifically, interpretative phenomenology for the first research question and elaborative coding drawing from the reflective judgment model for the second research question.

The interpretative nature of the research design for the first research question was chosen in order to generate a detailed description of each person’s spiritual beliefs, which could then be organized into common themes. These themes could then be considered in relation to research on the topic. The second research question enabled an opportunity to revisit portions of the data through a new “lens”. Using a qualitative design helped to both access and organize the data which the first research question generated by facilitating interpretation of the data through the reflective judgment model. The intent of this interpretation was to illustrate how participants think about and critically reflect upon their spiritual beliefs. The goal for analysis was not to draw quantitative conclusions about specific participant stage levels nor to provide a proof of the reflective judgment theory, but rather to group participants according to stages and then examine similarities within stages. The goal of this examination was to surface and interpret participants’ presumptions about the nature of knowledge and examine how those presumptions relate to how they critically evaluate their spiritual beliefs.

My goal was for the research questions to inform each other. This goal was influenced, in part, by Clinchy’s (2002) chronicle of her involvement in developing the theory described as
Women’s Ways of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997). In her chronicle, Clinchy described how their research first began with wide-ranging interviews with women, and while a portion of these interviews was intended to elicit personal epistemology, the epistemologically-oriented part of the interviews originally was not privileged in any particular way. What their phenomenological study eventually yielded, however, was an understanding that epistemology was central to the meaning-making process for the women in their study. Clinchy (2002) explained that:

Gradually, however, as we coded responses to what we then called the “Perry part” of the interview and then reread the rest of each woman’s interview in the light of the coding, we came to believe, as we say in the preface to the second edition of the book, ‘that the women’s epistemological assumptions were central to their perceptions of themselves and their worlds,” and so “epistemology became the organizing principle for our data analysis and for the book we were beginning to imagine. (p. 64)

This study is interested in how both spiritual beliefs and epistemological assumptions around spirituality influence each other.

Research Design and Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

One’s choice of research method is generally influenced by the purpose of the research question. It also is influenced by the researcher’s stance on epistemology. Psychology has a long history which supports the emphasis of qualitative research on the richness of human experience and the influence of culture, language and society on how we construe reality. Ashworth (2003) proposed this history has influenced what has now come to be collected under qualitative research. Some seminal influences related to this influence in psychology’s recent history include Wundt’s (1904) interest in cultural psychology (Völkerpsychologie), James’ (1902/1997) rejection of atomism, Allport’s (1937) argument in favour of idiographic research, the influences of phenomenology and existentialism, the humanistic movement’s rejection of behaviourism and Bruner’s (1990) concerns about positivism within cognitive psychology. This
historical stream shared a tendency towards an objective, unchanging and measureable reality. Ashworth (2003) explained that Allport and James construed the individual as an active perceiver. This emphasis on the primacy of perception is similar to representationalism: “the supposition that we can directly describe experience” (p. 21). Postmodernism rejects representationalism, in particular because this construal of reality does not include the importance language plays in the creation of reality, the tremendous influence of culture, and how the researcher becomes, as Ashworth pointed out, a part of the web of cultural construction. These influences of culture and language contribute to the conundrum present in all forms of research which seek to provide an objective portrayal of a subject, while at the same time acknowledging that all assessment is filtered through both the subject and the researcher. In describing a postmodern perspective, Denzin and Lincoln (1998) explained that “there are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed” (p. 25).

Elliott (1995) suggested that qualitative research answers questions that differ from those examined using quantitative methods, and in particular is well-suited to understanding individuals’ experiences and their elaboration and application of meaning to experience. Yardley (2000) described qualitative research methods as involving: “detailed exploration of the interwoven aspects of the topics or processes studied, whereas quantitative studies more often employ a limited number of measures to summarise specific, isolated variables at one or two moments in time” (p. 215). Qualitative inquiry is comprised of diverse methods (Marecek, 2003). Phenomenology, first described by Husserl (1900/1970), has produced a phenomenological method which focuses on the “meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).
Phenomenology seeks to surface and describe the structures of lived experience. Van Manen (1997) explained that structures are “internal meaning structures,” and that by uncovering and describing the particular experience, a universal is also revealed (p. 10).

**Research Design and Rationale for First Research Question**

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a relatively new qualitative method that merges both phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions, the latter in recognition of the researcher’s interpretative position. Smith (2004) first developed IPA in the early 1990’s and since then it has acquired a following of interested researchers, particularly in health, clinical, counselling and social psychology. IPA draws upon phenomenology in its desire to understand the lived experience of participants, with the hermeneutic appreciation that such an understanding requires interpretation on the part of both participant and researcher. Smith described this interpretive process as a double hermeneutic; the participant strives to explain his/her meaning, and the researcher strives to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of his/her personal and social world.

Smith and Osborn (2003) described IPA as a research method designed “to explore in detail how participants [make] sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants” (p.51). Access to participants’ meanings is complicated by the researcher’s own perspectives, which is recognized through the hermeneutical tradition. Hermeneutical inquiry provides a theoretical framework for interpretive understanding. Patton (2002) explained that the use of the term hermeneutics was originally defined as to understand or interpret. The philosophical framework on which a hermeneutic research method is grounded argues that, in order to interpret, it is important to appreciate what the original author intended, what were the goals and
intended meanings, and what historical, social, and cultural influences were present. Benner (1994) explained that:

By engaging in the interpretive process, the researcher seeks to understand the world of concerns, habits, and skills presented by participants’ narratives and situated actions. These understandings are then used to contrast similarities to and differences from other participants’ narratives and situated actions. Understanding human concerns, meanings, experiential learning, and practical everyday skilful comportment, when they are functioning smoothly or are in breakdown, is the goal as opposed to explanation or prediction through causal laws and formal theoretical propositions. It is posited that understanding is more powerful than explanation for prediction in the human sciences because it stands more fully in the human world of self-understandings, meanings, skills, and tradition. (p. xiv)

Smith (2004) explained that IPA can be described by the following three characteristics: it is idiographic, inductive, and interrogative. It is idiographic because a phenomenological approach emphasizes a detailed examination of each participant’s experience, and only when the iterative process common to qualitative research indicates a kind of closure, or as Smith explained, a gestalt, does the researcher then move forward to the next case. It is after this point that emerging themes begin to be described. IPA is, as is much of qualitative research, inductive in its openness to emerging themes. Lastly IPA is interrogative in its grounding and examination of themes to relevant literature.

The first research question (what spiritually-related beliefs do non-religiously affiliated young adults have?) was situated in an interpretive phenomenological research method in order to understand and describe participants’ spiritual beliefs. Because beliefs are complex composites of cognitions, emotions, expectations, experiences and intentions, IPA was well suited to describe and analyze something so intricate. IPA also helped to describe in detail, by describing common themes, the perceptions and meanings a particular group share in common. Those themes could then be used to consider the spiritual beliefs of participants in relation to relevant research. IPA was a good match for this research question because it provided a
recognized framework and suggested guidelines that enabled a rich description of experience. While guidelines help to aid rigour and clarity, ultimately effective qualitative research is dependent on the depth of analysis and by ensuring that emerging themes are grounded in the data. Benner (1994) observed that interpretation must be auditable and be the best possible account of the text.

The link of IPA to psychology, particularly social cognition, also shared some overlap with the second research question’s use of personal epistemology. Smith (2004) pointed out that IPA’s emphasis on meaning-making contained links to the cognitive psychology first proposed by Bruner (1990), one of the founders of the cognitive psychology movement. An interpretative phenomenological approach, because it is idiographic, helps to address concerns related to mainstream psychology’s emphasis on nomothetic research. The latter addresses group level claims, which Allport (1937) referred to as the “generalized mind”, a kind of fictional average that cannot say anything substantive about the specific individuals who provided the data for the study in the first place. Warnock (1987) pointed out that it is in our appreciation of the particular that we are better able to consider the universal. From a surface perspective it can be easy to think we share little in common with one another, but a deeper level of analysis exposes the presence of more universal themes. Smith (2004) noted that in this way IPA speaks to the kinds of essences that Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) described in Husserlian phenomenology. In a similar vein, Smith (2004) also commented that much of the developing corpus of research within IPA, at the super-ordinate level, seems linked to identity. Interpretative phenomenology also enables close attention to detail and analysis, that, when properly grounded through textual analysis, helps to describe and interpret complex reality and contribute to existing research.
Interpretative phenomenological analysis can, so long as the researcher is transparent and clearly marks boundaries, draw upon a specified theoretical body for a portion of its analysis. However, Ezzy (2002) cautioned that an over-simplified use of a theoretical deductive approach may artificially restrict the findings. At the same time, Ezzy observed that limitations can occur with an overly simplified inductive approach as well. Miles and Huberman (1994) argued that a purely inductive approach is likely impossible since researchers always bring some conceptual perspectives to bear on their research questions. Ultimately though, the interpretive researcher grounds the account within the text, while at the same time elaborating upon it. Benner (1994) explained that the research goal has been achieved when participants say, “You have put into words what I have always known, but did not have the words to express” (p. xviii).

**Research Design and Rationale for Second Research Question**

In contrast to the first research question, the second research question re-examined portions of the data by using the pre-existing reflective judgment model to illustrate how participants critically think about their spiritual beliefs. King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model was intended to examine how people critically reflect upon real, ill-structured problems that have multiple possibilities. The research method for the second research question was designed to be a top down application of personal epistemological theory, more specifically the reflective judgment model, to the portions of the interview in which participants explicitly spoke about how they assessed their beliefs, or spoke about their assumptions about the nature of knowledge. The semi-structured interview included two questions which were designed to encourage participants to describe how they critically reflected upon their beliefs. These questions asked the following: Interview Question Five – In what ways, if any, can you defend or
support the beliefs you’ve described above? Please elaborate using the beliefs you have identified. And Interview Question Six – What have you found useful in defining your beliefs?

My goal was to use established theory in order to illustrate how participants critically thought about what they had described in the first research question. To accomplish this goal I planned on using elaborative coding, described by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), for those portions of the interview that related to the second research question. Elaborative coding was designed for grounded theory, and my intent in using it was to take theoretical concepts from an initial study and apply them to relevant text in a second, follow-up study. I coded the relevant text in a second round of analysis by bracketing out the portion of the interview related to the second question, and utilized elaborative coding to analyze how participants critically reflected upon their beliefs. Belenky et al. (1997) described how, in their initial analysis, their research group decided to utilize women’s epistemologies as the organizing principle for their data analysis. In their study Belenky et al. came to see that participants’ theory of knowledge was central to their perceptions of themselves and their worlds. Once they decided on this interpretive focus, they analyzed their data using three theoretical perspectives: Perry (1970), Kohlberg (1984), and Gilligan (1982). Denzin (2002) described an interpretive process which I believe shares similarities to what Belenky et al. did, and which was my intent also. Denzin explained that:

. . . in bracketing the phenomenon, the researcher holds the phenomenon up for serious inspection, taking it out of the world where it occurs. The researcher dissects the phenomenon, uncovering, defining, and analyzing its elements and essential structures. The researcher treats the phenomenon as a text or document; that is, as an instance that is being studied. (p. 355)

By drawing on a defined area of theory, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), one can elaborate on and enrich the research questions. Smith and Osborn (2003), in describing
interpretative phenomenological analysis, defended the use of a critical engagement with the
text. They suggested that critical engagement tends towards a more empathic reading the first
time, and this first reading can be elaborated on during the next reading by more critical
reflection upon the text. Analysis for the second research question clearly identified a theoretical
body which was used to evaluate those portions of the text related to that, and interpretation
moved between both an empathic and critical engagement with the data.

To recap, this study chose to work within an interpretative phenomenological analytical
method for the first research question. The goal of the first research question was to understand
and describe participants’ spiritual beliefs and identify common themes. Analysis followed the
procedures described by Smith and Osborn (2003). Repeated engagement with the data
produced a series of shared themes on the topic of spirituality which was then interpreted in light
of research on the topic of spirituality. The second research question utilized a different
analytical focus by applying elaborative coding from the reflective judgment developed by King
and Kitchener (1994) to interpret how participants critically thought about their spiritual beliefs.
Both research questions ultimately informed each other.

**Participant Selection**

I gathered a purposive sample of 16 individuals. My goal was to use a fairly
homogeneous sample. Homogeneity was determined by selecting a sample that included an age
range of 19 – 26 years, with an interest in spirituality but having no religious affiliation. The age
group 19 – 26 represented university-aged individuals, and met University of British Columbia’s
Behavioural Research Ethics Board criteria for age participation without parental consent. Since
Kwantlen Polytechnic University is an exclusively undergraduate institution, the older
individuals in the 19 – 26 age range were still undergraduates, which helped to keep this group
relatively homogeneous. Smith (2003) observed that the detailed and nuanced analysis typical of an interpretive phenomenological method limits the number of participants that are logistically able to be included, which is why my study was restricted to a number under 20.

I advertised for participants for two academic semesters through my workplace, Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Posters were placed around the three Kwantlen campuses (see appendix B). A description of the study, along with the criteria required of participants, was also included in an advertisement within Kwantlen Polytechnic University’s research participant pool (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to self-select their appropriateness for this study through the advertisement. Twenty-three participants inquired about the study. Ultimately 17 participants completed both the questionnaire and semi-structured interview. There were no participants who only completed a portion of the two interviews, but one interview set was not used since the participant did not meet the age requirement for participation. The interviewer neglected to confirm age until after the interview was completed. This participant received compensation nonetheless. Participants received either course credit through a participant pool my workplace has established, or could opt to receive a $50.00 stipend for participating. Since the overall questionnaire and interview process took two to three hours, this amount seemed appropriate.

Gender included eleven women and five men, with a mean age of 20.5. Ethnicity was as follows: Caucasian - 10, South Asian – 4, Asian – 2.

**Summary of Data Collection Procedure**

The procedure for data collection includes a description of the data collection instruments, development of the questionnaire and interview, data collection procedures, the role
of the researcher in the collection and analysis process, data management and analysis for both research questions, and a description of the criteria used for trustworthiness and rigour.

**Data Collection Instruments**

Data collection was comprised of written responses to an initial questionnaire, followed by an in-person semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was designed to address both research questions. Because IPA recommends the use of semi-structured interviews and the reflective judgment model was derived from interview data, the second means of data collection was a semi-structured interview that asked participants to elaborate on their responses to the questionnaire. The interviews helped to produce rich data because they provided ample time to allow participants to relax, gave the researcher the opportunity to ask additional questions and use probes, and generally helped to produce more elaborative responses than the questionnaire generated. Interviews also provided the opportunity for the researcher to rephrase and confirm whether participants’ views were understood accurately.

**Development of Questionnaire and Interview Questions**

Data for the reflective judgment model has mostly been collected by asking participants to explain how they evaluate and resolve an ill-structured problem. This is known as a production task, and requires participants to think on their feet, so to speak, and as such this tends to be more challenging than interview questions that might ask for description alone. It was partly because of the questions related to reflective judgment that I opted to include an initial questionnaire in order to help participants prepare and think about their responses. The questionnaire also helped me to prepare for our interview. The questionnaire, in consultation with my advisors, was written to encourage description of beliefs and assessment of beliefs and included eight questions which all participants were asked to respond to. These questions are
located in Appendix C. I undertook a trial run of the questionnaire with several volunteers in advance of the actual data collection. My goal was to check on the clarity of the questions and their effectiveness at producing rich material. As a result of this some of the wording in the questionnaire was changed.

The interview was based upon participants’ responses to the questionnaire. Once I received a completed questionnaire, I read through the participant’s responses and identified particular areas that I believed could be elaborated on and had the potential for greater complexity. The interview was structured by following the order of the questionnaire, beginning with the first question and working through all eight questions. Points of clarification, elaboration and related questions were written on the original completed questionnaire. Appropriate probes and open-ended questions were also planned in advance and were influenced by the literature on spiritual beliefs and reflective judgment. For example, some points of clarification and elaboration related to participants’ description and assessment of their beliefs were framed in the following way: “What is the experience in believing in (a particular belief) like for you?” Can you tell me about the experience of having these beliefs in your life,” “When you’re considering this belief, can you tell me some of the feelings you might experience,” “What’s your argument that makes this belief successful for you,” “How might someone who doesn’t hold your belief argue for their perspective,” “Can you ever know for sure that your belief is correct? How or why not?” “How did you come to hold this belief?”

Data Collection

Questionnaire procedure

Posters describing the study directed interested participants to inquire about the study at either the Surrey or Richmond campus Psychology Labs. Lab assistants had copies of the
questionnaire, and provided copies to individuals who expressed interest in the study. Once individuals had had an opportunity to read the questionnaire, a lab assistant asked if they were interested in participating further. Those who were interested were asked by a lab assistant to read and sign a consent form – approval for participation (Appendix D). Participants were then asked to write their responses to the questionnaire in a Word document. They were asked to write their responses at home, or at location that was convenient for them (Kwantlen’s Psychology Lab has computers available), and upon completion email their responses to the email address provided. In the introduction to the questionnaire, participants were asked to take their time and to reply to each question without concern for grammar or proper essay protocol. My intention was to encourage a relaxed, thoughtful environment that questioning in person might initially restrict. Participants that had questions during this process were asked to contact me by email and or through my work or home phone number.

The criteria for participation were described on the posters advertising the study.

**Interview procedure**

Participants were contacted via email to establish a convenient interview time for us to meet. We met in a quiet, private setting (my office at whichever campus was more convenient for the participant). I clarified that the criteria had been met (age and no religious affiliation). At that time I also asked participants’ their age and year of study. I reviewed the procedures of the study, including how confidentiality would be ensured, how I would analyze and present their descriptions. I reviewed their signed informed consent forms – approval for participation, with them and encouraged participants to ask questions of me. I then explained that I would be tape-recording the interview and planned on posting the findings on an electronic bulletin board in the hope that participants would read and speak to my representation of their beliefs and analysis.
once it was completed. I then asked participants to sign the second portion of the consent form, approval to tape-record and approval to post transcriptions on an electronic bulletin board (Appendix D). Participants were ensured they could withdraw from the study at any time.

I also worked to set participants’ minds at ease by explaining small details like why I was writing down some of their responses (to help my memory for further questions). I explained that qualitative research never uses deceptive methods, that identifying features such as their names would not be included in the findings, that I would be transcribing the tapes and that the transcriptions and tapes would be kept in a secure location, and described the two research questions. Participants’ responses were tape-recorded.

The interview was structured around participants’ initial written responses to the questionnaire. I provided each participant with their responses to the questionnaire, along with the questionnaire itself. I read each question out loud, along with participants’ responses, and asked participants to elaborate on their initial reply. I also had questions planned in advance based upon participants’ written responses to the questionnaire. I found this to be very helpful since it gave me an initial introduction into participants’ perspectives, and allowed me some time to think about potential questions. On occasion participants’ responses in the interview led us into areas of discussion that I had not originally planned, but this often produced useful data as well. Interviews were approximately an hour long, and ended when we had reviewed all of their written responses in the questionnaire.

Role of the Researcher

Interpretive phenomenological analysis fits within a postmodern/constructionist framework because it acknowledges the influence of the researcher on the research findings at all levels of the research. The researcher interprets, based upon her theoretical, social, historical and
cultural background, what participants say. Therefore it is important that I explain my epistemological stance and influences. My interest in this topic is two-fold since my epistemological assumptions about the social sciences are constructionist, and this constructionist perspective has influenced the spiritual beliefs I have. I have long been interested in how thoughtful people experience and critically think about their religious beliefs. I envy people who have faith since I have none myself, and this shares a sentiment described by Louise Bogan, who said "the gift of faith has been denied me" (in Norris, 1996, p. 48). I have moments that I describe as peak experiences; a kind of oceanic feeling when I’m in the natural world, out on the ocean or walking in a forest. It was these experiences that were the source of Interview Question Seven: Have you had any experiences that might be described as sacred. For me, there are occasional times outdoors when I am filled with a kind of deep emotional awe and respect, something that I think might be similar to what others have described as a sacred experience. Part of my awe comes from the consideration of the enormity of the universe and appreciation for life. The thought of the possibility of a first creator is something that I experience with excitement and hope. My belief though is that if there is a divine presence that presence would be beyond what human cognition could know. I keep a quotation from the Renaissance mathematician and philosopher Pascal pinned to my bulletin board which partly describes my feelings about the potential for a divine being: “I am terrified by the eternal silence of these infinite spaces.”

I also am aware of a postmodern norm that is suspicious of what is described in postmodern literature as metanarratives. Writings and oral stories become objectified in social structures such as religion, giving, in this case religion, “a kind of factual existence or truth; it seems to be ‘out there’, an ‘objective’ feature of the world which appears as ‘natural’, issuing
from the nature of the world itself rather than dependent upon the constructive work and interactions of human beings” (Burr, 1995, p. 10). Burr argued that religion, or any intellectual and social construct, creates a story based on its beliefs, and then uses this self-same creation as an authority for its existence, which of course is a tautology. Last, this objectification entrenches these beliefs, and becomes incorporated into future generations’ metanarratives. These meta-narratives are further entrenched and structured by language. For example, could a dualist perception exist without words such as mind, body, and soul? Postmodernism though has also provided me with alternative perspectives, such as construing religious ideas as possibilities or perhaps as events that are interpreted. I appreciate that religion might also be experienced in non-linear ways, such as through poetry, music, or contemplative practices.

I have also been influenced by teaching the philosophical and historical influences of psychology, in fact this research topic was generated through class discussions in this course. Certainly the interview portion of this research has been a favourite for me since that allowed for continued discussion and thinking about this topic, something which the literature review and conversations with my committee have also encouraged.

Data Management and Analysis

Interviews were recorded on a digital-audio recorder. Upon completion, each interview was downloaded to my laptop computer. This computer is kept in my home office, is password protected, and our home has a security system. Once interviews were safely stored on the computer, they were deleted from the digital recorder. I was solely responsible for transcribing these interviews. Printed transcripts are kept locked in a filing cabinet in my home office.
The procedures used in this study resulted in 65 double-spaced pages of written responses and 360 double-spaced pages of transcribed interviews. It was this data set that was used in the analysis.

For data management purposes, the qualitative software program NVIVO was used. This allowed for easier management of the data. This program is stored on my password protected computer at home. Transcriptions were imported into NVIVO. Once this study is completed, the transcriptions and interviews will be saved on a computer disk, and then stored at my supervisor’s office at UBC.

**Research question one analysis**

The data set for the first research question was generated by Interview Questions One to Four, Seven and Eight in the questionnaire (Appendix C), and through responses from the interview. Data was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Reflecting the double hermeneutic described earlier, this is a two-way endeavour with the researcher actively working to construe the participant’s personal world, although clearly this is influenced by the researcher’s own conceptions. Miles and Huberman (1994) encouraged using an approach they described as early analysis. They commented that in reality interpretation begins from the moment we begin to engage with data and so it is artificial to limit analysis to the initial readings of the transcriptions. Early analysis was true in my case since I began to conceptualize themes from reading the initial written responses, and certainly from the time of transcription and on.

At this first level of analysis small repeating ideas or themes developed out of readings of the transcripts. Schmidt (2004) observed that: “In response to existing theoretical and empirical concepts, and against the background of theoretical traditions, a number of (initially rather vague) categories will arise” (p. 255). Smith and Osborn (2003) noted that at this early stage of
analysis the entire transcript is considered as data, but that there need not be an expectation that every step will reveal new themes. Each transcription is read a number of times and as something interesting or significant is read notations are recorded. In NVIVO this was accomplished by highlighting text and naming what was significant in that text, and also by attaching annotations, and/or links to memos that elaborated on my ideas.

Smith and Osborn (2003) suggested that in the second reading of the transcript emerging theme titles can be described. In NVIVO one can copy portions of a transcript and store them in themes. These themes are highlighted in different colours, and can be seen in the document’s right margin so they can be viewed easily. A search for a particular theme opens all data that is stored under that theme. As analysis progressed, data for the first research question was initially ordered into approximately 150 small stand-alone themes, known as “free nodes” in NVIVO. “Free nodes” represented emerging themes, and were given titles that best seemed to represent data. Eventually the number of “free nodes” became too unwieldy, and at that point they were ordered into larger themes known as “tree nodes”. Smith and Osborn suggested that emergent themes be listed and the researcher should work to identify connections between the themes. In so doing small themes eventually come to be clustered together. There were 10 “tree nodes”, but very quickly some of the “tree nodes” became too large, and I was concerned that their size would make analysis unmanageable. For example, in the spirituality “tree node”, there were 70 “free nodes.”

The next step of analysis entailed a reorganization of the “tree nodes.” The process for this organization began with some thought about what constituted themes. The word theme seemed to be the most commonly used term within qualitative research. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) defined it as: “an implicit idea or topic that a group of repeating ideas have in
common” (p. 62). Bazeley (2007) however observed that the word theme seems to imply a tendency towards description only, and clearly "fracturing" the data the way coding does is a process of constant "recontextualization of the data" (p. 66). In order to help reflect this process of recontextualization, I began using the term concept heading to describe what NVIVO calls “tree nodes” - large conceptual categories that contain repeating and related ideas.

To begin the conversion of “tree nodes” into concept headings, a review of the “free nodes” stored in each “tree node” was undertaken. This review involved rereading the data stored in each “tree node”. As each “free node” was reviewed it was ticked off of the list of nodes contained within each heading. “Free nodes” that seemed to share common elements were merged. This merging process was tracked with memos. Memos were also written about nodes depending on whether a salient feature or commonality created an idea. This process helped to reveal commonalities among the data, enabled me to query the appropriateness of each title, and helped to create new concept headings that better represented the data. The review of “tree nodes” continued, and eventually all the “tree nodes” were replaced with concept headings. The following is an example of a memo describing the creation of the concept heading that initially was titled Belief - Creation of.

Regarding the title - Belief - Creation of, I’ve chosen this concept heading because it seems that the repeating ideas in this text speaks about the nature of belief itself. These pieces sound as if participants are working to formulate an essence, a core, of what their beliefs are hung on. Possibly belief - essence or nature of, might be a more inclusive heading, but it has the potential to suggest phenomenology exclusively. Belief - description of, is too similar to my other heading, which includes the literal descriptions of beliefs. Since this review of concept headings is a kind of narrative - this is my beginning, and for now I'll stay with this unless or until something else presents itself.

Following are the "free" nodes included within this "tree" node, or concept heading.

- avoids creating belief out of fear of entering into topics such as death
- belief - are part of what we do without consciously reflecting on them
• belief - because I want it to be so
• belief - extent of my understanding at this time
• belief - fight for differentiation
• belief - for curiosity
• belief - independence of also makes it a private event
• belief - is made real through experience
• belief - the reason for belief is to give us purpose
• belief - we need to be right, hence why people are so committed
• belief is self-actualizing
• beliefs are normative
• construction of belief is a pastiche that works
• context constrains
• ontology of belief

Process: I have opened each “free node” and reviewed the text I’ve placed in each. After reviewing these, I think now that perhaps this concept heading might be more representatively titled: Beliefs and their Narratives since there are many narrative features present in these particular “free nodes.”

At this point a coding query was undertaken for each concept heading, which helped to generate larger, more encompassing concept headings. These were collapsed into super-ordinate themes. Suggested changes and data reviews throughout the analysis process were discussed with my advisors. The super-ordinate themes were ordered into a three by nine matrix, which included on the horizontal axis the following three areas: beliefs, religion and spirituality. On the vertical axis data was ordered into the following nine areas: assessment, attitudes, construction, description, development, goal-directed, impact-outcome, experience of, and what informs them. The titles created from the “free nodes” were sorted into this matrix, and helped to provide a sense of the themes examined in each category. There was an additional category named “Sacred” where findings from an interview question which asked whether participants had had experiences that might be described as sacred were sorted.

A short narrative of each participant was completed after each analysis, and memos for each participant’s data set were created, where ideas, hunches, potential themes, were placed. NVIVO also includes an option for annotations, which enabled an electronic link attached
directly within the text for those annotations. Throughout analysis I was able to search for key words, and review data through queries which retrieve and organize information from the database.

**Research question two analysis**

The data set for the second research question was generated by questions Five and Six in the questionnaire and responses from the interview. The second level of analysis applied elaborative coding drawn from personal epistemology theory, more specifically the reflective judgment model described by King and Kitchener (1994). Analysis for this question bracketed out the portion of the interview and questionnaire related to the second question, and utilized elaborative coding to interpret how participants assessed their beliefs. Coding was based upon the seven stages of the reflective judgment model. Each time a participant explained how s/he justified or assessed her/his spiritual belief, or spoke about how s/he construed the nature of knowledge, that portion of the transcription was ranked according to stage level. Data which was included in a single ranking was organized into units, and units varied from only a sentence to one or two paragraphs. A unit needed to include a single rationale about justification of belief or construal of the nature of knowledge. When each analysis was completed, the units were tallied. Participants who scored consistently in one stage were assigned that stage. When participants scored in more than one stage more than 25% of the time the dominant stage was listed first, followed by the second stage. For example, if a participant had a total of 10 unit scores, with six scored at Stage 3 and four scored at Stage 4, the participant was assigned a Stage of 3 – 4.

The original plan for analysis was to include in analysis only the written and verbal responses to Question Five: In what ways, if any, can you defend or support the beliefs you’ve
described above? Please elaborate using the beliefs you have identified, and Question Six: What
have you found useful in defining your beliefs? Some participants though began speaking about
how they evaluated their beliefs much earlier in the interview, while others rarely spoke about
assessment. As a result, this second analysis bracketed off all portions of the transcription that
was related to how participants assessed their beliefs or spoke about how they construed
knowledge. The second analysis also included participants’ written responses in the
questionnaire to Questions Five and Six.

Coding was based upon the reflective judgment seven-stage model, which is labelled as
Stage 1, Stage 2, etc. Because there are a number of different stage names within personal
epistemological literature, and because some names have the potential to be confusing since they
are drawn from divergent philosophical models, (realist, dual absolutists, etc.), King and
Kitchener (1994) deliberately avoided naming each stage in order to avoid confusion. In King
and Kitchener’s model, each stage demonstrates a view of knowledge that is increasingly
complex, justified and integrated. A table of the reflective judgment model is included in
Appendix E. King and Kitchener developed a reflective judgment interview to assess levels
within their model. My study used a partial adaptation of this interview, but their protocol for
assessing levels is quite clear and entails evaluating interview material on the basis of its
epistemic assumptions. King, in an email correspondence, suggested using the stage descriptions
in their Developing Reflective Judgment book (1994). She commented that:

. . . a key to how well you’ll be able to link interview comments to these descriptions is
the degree to which the interviews get beyond the specific content of the beliefs to their
underlying epistemological assumptions. In other interviews I have used, I have found
that this is often a sticking point with interviewers who get so absorbed in the content that
they pay less attention to the structure – and that’s essential for coding. (personal
communication, July 28, 2007)
Kitchener and King (1996) have a *Reflective Judgment Scoring Manual with Examples* that is a helpful overview of each stage. Each stage assesses three general dimensions of knowledge, which include cognitive complexity, reasoning style and openness, along with a summary of specific dimensions: 1) Nature of Knowledge – 1a) view of knowledge, 1b) right versus wrong knowledge, 1c) legitimacy of differences in viewpoints, and 2) Nature of Justification – 2a) concept of justification, 2b) use of evidence, 2c) role of authorities in making judgments. The manual included a number of very helpful examples.

King and Kitchener (1994) used second coders to increase reliability in rating for the reflective judgment interview. I hired an Honour’s student whose major is in psychology from Kwantlen Polytechnic University to assist me with this. The second coder has worked as a qualitative researcher through the Ministry of Children and Family Development for one year, and as a mixed-methods researcher for one year with B.C. Housing Program Planning. The second coder, after reading Chapters Three (The seven stages of reflective judgment) and Four (Assessing reasoning skills) in King and Kitchener’s (1994) *Developing Reflective Judgment*, along with my research proposal, and the *Reflective Judgment Scoring Manual With Examples* (1996), rated the transcripts independently of me, and we met weekly to review our progress and discuss areas of disagreement. We found that we had more areas of disagreement earlier in the process, although we consistently had areas of disagreement, and both found coding painstaking, lengthy and challenging because we only agreed consistently on about half of the transcriptions. The difficulty here likely lays both in the interview protocol and research questions themselves. The reflective judgment interview schedule has been standardized to assess six specific dimensions of knowing, and explicitly asks participants about their understanding of knowledge and how they justify their responses. In the current study only two questions were dedicated to
assessing the nature and justification of knowledge, and so it was difficult to have complete confidence in our coding. At least with these ratings we had a criterion to work by, but knowledge is complex and it is difficult to reduce since we were looking for participants’ underlying assumptions that contribute to their stance and justification of knowledge. Last, we also found that we had more difficulty coding for participants who were in between stages.

Additionally, the interview protocol for the reflective judgment model is different from Questions Five and Six in the present study. The reflective judgment model explicitly assesses for subsets of nature of knowledge and its justification. For example, in the reflective judgment model there are 7 ratings given per participant, and these are based on a set interview with a set number of questions. For the present study, my interview was semi-structured and was based on a different problem set from the reflective judgment interview. Because my intent was to use the reflective judgment model as a general interpretive tool, and because the interview did not explicitly ask questions related to the 7 ratings, I rated stage levels based on a general analysis of participants’ view on the nature of knowledge and its justification.

I coded for reflective judgment level one last time by reading through the transcriptions again, reading my comments, the second coder’s comments, and then making a judgment on those areas that were still in disagreement. These were the reflective judgment levels I ultimately came to work with.

**Trustworthiness and Rigour**

Smith (2003) stated that the discussion around validity and reliability in qualitative research reached a new maturity with the publication of two articles on this topic: Elliot, Fischer and Rennie (1999) and Yardley (2000). Both articles, according to Smith are successful because their suggested criteria for assessment of qualitative research are wide-ranging and suggest a
range of ways in which trustworthiness and rigour can be established without oversimplifying their application. They also provide criteria which can be applied irrespective of the theoretical orientation of the study and developed their criteria through a review of literature on the topic, presented their criteria at scholarly conferences which furthered discussion and review, and through conversation with qualitative researchers. The resulting criteria in both articles are very similar, are both described as evolving, but are titled and organized somewhat differently. I selected the criteria provided by Yardley (2000) since these were the criteria Smith utilized to assess interpretative phenomenological analysis. Following are the three evolving, flexible, broad principles from Yardley:

1) sensitivity to context
2) commitment, rigour, transparency and coherence
3) impact and importance. (p. 215)

Sensitivity to context includes contexts of theory, socio-cultural context, and the social relationship between researcher and participants. McLeod (2001) observed that good qualitative research has reflexivity built into its method. Awareness of issues around power, language and the constructive, ephemeral nature of individual reality is present in my first research method, which is interpretative phenomenological analysis. Yardley stated that in qualitative methodology: “a central objective is to highlight and query the common-sense concepts and assumptions which shape our naive observations and explanations” (p. 220). This objective is the partial goal of both my research questions. I have also clearly identified the theoretical models which have had primary influence on my analysis. Applying theory in analysis can help to develop new insights, and can be rigorous so long as the analysis is clearly grounded in the data.

Socio-cultural contexts refer to, according to Yardley (2000), the “normative, ideological, historical, linguistic and socioeconomic influences on the beliefs, objectives, expectations and
talk of all participants (including those of the investigator)” (p. 221). Drawing upon an interpretative phenomenological methodology helped to respect and reflect socio-cultural contexts since the first research question sought to describe participants’ experience of spirituality. The last context Yardley described was the social context that existed between researcher and participants. Because I am an instructor at Kwantlen Polytechnic I was aware that participants might want to represent themselves favourably, or feel awkward in the interview. This was one reason I opted to include a written response initially, as a means to help participants prepare their thoughts on the topic in their own time. I was also aware that participants might feel uncomfortable in the interview which was set in my office, and worked to make them feel at ease by explaining the research questions, the process, and sometimes describing my newness at the whole endeavour. I tried to use language that mirrored what participants said, and if I made reference to a theory it was only if I thought, through speaking with participants, that it was a theory they had encountered as well.

The last stage of this project included emailing participants to let them know that the study was completed, and asking if they would like copies of both Findings chapters. Nine participants replied and asked for copies of both Findings chapters. Two participants read the chapters and responded. Their comments are reported in the Discussion chapter.

Commitment, rigour, transparency and coherence correspond to expectations of thoroughness within qualitative research. Commitment refers to prolonged engagement with the topic, not just as researcher but as someone who possesses some empathy in the topic of interest, immersion in the data and rigorous application of the research method chosen. My research questions are ones I have been thinking about for a number of years. I came to this topic because I have seen, while teaching, how fascinated students are with the kinds of questions my research
asks about. One of the reasons this particular area drew my attention is because of my own interest in these questions, and from remembering my frustration, when I was a young adult, and older, in trying to figure out and consolidate answers to life’s “big” questions that were satisfying for me. In terms of the analysis itself, I have been engaged with the data for eighteen months now, and I have reviewed my analysis with my supervisors and research assistant (for the second research question) throughout the analysis process.

Rigour speaks to the completeness of the data collection and to the completeness of the interpretation. Yardley (2000) stated that this may need to occur at several levels of analysis. My study utilized three levels of data collection: written responses, face to face interview, and written responses to my final analysis. I have used two different types of analyses for two different research questions with the expectation that these two questions are clearly intertwined, and inform one another. I have also read transcriptions and written interviews as a whole a minimum of four times, and read portions of the transcriptions and written interviews numerous times while coding. My first full reading was during transcription, second during proofing and importing into NVIVO, third as I began coding within NVIVO, and again as coding proceeded. I read through the full transcriptions again when I identified portions relevant for the second research question, and reengaged with these portions during analysis. I revisited this again during discussions with my research assistant data. Throughout the process I met on average monthly with my dissertation supervisor to discuss analysis. In so doing I believe my results are not superficial.

Yardley (2000) explained that transparency and coherence are related to the clarity and cogency of the representation of the findings – is the account convincing, and does the research question, the philosophical perspective of the research method, and the research method itself
“fit”? Transparency is also achieved through the audit trail and disclosure of all levels of data collection and analysis. In the present study, data collection and analysis procedures have been described, and a research journal was kept which included my thoughts, insights and concerns related to the research process. I made notes after each interview, encouraged participants to speak about their experience responding to the questions I asked of them, and asked for their feedback on the research process and questions. My data collection and analysis can be independently audited, and NVIVO helps with this since each stage of the collection and analysis is documented within NVIVO, along with memos describing this process. Bazeley (2007) stated that there is a widely held belief that using computer software helps to improve rigour since software programs can locate every time a particular term or concept has been used. She cautioned though that this perception can be misleading since human factors are always involved and computer software can’t compensate for limited interpretation or sloppy work habits. I tried to keep this caution in mind as I progressed through the analysis stage. The last two criteria, impact and importance, are reviewed in the Discussion chapter.
Chapter Four-Findings: Description of Beliefs

The findings of this study were the outcome of interviews with 16 participants, ages 19 – 26, who expressed an interest in spirituality but who described themselves as having little or no religious affiliation. The first research question asked: what spiritually-related beliefs do non-religiously affiliated young adults have? The findings showed that participants’ beliefs were a wide-ranging melange which largely shared in common the primary feature of not being religious. Participants were open to experimenting with different beliefs, and were engaged in creating their narratives about spirituality through conversations with friends and family, the influence of popular culture, and even in the interview process itself. Creating their narrative was a fluid process that was comfortably wide-open to change. What inspired change is in part the subject of the second research question: how participants assessed their beliefs. This chapter will address the first research question.

Findings came to be ordered into the following three super-ordinate themes:

1) spirituality – what it is

2) the process of creating belief,

3) the “why” of spirituality – what are the outcomes of the beliefs.

Spirituality – What It Is

Spirituality begins with its definition

Participants were asked what the term spirituality meant to them, and were asked to describe their spiritual beliefs. Participants broadly defined spirituality as a hopeful syncretism of beliefs, a belief in a higher power, karma, and love of nature. Religion was central to a definition of spirituality because most participants began by distinguishing spirituality from religion and by expressing concerns about the problematic nature of definitions themselves.
**Definition is problematic**

Some participants began by explaining that they found the word spirituality confusing and suspected that the term is widely misunderstood or used in highly individualized ways. Some suspected that spirituality is commonly construed as an addendum to religion, and this perception caused spirituality to be defined incorrectly as part of the larger concept of religion. For example, Alpha emphasized that the meaning of the word is contained in its root, which is spirit itself.

I think that it is used very commonly today as spiritual having to do with God or, you know, a higher power. And people, just, you know, they forget the entire, like where it was the base of it comes from, is spirit which I guess, you know, the ghosts or whatever you want to call them (hm hmm), and um. That's where I find it kind of confusing, I think people have kind of forgotten where the word comes from. But I don't know, I mean, it's confusing for me because, like, I mean, you know (laughs), I don't know why it's confusing, it's just, it's weird.

For this participant, and for others, part of the confusion around spirituality also stemmed from the wide-ranging beliefs that can make up a definition of spirituality. For example, spirituality can refer to a belief in spirits, in a soul, in life after death, in karma, and in a higher power. These seemed to be the most common beliefs, although by no means did all participants share all these beliefs jointly.

**Elaborating on definition**

Spirituality was sometimes described as an emotional experience, a response to an important event, such as marriage, the birth of a child, or being in a natural setting. Many also had opinions on what spirit was. For some, it was a kind of energy, perhaps an energy we recognize in like-minded individuals, or individuals we are inexplicably drawn to. Pi commented that:
I don’t know, I think that it’s because, you know you talk to people, you can meet people and some people just give off an energy, and you are just like attracted to them. There is this energy about them, so I think they’re spiritual, I don’t know, just their soul, that’s their energy they give off.

For one participant, spirit was a kind of Freudian defence mechanism, a place where we store what is poorly understood or unknown, and endowed with a kind of magical quality to help us rationalize what is unknown. One participant had a complex understanding of spirit as a kind of alarm system that could forewarn her of impending harm. Many construed spirit as something that was non-material, others saw it as material. For some spirit was unchanging, for others spirit changed through a process of reincarnation, and was eternal.

Some participants recognized that their understanding of spirituality was near-impossible to explain scientifically. For some, the definition of spirituality was intertwined with how one knew the truth value of spirituality, and the challenge of this contributed to the confusion surrounding the definition. For example, one participant called his ideas “half-baked”, but seemed comfortable with that, not in a naive way, but in what possibly can be described as a kind of shared tacit post-modern norm, something like – “we know these things are incommensurable, and we know that people who think they know it all really don’t, and everyone knows that even science gets it wrong, so I may as well make the best use of my beliefs as possible”. There seemed to be a common acceptance of knowledge as relative, or comprised solely of opinion, and definition was a little like experimenting with new recipes, with a recognition that these ideas have to be given time to see if they will work successfully together. Spirituality included memories, doing good deeds, having children, or could be actions that live on in the memories of others. If there was one commonality in participants’ description it was that none were certain of their beliefs. Omicron explained that this lack of certainty was because there was no prescribed doctrine to follow:
I think that, I think like, yeah, there is something else, working there but not exactly knowing what it is or why or what happens. . . that you think that there definitely is. Spiritual means that you believe in something higher, but you don't necessarily know what that is, there aren't regulations or user-operations (hm hmm), it isn't a predetermined system of beliefs, but what you believe to be true. (italics mine)

Lambda explained that it was unlikely that someone could know with certainty whether his or her beliefs were true:

I don't think that any person could actually say for a fact that they know there is an afterlife, and so I'm not going to say I know there's an afterlife, I can't. I can't know that there isn't either. So it's just kind of like, when you die, it's a question mark, for me until it actually happens (yeah), so my spiritual beliefs, I guess would be that there is a possibility. It's just that I'm not going to say, without a doubt that there is a heaven, or something, something like that, any afterlife, or heaven or hell, I just don't really believe in that.

Many participants saw their lack of certainty as central to what spirituality was, and why they had chosen spirituality rather than be members of a religious group.

Alpha: yeah, I think of that, I don't know, I mean, there's so much out there, there are so many possibilities that there could be, I think not knowing is probably one of the most, like I feel a lot more free not believing, you know, one particular thing. Although I do, you know, I am curious as to, to see what is out there. But I feel more free because I am not confined to one basic religion. I can look at all of them (hm hmm). So that's why I'm comfortable, not knowing.

Problems with religion – anti-institutionalism

Many participants expressed concern at what they saw as religion’s restricting censorship upon their definition of spirituality. Institutional religions were largely construed as hegemonic and totalitarian. Participants stated that in order to authentically assess and select spiritual beliefs they had to position themselves outside of religion. The following is a fairly typical example provided by Beta, who had a hopeful perspective about her ability to access spiritually-related ideas, and made reference to how she believed religion might restrict that:
Yeah, there’s so much that you don’t know, for all you know this planet could be just the smallest thing like in the entire universe, and the entire milky way could be the smallest, smallest piece of like even greater parts of the universe. And like, there’s so many other galaxies out there. I know - maybe there’s another galaxy within the galaxy, so to just say religion is a big deal, well, you’re missing so much more, there’s so much more out there that you have no idea. Why not explore something that you don’t know, that you have more flexibility of getting to know?

Participants’ attitudes seemed to fall within a binary of, for the most part, spirituality good - religion bad. Other authors have described this kind of religious anti-institutionalism that participants described as being central to their understanding of spirituality (Bibby, 2009; Wuthnow, 1998). The following are examples of participants’ rejection of institutional religion.

Beta: And like I said, with the church community, everyone who goes in there, they cast judgment, they are going to gossip, and they, and when they devote so much into it, put their entire lives into it, the entire church group is going to know what’s going on in your life, so you don’t really have that sense of privacy. . .
I think that one of the really good ideas that Christianity brought up is that we’re all sinners, we all make mistakes and we all have faults, no one is perfect. But I can say that 90% of people who go to church, they believe that, in the idea that because I go to church that makes me better than the rest of the people in our society that does not go to church. So I don’t really like that whole close-minded and non-accepting and judgmental of others, and that’s why I kind of steer myself away from going to church.

Unlike other questions in the interviews, this was an area that participants spoke about at length, with conviction, with few pauses and provided many examples rich with detail.

Theta: okay, just from, you know like reading about the Catholic church and how corrupt it was and you know, even things like all the priests that worked at private schools, that you know, molested young children and I mean, these are people that are supposed to be people of the Lord, I mean, that would in no way be, if you are following that religion and the Bible and everything it says, what someone who is of the Lord would do, right? And so really it is just, like you look at people who are pedophiles, and they create their entire lives to, you know get to a place where they’ll be able to do what they want to do. Whether it is like, become teachers or like priests or whatever, they are at private schools. I think people just trust a bit too much just because it is labelled as being a religion and they just trust that it is good, but it is not and you know, like even, like I wrote about the Mayan pyramids and the people who were educated, would be inside the pyramid and
you know, they would tell everybody like all the people who live there about, you know certain gods and stuff and they would manipulate the shadows on the pyramid to make them believe that they were the authorities on the Gods, so that they would give them all their harvest, all their food, all their goods. And they just sat there, eating everything, and you know, reaping the benefits, while these poor people, who totally believed them, would do without, because they were doing what they thought they had to, to have a good life. And it is just all throughout history, where there is just so much corruption, and it's not this true, great thing, you know?

Nu: because, there are some people who are religious and they go like, I don't know, I think, - the guy who hijacked a bomb was religious, or I mean, the plane (yeah), and he was religious and he did something wrong, he did something way wrong than someone who would have done it who weren't religious . . .

Participants’ perspective on religion was as an unmitigated authority, and while participants pointed out facets of religion that they saw as positive, religion as a whole was largely understood as an institution whose raison d'être was to proselytize and control.

Participants saw religion as serving some ulterior purpose. Theta described this when she said, in reference to religion, that: “It’s not this true, great thing, you know?” Religion was also perceived as a convenient ideology that politicians may adopt to win votes, and because religion was a human endeavour, it was ultimately manipulated to suit human desire, with references made to the problems with pedophilia, and as a means to control resources. Some participants saw religion’s purpose as institutional control, especially as a way to influence the “mindless masses”. Gamma spoke about his perception of religion as an instrument used for domination and social control:

Because humans use religion to bend it, to their own spin-zone, to make it, to serve their own purpose? Like for example, in the Bible there is never any script that says that, um, homosexuality is a sin, and (hm hmm), don't get married - no! And there's other parts of the Bible that says that you cannot eat this kind of food. But people ate it anyway those
days, but like when it comes to homosexual - wouldn't think - hey, you are wrong. Not because of the Bible, because if they don't like you, they don't like homosexuals. So people really bend these things, you know, to serve their own interests. That's my interpretation of that.

This largely negative appraisal of religion was one of the most consistent themes encountered in reviewing transcriptions. It might be useful to keep in mind though that a selection criterion for this study was to be non-religiously affiliated.

*Problems with religion - a foundationalist epistemology is questionable, must be uncritically accepted and does not represent the individual*

Religions were also perceived as being comprised of a set of belief systems which were impossible to prove, and yet expected their congregations to accept those beliefs uncritically. Members of religious institutions were construed as naively and unreflectively accepting religious doctrine without judgment. Participants wanted to be able to select what they believed were the best pieces of religion without having to situate their beliefs within a larger system of religion, or have to defend their own ideology to religion. By choosing spirituality over religion participants were not constrained by religious doctrine and judgment, and because they were unique to each person those beliefs required little or no justification. Also, the individual and ephemeral nature of spirituality meant that it had no general “user operation manual.” Each “manual” had to be individually constructed; the goal of which was greater authenticity.

Interestingly though, while participants seemed to have little respect for religions as a whole, the validity of beliefs taken from larger religious system, such as a soul, life after death, or a higher power, seemed to benefit from the historical presence of religion. But religion, as Pi described below, generally was perceived as unilateral and comprised of adherents who asked no questions of the institution.
I don’t know, I think religion is just like, like following what people do, and there are rules, and with spirituality I don’t think there are any rules, I think it is more of an energy, just a feeling, and it is different for everyone, whereas with any specific religion it is going to be the same for everyone, most of the time because of the rules that they are following.

Gamma went further and expressed what was implicitly implied in other participants’ perspectives, which was that religion is a membership right which does not extend to him, but the benefits of exclusion outweigh the costs.

Right, see, good question. Um, sometimes I do feel like I’m being left out (of religion). I feel like I’m not in their club. But um, at the same time, I feel free. I feel like I’m not really, I define myself, I define my own humanity. Not really defined by other people. So I feel a sense of freedom, of being able to choose, that’s my spirituality.

It was not surprising then that this – either rejection of religious systems and the discourse around that, or the assumption that all religions operated similarly, seemed to be responsible for participants’ satisfaction in the openness and plurality of their definitions of spirituality. Participants did not seem to recognize religious institutions as places where dialogue and dissention ever occurred, much less were encouraged. Many participants believed that in order to be a member of a religious community complete adherence to that religion’s doctrine and standards was mandatory. To not do so was to be the most pernicious kind of hypocrite. This exclusivity, these extreme standards and expectation of complete compliance was expected of religious communities.

Researcher: you can’t opt out (yeah). And yet you have?

Xi: Um, well, I took, like myself, I kind of have, and my friends, because we kind of think alike, but, I don’t know. But I mean, I just don’t consider myself to be Sikh because I don’t follow it, because I feel if you are a part of a certain religion, you have to follow everything that religion says, you have to be practicing it in order to be called that (hm hmm), you know, I, I cut my hair, and you’re not supposed to cut your hair, and you’re supposed to be a vegetarian, and you’re supposed to do all these things that I don’t do, but I still believe in God, not a particular God, just a God or a higher being, somebody.
In order to maintain their spiritual integrity it was important for participants to remain outside of religious communities, because being outside seemed to them to be the only place they could speak their minds, and undertake their highly individualized and for the most part private spiritual exegesis. As long as they were the ones responsible for selecting certain spiritual concepts then that seemed to mitigate any concerns they might have about hypocrisy in their own actions and beliefs. Rho described:

Yeah, I didn’t want to be swayed, one way, anything that I thought I wanted to think of. I mean, I was open to all religious faiths at the time and I never started thinking that I was very religious, so for me, I didn’t want to just go there and act like I was a part of something. I knew it just wouldn’t fit right, I was thinking, I kind of needed to make a connection of some sort, and if someone just explained it to me, I’m supposed to think one view, I would just, - I could probably see how they feel about it just the way I do when my mom speaks about it. I mean, she holds it as one of her things that she really believes in, but her explaining it to me, I would be able to see how she explains all that and how it works for her, but for me it wouldn’t be the same thing. Her telling me wouldn’t be as good as me realizing it on my own. And because I did that, that is why I can say I actually believe what I do believe in, it was more of a thought process that I went through, it wasn’t something that was told to me and then kind of convinced me and I thought well – maybe I do believe that and whatnot. I wanted to kind of find it on my own. (italics mine)

By creating one’s own beliefs, participants avoided the problems and dogmatism they perceived as typical to institutional religion. Lambda’s example represented many participants’ views:

I think I kind of have a negative view on religion, no offense if you are religious, I don't want to offend anyone (no), but because of religious beliefs, like, I think, it's used, if that's not the main purpose, but it's used a lot in wars. And beliefs, like strong beliefs of groups of people, like group beliefs, have led to huge wars, and I just kind of think that if you have such firm beliefs embedded in faith, which you can't prove, and you are going to, people, millions of people die because of it, I think it's kind of pathetic. And I don't know what the purpose, or how else these wars would have started if everyone just had their own individual beliefs (yeah), it creates such a conflict like, it kind of draws lines between people and stuff, to have such, structured group beliefs.
Problems with religion – which one to choose?

Pi spoke to the problem of commitment to a single religion. How does one make such a difficult choice, how does one evaluate their differences, and how does one know which one is “true”? At least with one’s own beliefs, there was some validation in how she felt.

There are so many religions out there, I mean, how do you know which one, and if there is so many then maybe none of them are really right? Maybe it is just a spiritual thing, and different people are trying to place that spiritual, like give them rules, like some people just need, like following, to explain to their kids or whatever. So, they are, I don’t know if it is right to say, but they create these religions or, I don’t know where these religions come from, I guess it is more that I don’t get the same kind of feeling about them as I do with just my own spiritual feelings, I guess, from whatever the environment or higher power – (laugh) – whatever it is.

While participants’ opinions of religion were largely negative, they were willing to utilize religion’s long history and large following as evidence for the probability of some of their spiritual beliefs, such as the existence of a higher power or a soul. The thinking seemed to be: if religion has so many adherents, some of the ideas must have validity. Most participants had some minor exposure to religion, many had a family member who was active in their Church community and believed in a religious faith, or had friends who were members of a faith-based community. They seemed to have little knowledge about religious communities though, or their experiences with religious communities were negative ones, and participants tended to assume that all religious belief was of the most literal, simplistic kind. None seemed to lament the loss of community that can be found within religion, if anything they preferred their aloneness and stature of being “outside”. For example, Beta stated:

So for me I think I’m safer in what I believe in, because I made my relationship with God or whoever’s out there and there’s that privacy, whatever I pray, in my own time, or ask for and believe in, that’s between me and whoever’s out there who’s listening. It’s not so much that I have to go to church and share with everyone else, so.
and I don’t really want to be in that community, and I feel better that I extract myself from that. And I’ve learned from my experience, from my surroundings and from my own ideas, as opposed to having to listen to someone else’s ideas, who have different surroundings and different experiences, that you can’t force that on someone else, that’s what I think.

Gamma stated something similar:

But um, at the same time, I feel free. I feel like I’m not really, I define myself, I define my own humanity. Not really defined by other people. So I feel a sense of freedom, of being able to choose, that's my spirituality.

*Spirituality is a hopeful syncretism*

Putting their concerns about religion aside, participants explained that their beliefs were something that gave them hope, and that for many participants they simply just believed without questioning. These participants recognized they could not know with certainty, such as Beta observed:

Yeah, it gives me that comfort, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s accurate or wrong. But why question something when it’s comfortable and it works (yeah).

Participants’ understanding of spirituality was as a hopeful syncretism. The presence of a spirit, for those participants that believed in that, was construed as something internal that acted for your benefit, and that could arise from a higher power, a deceased loved one, or positive past actions. When I asked if spirit could have the reverse effect, for example could there be a negative spiritual influence, there was surprising agreement on the exclusively positive nature of spirit. If this cohort’s understanding of spirituality is, as Wuthnow (2007) defined it, something to be tinkered with, then satanic forces which are present in many religions, has clearly been rejected, with one exception, and that is the exception of karma. With karma there was the
potential for negative influences depending on one’s actions. Here is Epsilon’s example of the beneficial effects of spirit:

Epsilon: I feel that sometimes her spirit is still with me, guiding me to make choices in my life, and it may be that her spirit is in heaven, or her spirit is somewhere else, but I believe that it is living on.

Eta described spirituality as hopeful and metaphorical, and his reliance on metaphor conveyed his belief that spirituality is something poorly expressed through prose.

A transcendent, overflowing truth that can be either forceful or subtle that connects to the individual and offers something new, an opportunity for growth or for change. Anything that captures genuine interest and has life, or is alive, despite being inanimate.

Spirituality was not only a connection with a positive power, but it was also a process of developing wisdom through experience and through the influence of important individuals. To be spiritual seemed to be synonymous, for many participants, with psychological and emotional growth, and was a way to challenge oneself to avoid dogmatism and be open to new experiences.

Xi: seeking wisdom, striving for growth, seeking deep connections with others, um, in my life I always try to grow emotionally and intellectually and strive to gain real insight into my life . . . I think that if an individual wants to have a spiritual life then they must always strive for growth. By pushing oneself to learn and always be open to new ideas. Finding connections with others is critical in my opinion, interacting with others, by helping them and connecting with them on a human level.

. . . . .

But if I had to, then I suppose I would try to explain by saying that spirituality transcends the material world. It has to do with experiencing sanity, mental peace, and psychological health, the sunset, (some Maslowian peak experience - laugh) - um, the wind. Yeah, and you say, if you have, then you have experienced spirituality.

Some participants described a kind of anamnesis as their understanding of spirit:

Iota: I do know a little bit about, like, your unconscious. And you are consciousness, but I do think it goes a little bit further than that. I kind of think that your spirit can almost, is hiding somewhere in your consciousness and that we can't really tap into that, really . . .
I think our consciousness is able to retain the memories from past lives, and is somehow able to forewarn us of events that are going to happen in the future. When we may not be sure of it at the time.

**Variations on a higher power**

That there are no regulations or user-operations in spirituality extended also to participants’ understanding of what a higher power might mean or be. Most participants had some belief in a higher power, albeit a very tentative one, ranging from Eta’s proposition that God may be us, or in us, to an unknown energy, an intelligent presence, to more traditional interpretations of a greater being. Some participants did not see the need for a higher power – spirit is simply a part of human nature and we experience it in the form of ghosts and reincarnation. Spirituality could refer to both energy and growth, and for some participants, spirit was the bearer of God. But still there was a constant questioning of whether this was a real presence or something invented. Here Pi described how she understood and queried the existence of a higher power:

I think it has something to do with, you know, the feelings we get from that energy when we are in tough times or whatever, I think that’s where these feelings come from. I think it is all, I don’t know, I think we all probably get different feelings of energy from a higher power or whatever. Or maybe we don’t actually, maybe it is just ourselves telling us that because we don’t know how else to get through it.

Researcher: maybe there are sides to ourselves we don’t know, (yeah), and again that . . .

Pi: and we create that you know, when we are a little kid, we make up monsters under your bed or whatever, I don’t know. Maybe we just – and when we are grown-ups, we don’t want to deal with those monsters so we create another part of that that makes us feel better about it, I don’t know.

Researcher: would that, be very upsetting for you, if you one day decided that higher power is just another part of you?
Pi: I don’t think it would upset me. I’m kind of like a logical person. I like to know facts, like, I don’t read fairy tale novels, I’m not like that kind of person, so I don’t think it would bother me personally, but I could see it bothering other people. Because I don’t know, when it does get hard for them it might take away that, I don’t know, a lot of like getting through life is all about positivity and attitude, so if you take away that energy – what are people left with, right?

But participants were hopeful about the possibility of a higher power, although no one was willing to completely commit to such a belief, and this was especially so if the higher power was associated with religion. Instead, participants tended to think – maybe there is, maybe there is not, but it would be nice if this were true. If there is a higher power, this power has a purpose, either as a kind of energy system that operates throughout the universe, or as a benevolent presence that helps us, watches out for us, and helps to encourage moral choices. Beta described a benevolent higher power in the following way:

Like a powerhouse, kind of like it gives you a reason to do better, to work harder, maybe you already have the ability to do better, but just knowing that someone already believes in you, and that some greater being is helping you, you’re more than that.

I don’t believe that there’s a man out there who has control over everything and created the universe and all that stuff, but I do believe that there’s a greater being, not necessarily God but a greater being that we call God who is looking out for all of us.

**Belief in karma**

While most participants were uncertain about whether a higher power actually exists, many took a stronger stance on the presence of karma, which Smith, in *The World’s Religions*, defined as “the moral law of cause and effect” (p. 64). A few participants spoke of reincarnation. Some participants mentioned how common the concept of karma is, and how its ubiquity helped to lend support for its likelihood. Karma seemed to share roots with some participants’ love and respect for nature and increased awareness of the environment. Karma,
reincarnation, spirit in nature, were all concepts that participants had become familiar with through popular media and exposure to Eastern religions and multiculturalism in Canada. Several participants spoke about their interest in multiple religious ideas, and how they appreciated the pluralism we see in Western culture. They understood pluralism as something that helped them to elaborate on their choices and diminish what many saw as the hegemony of Christianity. Rho spoke of her desire for karma and reincarnation to exist, partly because it is such a commonly-held belief, and partly out of a concern that death is non-existence.

   Something has to happen once we are gone because people always talk about karma, and I am a strong believer in karma and so it has to mean that once I am no longer here that I will still in some way be connected to my life before. I believe in my reincarnation not because of religious views - (I am taking from that, not because of say, a particular religious scripture or doctrine?), yeah, but because I believe a person's spirit goes on living even once your body is gone.

Several participants talked about a kind of physical reality that a karma-like accounting would enact on the world. Participants explained this was difficult to describe, but several persevered and gave their sense of how the universe could unfold utilizing this kind of cosmic karmic balancing. Theta described her hypothesis in the following way:

   I do, like I really think it is all part of that, you know, like maybe we are all, in a sense characters on this game board, and we have our little strings and we are being you know, pushed around, and that's like the force. And whether you get more motivation to go in a certain direction, because that is where you're supposed to go or whether you are just feeding off of that, you know, that you know you are going in the right direction, so you are more motivated to continue pursuing that because it is right, or bringing you closer to where you are supposed to go.

   . . . .

   I mean yeah, except the only thing is just to - the whole idea that we are all kind of, you know, like positive and negative ions, that we can charge each other or give off to each other. Just the whole chain of Dominoes effect of how positivity or negativity can spread in your everyday life.
Lambda speculated that this cosmic effect could increase the probability of good enacting good.

Lambda: no, I don't, I don't really believe in that, I kind of believe that all your effects leave a ripple (oh I remember that - third law). Yeah, yeah. And I basically think that you kind of put a more positive spin on just the randomness of the universe. It will come, it could come back to you in a positive way, but I would say it's all probability and to do with chance and stuff, and I don't think it oh - like I got in a car crash, and I didn't die because I did something good the day before, I don't believe in that necessarily. Just that it could increase the chances maybe, if you keep living consistently as a overall good human being.

Researcher: so you entertain that, do you actually believe it?

S-Lambda: I just, I just think that there are consequences for every action, and some of the consequences are more likely to be negative if you are, like putting out a negative action to cause them. So, I guess it's karma in a way but in a probability sense, not in a supernatural sense.

**On nature**

Most participants spoke of nature as being spiritually illuminating and a place of reverence. In fact a feeling of reverence was only spoken of in reference to nature.

The natural world was a place that elicited spiritually-related thoughts and fostered a feeling of safety, of appreciation, of being at peace.

Omicron: It’s always, I don’t know, this is kind of hard to explain, but like when I feel happiest is when, this is going to make me sound like a hippy, but when I feel happiest is when I am in, like the environment or on the ocean or something and I just feel like that, that feeling of wholeness and completeness. It is different than when you are in the city or at school or working or something, like that to me is spiritual, like at one with nature, without all the other bullshit of the world coming into it. And that’s just what like I have always kind of felt that way, and so there is no religion out there that says that, that I know of anyway.

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Mu: I think that that time at the beach is for myself. Personally, I would just feel most at peace, and most, I don't know. Not you know, I'm happy when, like when I walk in the
city, but when I walk around my neighbourhood whenever and it's just you know, especially in springtime. When the cherry blossoms are out (oh I know) then it's just beautiful and I know, that's where I'm supposed to be.

One participant in particular had strong feelings about spirituality emerging most when in nature, and that participating in that merging created a kind of symbiosis.

Nu: it's just like you get an emotional feeling. You get this uh, you feel actually connected to something that is inanimate. It's not another human being. . . . I just felt that connected to it and it could actually understand me as just, I was just like an animal in that territory, and that was my home.

The Process of Creating Belief

Coming of age narrative – Spirituality is a journey

Spirituality was understood as a process, or as a kind of a journey. One of the goals of this journey was to question extant authority. To consider oneself a reflective individual one was expected to take on the old social order, and the resulting construction of spiritual beliefs were a highly individualized pastiche of various religious beliefs, ordered into a narrative. The most predominant theme present in these narratives was the idea of coming of age by rejecting a naive faith in the human-created enterprise of religious institutions. This particular narrative was one that was present in every participant in this study. Participants spoke about the process of creating belief, and how this contributed to the narrative creation. The following sub-themes contributed to the larger coming of age narrative: 1) an awareness of the influence of larger socially-created narratives, 2) a desire to create beliefs for one’s self, 3) the assumption that these beliefs, because they were individual, were more authentic, 4) the process of creating their own beliefs.
**Awareness of larger social narratives**

Awareness of social narratives included a continuation of the dominant rejection of religion theme described earlier. Some participants spoke of an awareness of a secularizing larger narrative that dominates Western culture. This narrative’s ubiquity was evidence of its validity, or at least, for participants, the safest bet. Delta described his suspicion that in our age secularism is perceived as a more correct choice than is having religious faith. Delta commented how strange it was that the presumption of unbelief about religion acted as the new prevailing narrative. He described a childhood belief he had had about this reversal of the traditional Western perspective about religion’s dominant social standing.

I mean, considering the fact that I was born into the good old white middle-class, something I was reflecting on, I think I touched on this in the paper, was the fact that when I grew up as a child, it was weird, if you believed in God. (yeah). Yeah, thinking now that it is actually very strange in our history, that children, they talk to each other and alienate one another for not being deemed godless, but for being godful, having that faith.

Certainly participants were aware of cultural, contextual and familial influences upon their beliefs. Participants spoke of a desire to undertake a journey of self-realization, of articulating one’s beliefs, while being mindful of the influence of these larger social narratives. For example, Eta and Nu spoke of their concern about the influence of social belief systems, and how they hoped to be able to avoid them.

Eta: This itself is a problem I struggle with, is the public a mass? Is the public a stereotypical entity, sometimes I think it is, sometimes I think it isn’t, but I always think I’m being unfair when I think it is, unfair to other people, but I think that there is a defined belief system, a structure, that runs through the public, and it’s always – I think it’s all security, it’s all grounding, and it’s always fallacious, it’s always wrong because it always is right, it’s right for the public and therefore its wrong for the individual, I think there’s a great psychological difference between public-thinking and individual-thinking, and it sounds pretentious and arrogant.
Nu described trying to find something from her own mind, instead of what she had been taught to believe.

Nu: yeah, I just kind of, like even when you are, um, just sitting and there is nothing there, when you are in nature you are not really just, you’ve gone through the path, you are focusing where you are, and you start more questioning yourself, and just the fact that when you start questioning yourself, like am I here? What is my purpose? And then you start questioning more often, um, what you believe, what you are getting from your own mind. Instead of something else, or someone has told you. (italics mine).

Epsilon explained how his lack of religious heritage had given him the freedom and opportunity to explore. He described how he suspected many people of religious faith have that faith because they inherited it, and that inheritance vetoes opportunities to question or alter that inheritance.

well, maybe this is really naïve of me to say, but I think a lot of people have religious beliefs because they are born into it, you know, and people could say that I wouldn't have religious beliefs because I wasn't born into a family with him or whatever, but at least, like I kind of have that choice? To if I want to explore whenever I can and some people don't have that choice, in the sense that, if your families got a certain religion. You completely go against everything, you never really get to go and explore options or whatever you're going to do, and think what you want.

Once we become aware of this influence though it is incumbent on us to try to look beyond it. Plato’s cave allegory comes to mind here, but the goal is to climb beyond institutional belief.

**Best done alone**

Maturity, individuation and self-knowledge are goals best undertaken on one’s own, and begin with a rejection of institutionally-sanctioned beliefs, and in particular religious beliefs. To undertake their narrative construction about spirituality as part of a larger group was to diminish the value and legitimacy of their beliefs. The constant inconsistency I saw here was that participants seemed to need to reject religion because of its perceived limitations of dogmatism and simple-minded faith, and yet in its place their need to create an intellectually defensible
system for themselves was not paramount. What was most important was the creation of their story of spirituality and to begin to write their story on their own. Lambda and Nu described their desire to develop spiritual beliefs independent of their culture, and also explained how this was experienced as more challenging than accepting the status quo.

Lambda: yeah, it definitely is a harder road to travel. It's pretty much, I choose to do that, because I find it harder to live, than just blindly accepting something, then it is harder to live with, just not being sure. But still knowing the fact that you are not going to, kind of conform to some popularized beliefs that people are a part of. Because I'm pretty sure if I was born in another part of the world, I would just conform to the religion there, and I thought about that, and I'd find it hard to live that way, not really believing it. But just being told to accept it, like when I had to go to church I didn't feel like I was being a good Protestant because I would always question it, and just to live in doubt, and I don't think I should be constantly be doing that, and I don't believe a lot of this stuff, in the Bible, so I just kind of wanted to develop my own philosophies, as to kind of why I am here and what my purpose is. And that's what I came up with, just live there, just treat others the way that you would want to be treated, that's how I've developed those kinds of ethics, I guess.

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Nu: yeah, it's difficult so just the fact I think that I do have that difficulty of finding, like making it for myself, it's a more, I feel that it's more myself then. It's not someone else making it for me anymore.

A few participants were tentative in their rejection of what they saw as the larger religious belief system. Part of the tentativeness around questioning, for Eta, came from recognizing how challenging this process is, and from fear of nihilism. The questioning process was partly a balancing act between daring to question, lingering in the discomfort of ambiguity and aloneness, and worry that he may not find anything real to take its place.

Eta: I don’t know, that’s difficult to say. Early, early adolescence was a very difficult time, based on peer groups and whatnot, high school politics and I think that I fostered doubt, fostered very deep scepticism that corrodes everything, that is, with scepticism or doubt everything is a little questionable or fishy and the more that you can corrode away from a superficial fishiness then the deeper you go. I guess the more things you realize are anchored down – the meanings that you were talking about, I think, are a bit of a
security blanket, it’s a warmth that’s important but it brings security, groundedness, I think that’s mainly what everybody wants in a spiritual definition, they want groundedness, they want belonging and they want identification. Floating out in the void somewhere you don’t have any grounding or any perspective or any relativity and I think that doubt is like a big black void you can wander around in – it can help but it can hurt at the same time, it corrodes but it can be corrosive.

For Nu, questioning her past beliefs led to more questioning, and a search for something that had authentic meaning.

Nu: but I do think that just the fact that you feel more connected with something else, you start believing that that is more authentic than what you were really believing before. It's just the fact because, self-consciously, as a child you have been told to believe that, but when you grow older, and some obviously just follow the same thing and never question it. But when you start questioning one thing and you start questioning another. You kind of make a connection that is just all, um, non-related, and you try to find something else that actually has real meaning to you, as a person. Not something that you think you should have a connection to.

**Spirituality is more authentic**

Part of the coming of age narrative included the importance of spirituality being something that was individual and more authentic than religion. This was partly because participants recognized they did not have to get this right the first time, in fact the matching of beliefs to a sense of authentic maturity was clearly one that required time and attention. Nu described the process of taking her time in order to find something that held real meaning for her. Beta spoke about rebellion during adolescence, and how she saw religion as representing authority. Rebellion was also levied against secular influences, such as materialism or, for one participant, the state-sanctioned Marxism he was taught in school. Participants chose spiritual beliefs to replace these, and spirituality was integral to a sense of self and meaning.

Nu: yeah, and me, at this point I'm choosing not to have a religion. I could go and do whatever I choose, but I think that, that's where, I don't know. Maybe it makes me feel
good because I don't have to do anything specific, I can take my time and decide what I believe in and kind of go from there and right now I'm fine not really believing in . . .

Iota: for a long time I was kind of thinking like, well, who am I? What am I doing here, do we just wake up, go to school to get a job so we can get money, and die and just do it all over again, is that kind of what it all is?

These participants’ descriptions seemed to reflect their need for a spiritual journey that travelled along a secular path. I suppose that at first glance this journey might seem a rather lonely one, but if Charles Taylor, in A Secular Age (2007) is correct about the primacy of secularity, and I believe these participants reflected his perspective, the secular road these days, at least for spiritual beliefs, seems to be a busy place. Clearly a large social narrative is a tricky thing to define, but participants were well aware of outside influences on their beliefs, and spoke also about the process of creating these beliefs.

**Creation of belief**

Participants spoke about the experience and process of creating their beliefs. Their construction of belief was a narrative, and given that much of this process centered around selecting spiritual beliefs and trying them on for fit with developing identity, this narrative process was construed as a kind of personal mythology. Sub-themes in this area illustrated the narrative process. For example, *because I want it to be so*, and the *extent of my understanding*, (sub-theme titles italicized), both seemed to explain how participants were working to explain the concept of belief, but had run out of words, which was different from elsewhere where they acknowledged ambiguity. In *extent of my understanding* it seemed as if they did not know how to continue their story - where do their beliefs go from here? Participants also confirmed their stories *through our experiences*, and their stories, as a part of how they structured their beliefs,
helped to provide a sense of identity. Clearly we want our stories, as part of our identities, to be right, which is why we are so committed to our beliefs. For example, Alpha made the following observation:

Right, and, I don't know, I don't understand it when people get so, so upset because other people don't believe them. It, it's almost like, the only thing I can only link it to is if, I were saying the truth, and you were calling me a liar, and you know, I'd get really upset when people call me a liar and I know that I'm not. So I think it's almost like that.

For some participants, their beliefs acted as a normative process. Gamma spoke about the social function beliefs produce:

okay, so, since we were born, as kids, our parents were teaching us - you can do this, you can do that, that's a benchmark. You shouldn't kill people, you should be nice to people, uh, um, that's a benchmark, and people are doing this, I think because they can feel, they want a set of rules for the world, so, when you are playing the games, when you are in these games you feel a little bit more secure, a little more safe, because you know what's going to happen. You can predict outcomes, if you're in the game versus like if you're born without parenting

Here was a participant’s description of how spirit and meaning have a kind of life-force which was instantiated as part of the meaning-creating process. Spirit animated objects, and spirit and meaning worked together. For example:

Eta: I put the word inanimate in there because if you think of physical objects as a symbol, I think that you put spirit inside of it, if it’s, I don’t know, I can’t think of an example but, if you take an object and you think of the ramifications of that object, of the tangents that it has, you put sort of life into it, you put history into it, even though it isn’t conscious. It isn’t . . . you can put meaning into it if you want to. And that’s putting spirit into it, if you have spirit you have inherent meaning and it can be put into, and can be taken out, it can be spiritual-less people, theoretically I think - people that have no internal meaning and they could be inanimate then, they could be inanimate objects but, if meaning is inserted then spirit is inserted as well, spiritual.

Eta gave a rich description of how he created spirituality for himself. He spoke of the importance of metaphor and poetry in developing spiritual meaning, in contrast to his impression
of the Bible which defined meaning. Later he spoke about how he created meaning through non-rational ways, such as poetry and emotion, and by trying to participate in nature.

Eta: But this is more like, I extrapolate from the text, extrapolate meaning from the text and I don’t strictly follow it like scripture or something like that.

We also piece our stories together, and our stories need to be credible, so context constrains our beliefs. Ultimately though what mattered most was whether one’s beliefs were effective. Many participants talked about a kind of self-actualizing process with their beliefs – the validity of their beliefs occurred through belief in their belief. Mu described this nicely:

With any religion you just believe that, if you believe strong enough, you know, Christianity believes there is a God so, you know you live by the rules of what he wants you to, and then this is what will happen to you, you go to heaven or whatever, right, like that. So, with anything, if you believe it enough, then it doesn't really matter what other people think or, or what the truth is or whatever that doesn't really matter, it is, you won't find out until the end anyway

Related to this process of “belief-actualization”, Gamma described a kind of relativism that was referred to commonly in the second research question – if we cannot know something for certain, then one’s own beliefs are the best stand-in.

While you’re doing that, is that you're highly objective, you don't know if it's real or not real, you know it could be interpreted in so many ways, so, it doesn't matter to me, what's real, what's not real.

Creating one’s narrative contributed to identity, and participants were aware of how they drew upon their cultural book-shelves to inform their narratives. They also seemed aware of how many twists and turns a narrative can take, in a sense they saw themselves as bricoleurs. Ultimately, the participants explained that spirituality for them was the sum-total of their beliefs, and that those beliefs helped to inform their sense of self through the stories they told, about what kinds of beliefs they chose, and how they lived those beliefs. Whether they were born into
nature, a deceased loved one was watching over them, there was a soul that was comprised of unchanging essence, or spirit was transcendent, they drew from the stories they have heard and worked to make them real for themselves, regardless of whether they thought these stories had any real validity. Theta explained how beliefs helped to answer questions and provide comfort, even if we cannot know for certain.

And I guess that, really in the sense that, you know, with Greek mythology, people just want to know why, and in a sense this is the same kind of thing, and this is my reasoning for why, and this is what gives me comfort, and knowing that there is a reason, and that there is just no higher power or anything. I think that everyone believes it just because they want to and need to, so.

Many participants’ narratives seemed to try and operate within a scientific framework. Perhaps a soul was another level of consciousness, or there was energy in the universe that was responsible for karma’s influence; participants merged science and their favourite beliefs into personal narratives that were meaningful for them. Because their spiritual beliefs were so personal and individual, meaning was grounded into their beliefs, and that was what authenticated them. Participants were wide open to a continuing sampling of what was available as well – that was a central point of how this worked – it was the fluidity of their beliefs that made their highly individual narratives successful and without need for public validation. Here was an example of a participant working to fit her narrative into a scientific framework:

Pi: I wouldn't say I believe in the conventional idea of God, but I do believe that there may be another level of consciousness. I will find myself sometimes in stressful situations, and I will be saying to myself words like "oh, please help me". And I am never sure who I am really talking to, so I think subconsciously I believe in a higher power (italics mine).

The beauty of myth also was that its narrative did not have to be scientifically validated – it served a purpose of meaning, not scientific prediction. In religion, having beliefs that were inconsistent or in opposition to that religion had the potential for damnation. Iota explained that
Iota: I just feel like when you do it yourself, you are doing it kind of for yourself? Rather than you're, let's say, I keep going back to Christianity, but that's the main one that I know about, it's just that. . . You know, if you're not following this religion then it's kind of that you're doing something towards God, you're going against God. Whereas you know, if I don't do something, or something that goes against my beliefs then, . . . which is not good either. But it's you know, someone telling me that I'm disrupting the order of things, or you're disrupting somebody else's, it's kind of my own problem.

This narrative process was one that was in progress, and that was an important feature of spirituality. Participants’ beliefs were fluid and open to change.

Theta: then I will probably change it yeah, absolutely. yeah, I definitely am open to like hearing different people's perceptions or ideas or theories and adding to or, adapting them to mine.

May (1991) expressed concern over the lack of modern mythologies that possess complex, nuanced meaning and worried that the predominant 21st century myths are vacuous and futile. I am not convinced though that this sense of futility was present in these participants’ spiritual beliefs. They seemed at ease with shifting, changing, inconsistent beliefs; in fact to them this seemed a far superior way of being than to have committed, nuanced belief, or they accepted that committed belief was somewhere off in their future, and they had confidence that their future would unfold with greater meaning. They did not express concern that their future may hold more of the same, or may bleakly lack meaning. They seemed willing to jump in and draw meaning from popular culture. Obviously it is hard to say, based on the present interviews, whether that process will grow stale as time passes, or whether their beliefs will become more consolidated and effective. Here is Eta again commenting on his experience of creating a critical attitude:
Eta: I don’t want to make myself out into something I’m not, but the last thing the fish notices is water, and if you’re not in that water then you can notice it, you can criticize it. And I’m not very sure where it came from but I developed a really harsh, critical mind when I was young, critical mostly towards myself, thinking of having low self-esteem about myself, not being . . . so I fostered a very critical attitude toward myself and I think that I learned to use that tool, that critical tool, and apply it to other places – it still works against myself, that corrosive process.

**Spirituality – Its Outcomes**

Participants chose their spiritual beliefs because of the effect they had on their sense of identity and in their day to day lives. Spirituality helped to provide a sense of meaning and purpose: by participating in goodness, by connecting with others both alive and deceased, to being open to new experiences.

Lambda: how do I live my beliefs? (Yeah). I guess my beliefs result in me feeling more purpose than if I had no spiritual beliefs.

Researcher: so how do you know that you have purpose, what are some concrete examples you can give, some examples in your life?

Lambda: I guess it makes me, I can't think of a better word, it makes me care about the world, whereas I wouldn't really care as much about, if I didn't have these beliefs, like. I've seen people waiting at the wrong bus stop and I know that they are at the wrong bus stop, and just because of my beliefs that I want to live a good life, that I care that they are going to miss it, so I'm going to tell them - oh, it's over there, I'm not going to snicker that they are on the wrong bus or something like that. (That's a great example). Yeah, I just help like, just really random people, because I feel like I'm morally obligated to, but then that gives me a sense of purpose in the universe. Like I saw this tiny Chihuahua, that was just shivering, I thought it was lost or something, I felt like I had to call the SPCA to get it rescued. I stood at the park for 10 minutes trying to call and then I, this kid comes over and calls the dog back into the house. And by now I've missed my bus, (oh), and I'm like, well, I wasn't mad about it because I just kind of felt that this is serving the purpose that I have gained for myself, and I wouldn't have those anomic feelings (yeah).
Being spiritual meant having a sense of hope, and for some, included a sense of closeness with loved ones who have died. Spirituality also entailed openness to new possibilities, for some it was an opportunity to support others, and helped to provide purpose.

Researcher: What is it like for you believing that your grandma is still with you?

Rho: it just gives you something to hope for, it just makes it feel like it is not as permanent as you would think it is sometimes, something that kind of tells you that even once you leave, I guess it is more reassuring that after I am gone, there is still a part of you that. Because you think of growing up and having a family and whatnot. And I know it would be just as hard. Obviously, leaving, even now, and so it just makes it a little easier, it gives you something to hope for too.

Once again participants spoke about the experience of not having beliefs clearly laid out for them, and how this in part contributed to their motivation to explore different beliefs. These beliefs helped to move them towards creating a sense of purpose and a more positive outlook on life. Participants spoke about spirituality being related to goodness, and the immediate effect doing “good” had. Spiritual beliefs provided comfort, maturation and a positive influence.

Participants also spoke more specifically about how their spiritual beliefs helped them to differentiate themselves from others, and how their beliefs helped contribute to their sense of identity, although this was more tacit than overtly stated. For example:

Gamma: But um, at the same time, I feel free. I feel like I'm not really, I define myself, I define my own humanity. Not really defined by other people. So I feel a sense of freedom, of being able to choose, that's my spirituality.

**Conclusion**

This portion of the findings addressed the first research question, which asked participants to describe their spiritual beliefs, and then ordered those beliefs thematically. Spirituality was construed as something that was unique to each person and this individuality helped to make one’s spiritual beliefs authentic and helped to provide purpose and meaning.
Spirituality’s individual nature was one reason participants’ elected to be spiritual rather than religious. Because religious belief was perceived as naive and wrongly derived from institutionally-based doctrine it was challenging, if not impossible, to have authentic, meaningful spiritual beliefs if one was a member of a religious community. Spirituality was also superior to religion because spirituality allowed for wide-ranging beliefs that could be selected and rejected at will. Participants’ spiritual beliefs were wide-ranging and they appreciated their access to multiple sources from which new beliefs could be derived.

For the most part spirituality was construed and experienced as something that was hopeful and positive. Participants created their spiritual beliefs as part of a narrative process that again was unique to each person, although participants recognized that their narratives were influenced by the larger culture. There was some acknowledgment of the dominant secular narrative in the West. To be a mature, reflective individual these days required rejecting what was perceived as naive faith in flawed, human-created religious institutions. Being spiritual was a practical choice that acted as a kind of middle-ground between participants’ acknowledgement of the uncertainty of religious beliefs while at the same time providing an opportunity to incorporate religious beliefs into their lives. Choosing the middle-ground also reflected their concern that many of these beliefs may have no actual reality. Participants wanted a spirituality that demonstrated their appreciation for a scientific-based understanding of the world, but which also expressed their desire for purpose and identity. For the most part participants did not describe their spiritual beliefs as something they were deeply committed to or as a central part of their lived spiritual experience. Chapter Five explains how the findings from this chapter related to the second research question, which asked how participants assessed their beliefs.
Chapter Five-Findings: Assessment of Beliefs

Assessment of Beliefs - Reflective Judgment Model

The goal of the second research question, which asked how participants assess their spiritual beliefs, was to examine how participants thought about and critically reflected upon their spiritual beliefs. My intention in coding for stage levels was to use a well-established theoretical model to illustrate participants’ thinking about their beliefs. The purpose here was not to provide a proof of the reflective judgment model per se but was a means to access and organize the data in terms of how participants thought about and supported their beliefs.

This second portion of analysis grouped participants into stages described in the reflective judgment model. Similarities amongst participants related to stage level were identified. Participants’ assumptions about the nature of knowledge contributed to their spiritual beliefs in a number of ways. These findings are described according to stage level within the reflective judgment model. Stage levels are organized into three periods: prereflective (Stages 1 – 3), quasi-reflective (Stages 4 and 5) and reflective (Stages 6 and 7).

The reflective judgment model assesses two general dimensions of knowledge: nature of knowledge and nature of justification. In the nature of knowledge dimension are three subsets of knowledge: view of knowledge, right versus wrong knowledge and legitimacy of differences in viewpoints. In the nature of justification dimension there are also three subsets, these include: concept of justification, use of evidence and role of authorities in making judgments. Because the interviews in this study did not explicitly ask questions related to the general or subset areas of knowledge, the following findings are grouped according to stage level only and make reference to general or specific dimensions only when appropriate.
**Stage Groupings**

Table 5.1

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Of 16 participants, nine scored in the pre-reflective Stages 1 to 3. One scored between Stages 2 - 3, four scored at Stage 3, and four scored between Stages 3 - 4. The four participants who scored between Stages 3 – 4 showed ways of thinking that represented both pre-reflective and quasi-reflective Stages 3 and 4. Six participants scored in the quasi-reflective Stages 4 and 5. Three scored at Stage 4, one scored between Stages 4 - 5, and two scored at Stage 5. One participant was scored at Stage level 6. Both Stages 6 and 7 are classified as reflective judgment. Movement between stages is more fluid than hierarchical and builds on one’s assumptions about the nature of knowledge. King and Kitchener (1994) noted that “there is a network of epistemological assumptions that seem to work together, which is not to say that people are precisely “in” one stage or another” (p. 45).

King and Kitchener (1994) cited mean scores of 3.2 in high school, college at 3.8, and individuals with a college degree scored at 4.3. In the present study more participants seemed to have scored slightly lower than the norm for their educational level. There are multiple possibilities for why this may be so, not the least of which is a small sample size on which normative comparisons cannot be made.
Pre-Reflective Thinking – Stages 1, 2, and 3

No participant scored completely in Stage 2 or lower. Stage 2 thinking is characterized by the presumption that truth can be known with certainty vis a vis observation or authorities, or that if truth is not presently known authorities can nonetheless determine what is true reality. Beliefs are either right or wrong and certain knowledge resides in either first-hand experience or in authorities such as scientists, teachers, or religious leaders. Because truth claims can be established with certainty, evidence other than what authorities report or individuals’ first-hand experience is not perceived as necessary. This stage is an advancement over Stage 1 because it is understood that some truths are yet to be known, therefore individuals in this stage recognize that there are alternate points of view. Those alternative perspectives though are dismissed as wrong.

Some portions of transcriptions were scored occasionally at Stage 2, but the majority of transcriptions were scored at Stage 3 or higher. The report of findings begin with participants who scored at Stage 3, which falls within the pre-reflective grouping.

In Stage 3 it is common to cluster knowledge into three areas: true knowledge, false claims and uncertain claims. It is presumed that knowledge which falls in the realm of uncertain claims can be evaluated with equal validity by everyone. This presumption, that all evaluations are of equal merit, seems to be due to the conclusion that since some truths are currently uncertain or unknown, even legitimate authorities are no longer sources of absolute knowledge. Any authorities that make knowledge claims about truths that are uncertain are perceived to be questionable, arbitrary, dogmatic or deceptive. Therefore, because some truths are yet unknown and even legitimate authorities are questionable, one opinion is believed to be equal to another. This Stage 3 perspective on the nature of knowledge was a central influence on the spiritual epistemology of participants who scored in the pre-reflective range.
The following assumptions about the nature of knowledge were central to participants’ spiritual beliefs: 1) one opinion is perceived to be as good as another, 2) the role of authority is dismissed as irrelevant, 3) the use of dogmatic thinking, 4) the process of justification is subjective and personal, 5) belief is justified in a circular fashion described as self-actualizing.

1) One opinion is as good as another

Stage 3 thinkers acknowledged that right and wrong answers do not exist for many types of problems. Spirituality is an excellent example of this type of “truth” since many of the beliefs associated with spirituality, such as the existence of God, cannot be known with certainty. For example, Alpha explained:

I think it's because religion is not an evidence-based topic, you can't prove that it exists or it doesn't exist, so it's all dependent on opinion.

When there are not absolutely certain truths, one belief, perspective, or opinion is understood as having the same merit as another, and as a result there are no qualitative distinctions made between opinions or evidence. The following was an example from Alpha who justified her belief by implying that since we are all entitled to our opinion, one opinion is as good as another.

Researcher: So my next question is, if you were to have a conversation with someone who didn’t share your belief in say, a spirit, you know the existence of spirits or ghosts, if they didn’t buy it. You know, what would you say to convince him or her?

Alpha: I probably wouldn’t say anything. I mean, if they heard what I had to say, and said, yeah, okay, whatever you say,

Researcher: So if you had said, your experience, your first-hand experience?

Alpha: Yeah. If I was talking about my first-hand experience, and they said, yeah, okay, whatever, like they didn’t believe, I’d say okay, that’s your opinion. Like, I don’t know, I just, I think that people are free to choose whatever they want. Like if they want to believe in a spirit, that’s fine, if they want to believe in a religion, that’s fine.

The difference between Alpha’s stance on people’s freedom to choose and higher scoring participants was her unilateral position on any and all opinions or beliefs having equal merit.
Participants in higher stages qualified this belief in the equality of opinion by explaining why their belief was important to them. A central reason why Stage 3 participants tended to conclude that all opinions were of equal value was due to their confusion about the process of justification. If one presumes that there are no distinctions between authorities or perspectives, then it is very hard to know how to identify and select appropriate evidence and match this to beliefs. The following example from Pi shared a similarity to Alpha’s example in its confusion around the justification process and its emphasis on subjectivity.

Researcher: yeah. Oh, so number five, in what way is if any can you defend or support the beliefs you described? And please elaborate using the beliefs you have identified, and then, uh, so I have said, I noticed that you haven't answered this one, and that is interesting, all by itself. Why would you not answer that?

Pi: I don't know.

Researcher: (laugh) - that's the second research question (laugh) - that you find so irritating!

Pi: well, that was a difficult one, I guess because I really don't have any solid support for what I believe in or where it comes from, it's just, I can't even explain, I can't put it onto, like on paper, I guess, it's really only just a feeling. (And only feelings) yeah, like this whole time it has always been, I guess, like you said, I never shared them so it was really hard when I first saw that question, I guess I even didn't really think about it, because I guess I didn't question it before, I never even talked about it. It was just there, a feeling.

Pi made several points about why she did not include a justification for her beliefs. One point related to the personal nature of spirituality. Pi explained that this was not a topic she had discussed before and so had not had an opportunity to practice justification. Pi also seemed uncertain as to how to differentiate viable evidence from her opinions or personal beliefs. In Stage 3 individuals frequently base their decisions on what feels right without any other type of justification or elaboration, which is what Pi did. However, Pi qualified her use of feeling as justification by stating that this was not “solid support”, which might be interpreted as Stage 4
thinking, the next stage in which individuals begin to make distinctions between considered and unconsidered belief.

2) The role of authority

Because beliefs such as the existence of God or the possibility of life after death cannot be known with certainty, participants in the pre-reflective grouping concluded that there were no authorities who could elaborate on this topic effectively. Religious authority was especially mistrusted because it spoke on a topic that was understood to not be known with certainty. While participants at all stages construed spirituality as superior to religious belief, the reason for this rejection differed by stages. In Stage 3, spiritual beliefs were perceived as superior to religious beliefs because all religion was construed as an absolute authority that rejected subjectivity and allowed for no flexibility. Beta provided an illustration of this Stage 3 suspicion of authority in the following example.

And the church has always been established by power and hierarchy, you’re not really getting that equality because people put the priests up there, and the pastors up there, and then everyone else is sitting down there. And you have one person who you appoint, or think have more ideas or has reached that level where they’re so much better than everyone else, that they get religion, like that, that they want that person to be the person giving you ideas.

The perceived inflexibility of religion necessarily restricts one’s spiritual choices. Beta explained that she preferred spirituality because it allowed for greater “leniency with ideas.”

That spiritual gets to have more leniency with ideas, you don’t have to be right or wrong, to have spiritual beliefs.

A preference for spirituality because of its “leniency with ideas” was especially typical in Stage 3 thinking. By not having to be right or wrong there was no need for participants to provide justification for their beliefs beyond what felt right or their opinion. Alpha stated a similar appreciation for openness in spiritual beliefs.
Alpha: I don’t know, I mean, there’s so much out there, there are so many possibilities that there could be, I think not knowing is probably one of the most, like I feel a lot more free not believing, you know, one particular thing.

3) Dogmatism

In Stage 3 thinking there is a clear binary of us and them. This binary was commonly presented as: us, who are individuals in our spiritual beliefs and them, members of religious organizations who worship without thinking about what they believe. What was central to this thinking seemed to be the primacy of individuality. Making individual choices was understood as being equivalent to reflectively and critically making individual choices based on appropriate justifications. Many Stage 3 thinkers assumed the following flawed logic: people who are members of a group, especially a religious group, cannot make individual choices, therefore their choices cannot be reflective ones. Spirituality was perceived as boundless and so was wide open to choice and interpretation. Religion was understood to be something that also should be open to interpretation and complexity, but wrongly and dogmatically drew boundaries. Here was an example from Nu that privileged spirituality on the basis of its inherent individuality and that also included a dogmatic tone.

Researcher: hmmm, you flinched at the word worship?

Nu: I don’t feel that you should be worshipping anything. It just feels like blindly following something. With science, you realize that we’ve been evolved so it’s kind of like you are following it, it’s not. . . worshipping to me is like sacrificing something and when you’re with mother nature you are not sacrificing yourself, you’re just being with it. . . . Because they say, if you believe in mother nature you believe in God too, and I feel that’s totally separate, because religion is basically following someone, worshipping someone, blindly following a faith, whereas spirituality is something that you’re feeling, something that you’re connected to. It’s not something that’s been constructed by someone.

Like other participants in this stage, Nu used “is something that you’re feeling” as a justification without elaborating on why feeling is important, and overlooked the probability of people of
religious faith experiencing strong feeling as well. Nu’s justification did not possess the differentiation and integration of evidence to belief that higher stages did, and her language choices such as “blindly”, “totally”, “basically” have a dogmatic tendency, which is typical of Stage 3 and lower.

Dogmatism was also seen in the Stage 3 belief that true knowledge must be proven in some concrete way, which complicated the process of assessing a construct such as spirituality. This belief in the concreteness of true evidence is referred to as naive realism; the expectation that there is a direct and completely accurate knowledge of our world through our senses. For example, Nu stated:

Like I don’t feel like there should be anything in your life that you can’t feel or see. That doesn’t hold any value to you, or meaning, because it’s not there. In your mind, what you’re thinking is what you’re seeing basically. You can’t really construct something unless you’ve seen it, or someone has seen it.

4) Subjective and personal – What feels right

Stage 3 thinkers frequently used a subjective analysis such as what felt right as evidence for their spiritual beliefs. Earlier, in Pi’s example, she explained that her beliefs were “only just a feeling” and so had not provided any justification for her beliefs. In the following example, Epsilon used what “feels right” as her primary means of assessment, and yet in also identifying feeling as not real evidence, demonstrated a distinction between opinion and evidence:

Researcher: So the next question then, in what ways if any can you defend the beliefs you described above, please elaborate using the beliefs you have identified. And you say (interviewer reading participants’ written response: “it may not be real evidence, but it is what I can feel with certain situations.”) So I’m asking what would you consider to be real evidence?

Epsilon: yeah, it’s just what you feel, you can’t, it doesn’t, I mean, other people won’t believe that is real evidence, that’s why everyone kind of experiences that for themselves, because it won’t mean, you can’t necessarily believe them, they could be making it up or they could be, you know?
Both Pi and Epsilon recognized that using feeling as their sole justification was problematic. Epsilon tried to explain why that was the case, but more complex, effective use of feeling as justification is not seen until higher stages.

5) Self-actualizing beliefs

A few participants, particularly in Stage 3 (and some participants at Stage 4), used what Solomon (2002) described as a self-actualizing approach to assessing beliefs. This approach is founded on the presumption that belief does not need to be elaborated on or justified, rather belief and truth operate synonymously. Stating one’s belief is how that belief is made true. The following example illustrated a self-actualizing tendency.

Mu: With any religion you just believe that, if you believe strong enough, you know, Christianity believes there is a God so, you know you live by the rules of what he wants you to, and then this is what will happen to you, you go to heaven or whatever, right, like that. So, with anything if you believe it enough, then it doesn’t really matter what other people think or what the truth is or whatever, that doesn’t really matter, it is, you won’t find out until the end anyway (laugh).

Without knowing how to select and relate appropriate evidence to belief, restating a belief and investing enough authority in the belief was an alternative to providing justifications.

Summary of Stage 3

Stage 3 reflective judgment contributed to the kind of spiritual beliefs participants described. Spirituality for these participants was highly personal, subjective and was created in opposition to religion. While this opposition was also present in other stages, the justification for this opposition differed. For Stage 3 participants, all religion was misinterpreted as a dogmatic authority. Misinterpretation was due to the inability to generate complex, appropriate justifications, and religious authorities were commonly mistrusted or rejected because it was presumed that they could not effectively speak about a form of knowledge that could not be known with certainty. By recognizing that some forms of knowledge could not be known with

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certainty Stage 3 participants had begun to appreciate a constructivist view of knowledge. Choosing spirituality over religion seemed to be a way to acknowledge this view of knowledge. But, because Stage 3 thinkers do not yet know how to evaluate competing claims, complexity is confusing, and there was a desire for simplicity and flexibility in their own beliefs, while concurrently dogmatically rejecting religious beliefs.

Participants coded as Stage 3 tended to include very little about the process of justification. What justification was included was achieved by restating their beliefs and by appealing to the individual and subjective nature of spirituality. On two occasions Stage 3 participants submitted their written responses without answering Interview Question Five (In what ways, if any, can you defend or support the beliefs you’ve described above? Please elaborate using the belief you’ve identified). Stage 3 spiritual beliefs were wide-ranging, were explicit, and did not seem to be part of a larger personal philosophy.

**Quasi-Reflective Thinking – Stages 4 and 5**

Stages 4 and 5 are described as quasi-reflective thinking because knowledge in these stages is recognized as being uncertain; what is true for one person may not be true for another. Perry (1970) first described the central assumption in stages four and five as the following: what is not yet known becomes a new certainty of “we will never know for sure” (Moore, 2002, p. 20).

In Stage 4, knowledge and the process of justification begin to be construed as abstractions, but the process of combining of knowledge with appropriate justifications is still an uncertain one. A commonly held assumption about the validity of opinion within Stage 4 thinking is as follows: because knowledge is uncertain, everyone has the right to his or her own opinion. This right implies a new appreciation for the individual nature of knowledge.
Stage five builds on the understanding of knowledge typical of Stage 4. By Stage 5 individuals appreciate that while individuals may not know with certainty, they may have knowledge based upon a subjective interpretation of the evidence presented. This is frequently referred to as relativism – knowing is always limited by the perspective of the knower and beliefs are relative to a particular context since different contexts have different rules of inquiry. Stage 5 thinkers are able to relate two abstractions and are better able to evaluate an argument, they reason logically, their use of reasoning and evidence is appropriate and consistent, and they can evaluate evidence on more than one side of an issue.

In the present study higher level thinkers frequently described their involvement in school projects that examined philosophical and metaphysical questions, or described instances when they talked about religion and spirituality with friends and family. Perhaps lower stage thinkers were similarly involved in school projects or conversations with friends and family, but they elected not to describe these experiences in their interview.

There were fewer participants who scored in the quasi-reflective range and up, and as a result there are fewer examples to illustrate quasi-reflective and reflective thinking. The following findings were drawn from the available data. Stage 4 and 5 thinkers assessed their spiritual beliefs differently from other stages in the following ways: 1) In Stage 4, opinion was recognized as a valid form of justification because Stage 4 thinkers recognized that truth was individually created. Because of the constructivist nature of truth all opinion should be respected. Stage 5 thinkers recognized that in order for opinion to act as an effective justification, it needed to be supported by a rationale that was not only subjective. 2) While both Stage 4 and 5 thinkers acknowledged that reality cannot be known with complete certainty, those in Stage 4 had yet to view knowledge as truly being contextual or interpretative. 3) In Stage 4,
beliefs were justified. Justifications for beliefs in Stage 4 were more complex than previous stages, but were sometimes idiosyncratic and inconsistent, while Stage 5 justifications were more complex and logically consistent. 4) There is increasing tentativeness and caution in the conclusions that are drawn in Stages 5 and up.

1) Different perspectives on the appropriate use of opinion - Stages 4 and 5

Stage 4 thinkers differed in their justification for the use of opinion from earlier stages because they recognized that we all form opinions based on our own relative data. Because of the relativity of knowledge, it is wrong to judge other’s opinions since all opinion is contextual. The following was an example of the same person utilizing both Stage 3 and 4 assessments in relation to the value of opinion.

Researcher: In what ways, if any, can you defend or support the beliefs that you’ve described above, please elaborate using the beliefs you’ve identified.
(Interviewer reading the participant’s written response) “It’s pretty hard to defend or support beliefs because everyone has a right to their own opinion, I think that’s a good rule to go by.”

Researcher: The one, everyone has a right to their opinion, (hm hmm) so that’s a powerful belief right there, (hm hmm), so I’m wondering if you can elaborate on that? Everyone has a right to their own opinions. Why is that so and how can we know that to be true?

Mu: well, I don’t know that be true, I just think it is fair that everyone can voice their own opinion and everybody should have the right to their own religious beliefs. And, nobody can say you’re wrong, because who knows for certain what’s wrong, right? Because, it’s a belief you hold, you can’t tell someone that their belief is wrong. I mean, you can (laughter) but you’re not necessarily right.

Mu’s first response, “It’s pretty hard to defend or support beliefs because everyone has a right to their own opinion,” seemed typical of a Stage 4 construal of opinion. Since truth is contextual everyone has their own truth. In Stage 3, there was no need to justify since the uncertainty of knowledge was interpreted as meaning that everyone’s point of view was equally correct or equally wrong. Mu qualified her initial justification in the following way: “And nobody can say
you’re wrong, because who knows for certain what’s wrong, right?” This justification implied a Stage 3 stance on opinion because there seemed to be no distinction drawn between different knowledge claims, any interpretation was understood as just guessing. Later though, when asked about beliefs that could be harmful, cruel or just poorly thought through, Mu countered her earlier opinion by stating that in those cases it was okay to judge beliefs that were extreme.

When asked to choose which religious beliefs made sense, Mu replied:

Well, that’s an individual choice. You know, for someone who doesn’t follow religion, it is what makes sense for you, right, what makes sense for me might not make sense for you or for one of my friends or whoever (hm hmm) or for my classmates or anybody, it’s just what makes sense and do what works in your own life.

This again sounded like a Stage 4 understanding of the role of personal opinion because Mu implied that truth was individual and contextual.

The following was another example of both Stage 3 and 4 thought on the value of opinion.

Researcher: So in what ways can you defend or support the belief that you have described, please elaborate using the beliefs that you have identified. Your reply is: (interviewer reads answer out loud) “I don’t really have any evidence to support my beliefs, I’ve never really felt it necessary to defend my beliefs, because we are all entitled to our beliefs, to believe what we want.” (Interviewer stops reading response). So, I say there is an interesting belief right there – can you elaborate a little on your belief that we are all entitled to our own beliefs?

Iota: I just think that, whatever makes you feel good about yourself or comfortable with your life or your actions. I think that, if that’s how you want to live your life then go for it. I don’t think that you should use those beliefs or ideas to affect other people so much.

Initially Iota explained that she did not see a need to provide evidence to support her beliefs, which is common in Stage 3 thinking. But Iota also concluded that beliefs serve a purpose, which was to make one feel good or comfortable about one’s self. Since that was their purpose, it was unfair to apply those beliefs in judgment of others. This justification fell more within Stage 4 because of its appreciation for individual truth.
There were no Stage 5 examples of opinion solely used as a justification because Stage 5 thinkers understood that opinion, when used as a justification, needed to be supported by relevant evidence or an appropriate rationale. Here though is an example of a participant from Stage 5 describing his understanding of opinion:

Zeta: And that’s the positive aspect of having like flexible beliefs, or having, arguments tied to a belief as opposed to the belief being the central thing. The belief is made up of certain arguments or certain things that you believe, or are reinforced through those experiences, when someone attacks the belief directly then they aren’t attacking any of the premises, the arguments, then there’s really no, no way of dismantling of the belief.

Zeta recognized that by having beliefs tied to an effective justification, beliefs are better able to be both grounded and flexible. One avoids dogmatism by not making the belief stand-alone, and the avoidance of dogmatism allows for the potential to elaborate on beliefs through experiences, new ideas, or any of the myriad ways we inform our beliefs.

2) Reality cannot ever be known with certainty - Stages 4 and 5

Stage 4 thinkers began to appreciate that an objective understanding of knowledge is rarely achievable. The following example, coded at Stage 4, was the only example that explicitly addressed the uncertainty of knowledge (example italicized):

Lambda: And I, just kind of, I'm pretty down to earth, I guess, and after studying like biology and bringing my philosophy on to it, I just can't fathom, like comprehend how a religion can be true, looking at it realistically I guess, because I'm more towards science than I am towards religion, I guess. *Even though it doesn't have to be all, this is concrete, this is what is there.* But I'm not going to just, kind of pick a belief or whatever that other people have and that a large group has certain beliefs and I'm not going to just join that group, because it's popular or anything. I think I can have my own beliefs, I guess. Especially if I don't buy into a lot of their propositions.

Here Lambda, by stating “it doesn’t have to be all, this is concrete,” moved away from the assumption that there is a fixed and knowable reality that can be known directly. For Stage 4 thinkers it is this appreciation of the uncertainty of knowledge that helps to lay the foundation for
later views which construe knowledge as an action that is actively constructed through critical inquiry.

The following is potentially a Stage 5 assessment of the uncertainty of knowledge because knowledge, in this example, seemed to be construed as interpretative. It could also be Stage 4 however because this example did not explicitly describe the interpretative and contextual nature of knowledge.

Researcher: is there a way that you know at the moment when it feels right, that . . . ?

Zeta: Yeah, but you can never be sure about anything, and that’s the thing. You can only have a certain amount of probability that you’re sure what you did is right based on . . .

In Stage 5 participants began to describe how knowledge is created. For example, Lambda began by explaining that his spiritual beliefs needed to be completely rational, and were based on his understanding of morality and goodness. Later though, when we talked about ways of knowing outside of logic, he described the following understanding of knowledge:

Yeah, I guess every reality is definitely a construction. Like, this is only a table because we say it’s a table. Everything has been defined by humans for what it is. And I think that there is definitely lots of undefined things that we don’t, don’t know about. And science kind of follows through from the definitions of how we do define reality, I guess. It’s basically the facts about what we’ve already kind of constructed. So it’s kind of facts on our own constructions of reality.

3) Justifications beyond opinion or description - Stages 4 and 5

Stage 4 thinkers proposed more possibilities in their rationales, were less dogmatic and were better able to relate evidence to belief. Often though, this process of justification was idiosyncratic and inconsistent. The following provided a good example of the Stage 4 tendencies described above.

Beta: Yeah, it’s not something I know to be true as a fact, but I’m more the type of person who needs fact, but, if you want me to believe that Jesus or God is up there then I need more fact than that. I need proof, I think that’s why a lot of people in our society are becoming more leaning towards . . . because there is so much scientific ideas that, -
we came from apes and developed into humans and that. But I still believe, but ... I’m more of a cross between. I believe that there is a greater being but we evolved from apes and homo sapiens and all that stuff, maybe God created them, kind of thing, and we developed into something like that. I don’t think it was: “there was water, and there was light, and then Adam and Eve.” Maybe not like that but to the extent that the trees were created and then we evolved from a species, that’s what I think is more ... 

Researcher: So how would you explain ... on the one hand I hear you saying that your understanding of there being a greater power, you reconcile that with science and evolution by saying perhaps evolution and God?

Beta: Or a greater being came together as one, I think that’s more logical for me than to say from a book, which is written by a man, who could have changed anything they wanted. Especially with history, that the church and Christianity has so much power controlling society, because it was a way of having a government and it was corrupt, it was probably corrupt in those days because people have their own opinions and the church wanted to hold people down so they could change the bible in any way, and then there are some people who are really religious, like my friends, and they say “well that’s why we have the Old Testament and the New Testament, but either way it’s still written by a man, you can add anything, you can erase anything, and you can change it, you can skew it so people will believe in this religion more when there are so many other religions out there, so many other ideas.

Beta’s justification is a Stage 4 assessment of knowledge in the following ways:

1) Compared to stage 3 justifications, Beta’s proposal was more complex. 2) There was the possibility of knowledge being construed as an abstraction because she perceived Christian truths as being the result of social constructions. 3) Beta’s justification identified potential problems with utilizing Christian scripture as unequivocal truth. 4) Last, there is defensive and slightly angry feel to Beta’s perspective. Stage 4 thinkers have difficulty selecting multiple pieces of evidence and weighing their merits. They can distinguish between opinion and evidence, but relate evidence in a simple fashion, which is what the example above does, particularly in its sweeping dismissal of religious organizations as a whole. Because of the absence of certain knowledge Stage 4 thinkers assume that individual knowledge is personal and subjective, but there is little sense of critiquing those beliefs.
Beta also made a reference to evolution without including any reference to the scientific research that supports evolution, although that was implied. A number of participants in Stage 3 and 4 evoked science and evolution as a rationale without explaining why, and these evocations seemed a little like they were simply name-dropping evolution and science as viable justifications. On the occasions I challenged this, I made participants uncomfortable, and I think this was because they were shocked that I would question science and assumed that perhaps I was a “religious-nut.” I do not think it occurred to participants that my goal was to encourage them to explain how they justified science and evolution, and explain what it is about the scientific method that makes science so successful in prediction.

The next example is illustrative of a Stage 5 justification of belief for the following reasons: 1) the example included a justification of belief within an appropriate context, and 2) there is a more effective evaluation of arguments through appropriate use of reasoning and evidence.

Delta: Spirituality, they, spirit itself, I suppose, I have got a lot of faith in the individual's capacity, the individual to be an individual versus the individual's capacity to be a member of the group. And that strange situation where the person's actions and impressions on the group will live on, while the person's motives and inner characteristics won't. That's definitely something I haven't explored a lot. It fascinates me a little bit, though.

Researcher: so spirit, then is a kind of legacy of what we leave behind. And that what we might leave behind, is more our influence (hmm)?

Delta: well, that, I think that fits the best description of any standing definition of spirit -- something immortal, something that lives on past, beyond our time with, our influence on the world, not any sort of individual, not our idea of a human being, not even a noun. It's a method.

Researcher: a process?

Delta: yeah it's something I'm sure you are, I'm getting my strange ideas here (no, no I want to hear your strange ideas -- laugh - please), not a noun, but a verb, and it's probably not anything more definitive than that.
Researcher: so it is something active? (Definitely). It’s not a thing?

Delta: a process that exists in the community, the resulting process of our influences on the community.

Later in the interview, he added: “I definitely take a leap of faith in accepting everything I have been taught in school, (right) just as much as everything that, this school takes a leap of faith on gravity.” This seemed to demonstrate an appreciation for the difficulties inherent in a truly objective understanding of reality, which is representative of Stage 5 relativism. Delta also acknowledged his use of reason as central to his conclusions. He offered a possibility that spirit may be nothing more than our need for such a thing, and made reference to social psychological principles, which seemed a somewhat appropriate type of evidence. While Delta seemed open to critiquing his views, such as when I questioned a position more closely, an actual critique never occurred. Critiquing one’s views and encouraging others to do so as well is more representative of the next stage, which is reflective thinking. There were also instances when he seemed closed to new ideas. For example, when I inquired about multiple human influences on ways of knowing, they were dismissed except for their effect on our ability to use reason.

4) Increasing tentativeness in Stage 5

Stage 5 thinkers showed an appreciation for relativity, their judgments were better founded and more complex than judgments from earlier stages, and conclusions were more open to re-evaluation. Interestingly, the higher the stages, the less sense we had of what these participants’ spiritual beliefs actually were. They seemed to be more cautious about what they were willing to commit to in terms of beliefs. The second coder assessed the other participant in this study who was scored at Stage 5 the following way:

Zeta talks a lot about how other people define and defend their beliefs, but doesn’t really talk much about his own actual beliefs and defences other than in very general terms. I
have the sense that this is a fairly evolved individual, who is open to discussion and is interested in learning, but by page 8 of the transcript I still have no idea what their belief system is. I know the types of dogmatic thinking s/he disapprove of, and that s/he think that religion serves a purpose for helping some people. I also get the sense that this person is somewhat of a humanist who does not wish to impose their views on others, or to cause harm to others in any way. Nice person, but I am struggling with staging.

By Stage 5, defining belief became intertwined with how participants knew and justified their beliefs. The nature of knowledge was increasingly construed as individually created, and this was especially true for Eta, which is the last participant to be described. One last point for participants who scored in Stage 4-5 and 5 - the length of their responses, especially around how they established a rationale for their beliefs, were often three and four times longer than lower level stages. I also did not need to clarify as frequently, and part of what was clear was their caution at committing to beliefs that they could not justify.

**Summary of Quasi-Reflective Thinking**

Stages 4 and 5 thinking was reflected in the ways participants explained and justified their spiritual beliefs. Their beliefs were more complex than lower stage examples, although they were not as explicit about the beliefs they had, particularly in Stage 5. They appreciated the need for some form of justification, they began a movement away from dogmatism, were somewhat more tentative and reflective, and their beginning construal of knowledge was of a process that was actively created. Their spiritual beliefs were less literal and dogmatic. Participants who scored at Stages 4 and 5 began describing how they assessed their spiritual beliefs before they were explicitly asked, and construed spirituality as a type of knowledge. The more complex their examination was, the more their spiritual beliefs were intertwined with their understanding of knowledge and how knowledge is justified.
Reflective Thinking

What makes Stages 6 and 7 reflective is the understanding that knowledge is a process that must be actively produced on the part of the knower. Knowledge is understood as contextual, justification requires grounding in appropriate data and conclusions should be open to re-evaluation. Reflective thinkers recognize that completely objective knowledge is not possible since reality is filtered through our interpretations, but some arguments are better founded than others, and they have a sound knowledge of the justification process.

Eta was coded at Stage 6 because he was clearly aware of his role in producing knowledge, and he expanded lines of inquiry beyond empirical science to multiple ways of knowing that seemed more suitable for the topic under scrutiny. From the very beginning of the interview Eta’s definition of spirituality was his cautious but also elaborately and successfully justified assessment of what spirituality meant to him.

Researcher: So the first question then is the actual literal first research question, what does the term spirituality mean and I appreciate your answer and I appreciate your caution around definition. My job in a way is the opposite – it’s to start drawing boundaries around, pushing the boundaries around. I’ve highlighted some of the words that seem to stand out to me.

Eta: The italics are important, I deliberately chose the italics – if I had the space, if I had colour I’d do it in red, I’d just blow that word up to font 50 or something like that. When I think spiritual I think, the importance I think, all types of importance, emotional importance, primarily but intellectual importance as well, but I think spirituality is primarily emotional or something nonverbal and that’s why it’s difficult to pin down the definition because the first thing I say, whatever I say verbally will be a compromise, to the internal definition.

Eta brought a poem to help describe his understanding of spirituality because, he emphasized, metaphor seemed the most appropriate means to describe something immaterial.

I brought a poem to illustrate what I mean by this, and I think this is useful to bring in because a) poetry and fiction is my spiritual bible, it’s my spiritual collection, in a way it’s my spiritual authority such as the bible would be, or anything like that, so it is an influence on me. It is a path I can draw on, it is very much an influence . . . So here
goes, this is by D. H. Lawrence, which I think I said is one of my sacred experiences in the summer, and I read this in the summer, and this made me think of it when I try to define my spirituality. I don’t want to, merely repeat what this poem says and define myself to it, I think it’s an extension of myself, I don’t define, whereas the bible you might be held to do that, you might be held to define yourself by the written word or something like that but this is more like, I extrapolate from the text, extrapolate meaning from the text and I don’t strictly follow it like scripture or something like that,

Researcher: Meaning for you is ever-changing?

Eta: That’s right – so shall I read it?

Eta’s definition spoke to how reality was never a given, and interpretations of evidence and opinion were synthesized into his system of spirituality. This project’s second coder observed that “s/he seeks a source of evidence based on the nature of the inquiry. S/he used poetry because: a) poetry and fiction is his/her spiritual bible, . . . it is an influence on me, it is a path I can draw on.

Stage 6 and 7 thinkers re-evaluate knowledge when relevant new tools of inquiry become available. Poetry was relevant because, as Eta noted:

That’s why this study is so interesting because you have reason analyzing subjectivity, analyzing an importance that isn’t rational, poetic truth I don’t think is rational, spiritual truth very well could not be rational, so you have a very interesting combination of the two faculties of, (yes, they are odd bed-fellows aren’t they) and that’s why articulating it is very strange. Where was I going with this?

Researcher: Which is how you know this more through poetry and metaphor?

Eta: I think so, if I was to really, really try and demonstrate how I felt, how I felt inside my spirit, I think I’d have to do it in a poem, or in some sort of poetic expression, some sort of unbuttoning of linguistic thought, that’s why I feel like I’m apt to rant or spin off out of control, and perhaps that’s what’s necessary, or, at the same time it can’t really be analyzed, or analyzed efficiently I think . . .

And this is where I think Eta has nailed spirituality on its ineffable head – because it is real, but it is not and it must be analyzed, but it cannot. By using metaphor and poetry, and by drawing attention to the potential incommensurability between reason and spiritual truth, Eta
demonstrated a complexity of knowledge and ability to evaluate across perspectives and identify appropriate domains of inquiry that differed significantly from the lower stages. Eta also explained that he did not believe that knowledge is simply objective, rather it is produced, something defended, and as such will be continually open to re-evaluation. For example:

Yeah, it’s very much an exploration, I think that I say that doubt is fundamental in my spiritual construction, I know that in a couple of years from now I’ll be changing my spiritual beliefs tacitly, implicitly, unconsciously, they’ll be moving and morphing, and I think that’s a function of doubt, which is part of insecurity.

So if, if you take this idea for granted then the possibilities seem endless, your spirit is the controller of the world basically, and of yourself, of your emotions. In a way you are God, this is my interpretation of it, I’m not sure if this is what they (existentialists) meant, this is my interpretation and when I’m optimistic it seems like this is a reasonable way of living because you take your actions with the utmost gravity. You always, what am I trying to say, responsibility is always yours and if you want you can do it, it’s empowering of the spirit.

And the last words are from Eta explaining how he experienced a book called *Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury (1988).

I think Bradbury has a great talent of thinking whatever you already thought and putting it in there so you realize this is you and the text, it’s all about summertime, childhood and summertime, this twelve year old boy called Douglas Spalding and he wakes up, before the sunrise, and this is the first day of summer, . . . so he goes up to the top of the house, and he looks out the window, and up comes the sun and he looks all across the town, he can see the town waking up one by one, he sees the first trolley coming along main street, the first paper boy, he sees people waking up and making toast and making breakfast and he thinks to himself, this is going to be a great day, and he’s an overseer of this whole town, he knows what’s going on, he sees the sun is up, he’s a part of everything but he can see everything moving and I think that’s what I mean when I say I need more eyes. I try and have more eyes everywhere, more perspective, more visions, and more sight and reading a book gives you another sight, gives you another facet. So going back to this example, he’s an overseer of all these events, he’s knowledgeable, but he’s a part of something, he can see it all moving and it’s almost like clockwork and there’s something really great about that, and that’s what I’m trying to notice in life, but later on in the book, the same day he goes – do we have time for this – (yeah) he goes picking berries in the forest with his brother and his dad, this is summer stuff – the stuff kids do so he’s in the forest and he’s picking berries and he feels something, some force coming up behind him, he looks around, he actually gets quite paranoid, some force he compares to a tidal
wave, it is just kind of overwhelming, something’s going to happen, he doesn’t know what, and his brother Tom is picking berries and cracking jokes and his Dad’s doing the same, and they don’t know anything, they just go about their business, but Douglas is – gets quite suspicious and then all of a sudden, like a tidal wave this thing hits him and the next thing that he knows he wakes up on the ground and he realizes for the first time in his twelve year old life that he’s alive, he realizes he has some great epiphany, some great realization, that his heart is actually beating and the sun is actually moving in orbit, I can’t remember all of the other points, but.

Researcher: It’s very powerful.

Eta: It’s very powerful, and this, a twelve year old boy, and this is the note that he starts his summer on.

Researcher: What a gift.

Eta: exactly and it’s a very powerful gift, and this thing that creeps up on him, its personified as some sort of creature but what else could it be other than spiritual meaning?

Conclusion

Participants’ personal epistemology influenced their spiritual beliefs in the following ways. Moving up the reflective judgment model spiritual beliefs changed from explicit, relatively simple beliefs created largely from a dogmatic opposition to religion. While all participants described spirituality as something individual, lower stages used the individual nature of spirituality as a primary reason for being able to choose any and all beliefs without justification beyond description or feeling. Lower stages held spiritual beliefs as opinions and or as feelings, but little else. In lower stages, spirituality seemed to be a less central part of their lived experiences. They had less to say about what spirituality meant to them. Higher staged participants described a greater understanding of and appreciation for a constructivist nature knowledge which contributed to a spirituality which was more complex and grounded in their understanding of epistemology. Spirituality at higher stages was more of a personal philosophy
which was produced by the intertwining of belief with how they justified and interpreted their beliefs.
Chapter Six-Discussion

This chapter includes a summary of the findings of the current study, its relationship to relevant literature, and a review of the current study’s limitations and implications for future research. Scholarly literature in spirituality and personal epistemology and the intersection of the two are related to the findings. The intent of the current research was to describe the spiritual beliefs of young, non-religiously affiliated adults, and to interpret these beliefs using King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model. The findings from the first research question, (the description of spiritual beliefs), showed that participants’ spiritual beliefs were wide-ranging, and were based on personal narratives that were largely created out of opposition to institutional religion. Participants perceived spirituality as a personal belief system that enabled them to develop authenticity, meaning and purpose. The second research question, (how participants assessed their spiritual beliefs), showed that participants’ understanding of personal epistemology contributed to the types of spiritual beliefs they had.

Purpose of Study and Summary of Findings

I originally became interested in my research topic through conversations with young adults who were enrolled in my historical and philosophical systems of psychology classes. In particular, I noticed that those young adults who possessed beliefs I thought of as secular-humanist-new-age, admittedly a large catch-all descriptor, were especially engaged in classroom discussions around meaning of life questions. Bibby (2009), in his latest survey of Canadian teens, stated that: “In our current survey, the topic that easily received the most write-in comments from teenagers was religion” (p. 163). This attention to religion is also interesting because Canadians have increasingly been less involved with institutional religion, while escalating numbers of people describe themselves as spiritual or interested in spirituality. My
concern was that young people who were spiritual but not religious, and so were not members of a religious community, might not have an equivalent type of community with which they could discuss and critique their beliefs. I wondered what other forums young adults might have available to them, knowing that, in the classroom setting, topics such as belief in a spirit, soul, God, are rarely discussed. My initial concern was that without an effective forum where young adults could discuss and critique their beliefs these young adults may have restricted opportunities to develop spiritual beliefs that were well-founded and to which they were committed. I was also concerned that the growing tendency towards relativism as the most common epistemological perspective might hamper young adults’ ability to critically evaluate their beliefs. This was the background that helped me to frame my goal for the two research questions, which were to first define what spiritual beliefs participants had and order them thematically, and then interpret these beliefs through the framework of King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model.

From the first research question, which sought to describe participants’ beliefs, three related themes emerged: 1) spirituality – what it is, 2) the narrative process of creating belief, and 3) the outcomes of those beliefs. The first theme, what is spirituality, included wide-ranging definitions that shared in common a hopeful and benevolent perspective on life, and which were largely founded on an opposition to institutional religion. In the second theme, participants described spirituality in a series of ongoing, highly individualized personal narratives. These narratives were related to identity development and the desire for authenticity was central. In order to be authentic in one’s spiritual beliefs, participants’ believed it was important to reject institutional religion. The third theme was the outcome of the beliefs, which contributed to identity, purpose and meaning.
All three themes from the first research question informed the second research question, which asked how participants evaluated their beliefs. The findings suggest that participants’ personal epistemology does contribute to the types of spiritual beliefs they have.

Moving up the reflective judgment scale, spiritual beliefs at the lower levels were largely descriptive, reactions to religion were more dogmatic, and justifications for beliefs were rarely utilized. Justification was understood as unnecessary because, for these stage levels, a central epistemic assumption was that everyone is entitled to their opinion, regardless of what that opinion might be.

Stage 3 thinking, and to a certain extent, Stage 4, presume that all opinions are equally valid. Because religion is based on established doctrine, religious institutions were construed by participants as being rigid and not open to a wide range of opinions and discussion. Participants opted for spirituality because it was perceived as being individually-created, flexible and better able to provide the marketplace approach to spiritual beliefs described by Roof (1999). As one participant explained, “there aren’t regulations or user-operations” for spirituality. For Stage 3, and to a lesser extent Stage 4 thinkers, spiritual knowledge was understood to be impossible to prove, therefore, they concluded, any belief related to spirituality was a viable belief and as such did not require any form of justification. All authority, particularly on any topic that was perceived as uncertain, and this included spirituality and religion, was dismissed as irrelevant or mistrusted in Stages 3 and 4. Without any authority to help link belief to evidence, participants had nothing to take the place of authority except their opinion and what “felt right.” The dogmatism that most participants believed was present in religious thinking was also common in their own assessment of religion.
Epistemology also was related to how participants enacted their beliefs. For example, it was presumed that in order to be open in one’s beliefs one must refrain from judging others’ beliefs. Judgment, however, was imposed on institutional religion because religion was construed as totalitarian. As a result, creation of thoughtful, committed belief was made somewhat more challenging because participants identified anything with the term religion in it as “off-limits,” thereby restricting their opportunities to engage with faith-based communities (or any community for that matter) to discuss, critique, elaborate on and develop convicted belief. Related to this is a paradox observed by Pargament (1999), who noted that because the discourse on spirituality tends to polarize religion and spirituality, this polarizing effect acts as a disconnecting force on spirituality’s aim to seek out connectedness with humanity, the universe and the divine.

Higher scoring participants’ described more complex beliefs and included justifications which began to link evidence to beliefs. These participants were less dogmatic in their rejection of institutional religion and their beliefs were more tentative and complex. Interestingly, Fowler (1996) noted that Conjunctive Faith, which is the fifth of sixth stages in the faith development model, “exhibits a kind of epistemological humility” (p. 65). We noticed that for higher scoring participants justifications for their spiritual beliefs were intertwined with the beliefs themselves.

The findings from the present study share in common two results described by Mason, Webber, Singleton, and Hughes (2006) from their large study on religion in Australian youth. They concluded that young people in their study had:

... taken strongly to two ‘late modern’ principles: that an individual’s views and preferences, provided they harm no-one else, should not be questioned or constrained, and that spiritual/religious beliefs and practices are purely personal lifestyle choices – in no way necessary. (p. 35)
Mason et al.’s first result, that one’s views and preferences should not be questioned provided those views do no harm, was described consistently by participants in the present study, and is a view that is enabled by Stage 3 and 4 reflective judgment. Their second finding, that spiritual/religious beliefs are personal, are related to lifestyle, and are not necessary, was also a finding in the present study. Spiritual beliefs served a number of purposes, and one purpose seemed to be an opportunity for personal expression. And, since beliefs were so open to change, deeply-held commitment to specific spiritual beliefs and practice was unfeasible in light of the dominant theme of openness.

I had characterized participants as “outsiders” because I believed they had had little opportunity to discuss their beliefs. Because they were not members of a religious group, and academic courses rarely include questions of this sort, the remaining available forums for them would likely be drawn from popular culture, a forum which rarely emphasizes critical thinking. In the present study, which advertised for participants who had spiritual beliefs but were not members of a religious organization, some participants described having conversations about life’s “big” questions with family and friends. Participants did not describe themselves as outsiders however, in fact quite the opposite – the primary intention of being spiritual rather than religious was to be able to choose and possess beliefs that were their own, without, they presumed, outside influences. They were insiders – inside themselves and mainstream culture. The goal of their beliefs was to provide comfort, meaning and purpose. Their beliefs gave participants a reason for why they felt the way they did in Nature, or when they were frightened, felt alone, or missed deceased family members.
Relationship to the Literature on Spirituality and Personal Epistemology

A number of findings in the current study relate to research in the area of spirituality. In particular, results from research in the following areas in spirituality appeared frequently in the present study: problems with definition (Estanek, 2006; Singleton, Mason, & Webber, 2004), a marketplace approach to selecting spiritual beliefs (Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998), belief in a higher power, search for meaning, identity, and authenticity (Estanek, 2006; Mason, Webber, Singleton, & Hughes, 2006; Tisdell, 2003), a desire for actualization (Pargament, 1999; Zinnbauer et al. 1997) questions about whether spirituality and religion are developmental (Estanek, 2006; Fowler, 1981; Love & Talbot, 1999; Parks, 2000; Tisdell, 2003), spirituality is in opposition to religion (Estanek, 2006; Marion, 2004; Parks, 2000; Roof, 1999), the discourse on spirituality polarizes religion (Pargament, 1999), spirituality is an ongoing narrative which is influenced by social-cultural schemas and is both fluid and grounded (Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998), a desire to feel connected to Nature or something larger (Estanek, 2006; Tisdell, 2003; Zinnbauer et al. 1997 and alternatives to exclusively rational ways of assessing spiritual beliefs (Bourgeault, 2003; Watson, 2003). Relevant research in personal epistemology described epistemic development and its links to identity (Boyes & Chandler, 1992; Clore & Fitzgerald, 2002; Desimpelaere, Sulas, Duriez & Hutsebaut, 1999). Fowler (2001) also spoke of faith development corresponding with self-development.

Personal epistemology as a recursive influence rather than strictly developmental is discussed (Chandler, Hallet & Sokol, 2002).

Definitions of spirituality

Scholarly literature on spirituality shows that definition is a primary concern: how to define a word, an act, a belief(s) and a discourse that draws from such a multiplicity of sources is
a challenge (Estanek, 2006; Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Consequently it was no surprise when participants voiced similar opinions – how to define spirituality is confusing. Participants were easily engaged in a discussion of definition, and saw definition as something personal, and so was lacking in universal agreement. For participants who scored in Stages 3 and 4 of the reflective judgment model, the act of defining their spiritual beliefs was presumed to be equivalent to justification of their beliefs. From the perspective of the reflective judgment model, the presumption that spiritual beliefs need not be linked to any type of supporting evidence beyond opinion or how they feel about them, is the result of participants’ view of the nature of knowledge. This presumption about the nature of knowledge is at the heart of most Stage 3 and 4 participants’ definition of spirituality. The assumption, that all spiritual beliefs are equally valid because spiritual beliefs require no justification, also enabled a marketplace approach to spirituality. This marketplace perception is frequently described in empirically-based literature on spirituality (Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). Roof, from telephone interviews with 1500 Americans, described the new spirituality across America as being creatively syncretistic. Wuthnow, from interviews with 200 Americans who represented a cross-section of ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, used the phrase “spiritual tinkerers” to describe many respondents. There are numerous theories that seek to explain this marketplace approach to spirituality, and most narrow it to post-modern influences upon changing religious discourse and secularization (Mason, Weber, Singleton, & Hughes, 2006). If relativism is the post-modern default epistemology, then this might also contribute to participants’ stance on both how they construe knowledge and how they frame spirituality.

Roof’s (1999) large empirical study on religion and spirituality suggested that American baby boomers increasingly describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. Marler and
Hadaway (2002) conducted a survey with American Protestant-adults and compared their findings to four large-scale studies in the United States that asked whether participants were spiritual and or religious. They argued that the distinction between spiritual and religious is partly due to confusion over definition and proposed that more people are actually both religious and spiritual. These large studies might not adequately represent Canadians, especially teens and young adults. Bibby’s 2008 poll of Canadian adolescents showed that 67% of Canadian teens believe in a higher power, although the proportion that say they definitely believe has dropped from 54% in 1984 to 37% in 2008. Fewer teens involve or identify themselves with a religious group than in 1984, but “large numbers are quick to say that they are spiritual or interested in spirituality” (p. 163). Unfortunately Bibby did not report whether teens or young adults distinguish between religion and spirituality, but 54% of Canadian teens stated they have spiritual needs. Participants in the present study consistently described themselves as spiritual but not religious, keeping in mind though that not being a member of a religious organization was a stipulation for participation in the study.

There were also some similarities in the present study with the definitions Zinnbauer et al. (1997) described, in particular: belief in a higher power, a desire, through beliefs, to “attain a desirable inner affective state such as comfort, anxiety reduction, security” (p. 556), and a desire for personal growth. Zinnbauer et al.’s findings did not show the lack of certainty about beliefs that was so common for participants in the present study, but, like Marler and Hadaway’s (2002) study, this may be because the study included people who described themselves as religious.

A number of studies, by reviewing literature on spirituality, described the most common definitions of spirituality cited in relevant literature, and share some definitions in common with Zinnbauer et al. (1997) and the present study. Estanek (2006), through a review of
phenomenological literature on spirituality, proposed five definitions of spirituality. Love and Talbot (1999), by a similar, although not phenomenological, review on the topic of spirituality, also proposed five definitions of spirituality. These two studies share in common with the present study a definition of spirituality that is developmental and which helps to produce meaning, purpose and authenticity. The desire for authenticity was important for participants in the present study and was a key reason they elected to “be spiritual” rather than religious. By being spiritual rather than religious participants could choose spiritual beliefs for themselves instead of, as participants perceived it, inheriting unthinkingly and without question prescribed religious doctrine and beliefs. Tisdell (2003), after reviewing interviews with male and female multicultural adult educators, proposed seven definitions of spirituality. The definitions from Tisdell’s study that share most in common with the present study are as follows: spirituality and religion are different although interrelated, spirituality is about meaning-making, and moving toward greater authenticity.

None of these studies described the lack of certainty around beliefs which was so common for many participants in the present study. The problem with definition might have contributed to participants’ tentativeness about their beliefs and their lack of commitment to them. What does match with the literature was participants’ expectation that their spiritual beliefs were open to change and this was so because there were no regulations or user-operations when it came to spiritual beliefs. This openness to change is very likely influenced by their epistemological perspective, which in turn is influenced by the current epistemological climate of relativism. Wuthnow (1998) observed that spirituality is sometimes perceived as “flaky” and described the challenge in being “both fluid and grounded” (p. 111). Bibby (2009) opened his survey of Canadian teens by affirming the presence of relativism, and noted: “This pervasive
extension of pluralism into all sectors of Canadian life has been made possible by an unspoken, yet widely assumed decree: ‘Everything’s relative’” (p. 7). In the present study the epistemological stance of relativism contributed to participants’ openness and lack of commitment to their spiritual beliefs, and, once again, was why participants’ preferred spirituality over religion. Religion was perceived as restricting and judgmental, a perception that does not fit with an epistemological perspective of relativism.

**Spiritual marketplace**

Roof’s (1999) and Wuthnow’s (1998) large empirical studies led them to conclude that there is a new culture of spiritual seekers and greater spiritual freedom in the United States. Roof described this as a spiritual marketplace. This has relevance for the present study since participants frequently explained that they preferred spirituality over religion because they believed this choice allowed for greater openness to new ideas, and represented the appreciation for pluralism that was common amongst participants. Bibby (2009) explained that appreciation for pluralism is a central value for Canadian teens, and this appreciation works hand in hand with a relativistic outlook and increasing appreciation for multiculturalism amongst Canadian teens. Participants often spoke of wanting to remain open in their spiritual ideas so they could be exposed to new ideas, and valued the opportunity to learn about other religious perspectives from other cultures. Many participants believed in karma, and several participants described their appreciation for multiculturalism because, in relationship to their spiritual beliefs, multiculturalism had enabled them to access ideas such as karma. This openness also provided opportunities to reinterpret beliefs. Tisdell (2003) explained how openness provides an opportunity to “spiral back,” which is a way to incorporate past beliefs into present ones. Spiralling back also helps reconcile and revisit earlier beliefs and contribute to a more eclectic
spirituality. No participant explicitly described spiralling back, but they all spoke about how they expected their beliefs would change over time.

**Is spirituality developmental?**

Much research, in particular faith development theory, describes a developmental element to religious belief. Fowler’s (1981) and Parks’s (2000) research was based on this presumption. Estanek’s (2006), Love and Talbot’s (1999), and Tisdell’s (2003) definitions of spirituality included a developmental movement toward greater authenticity or more authentic self. King and Kitchener’s (2002) reflective judgment model, which assesses people’s epistemic assumptions, is also developmental, although these authors pointed out that: “characterizing individuals as being “in” or “at” a single stage is clearly erroneous and should be avoided” (p. 45). Because the present study was interested in how young adults assessed their spiritual beliefs, and because both spiritual and epistemological research frequently show a developmental progression, it seemed safe to expect some depiction by participants of spiritual development. Participants described their beliefs as an ongoing personal narrative which was fluid and open. No participant though explicitly described a developmental presumption, but some spoke of their spiritual beliefs enabling them to grow emotionally and intellectually. Boyes and Chandler (1992) described a developmental process in epistemology that contributes to identity. In the present study spirituality and its contribution to identity was implicitly described by participants and this contribution is likely influenced by epistemological level, since participants in lower stages have yet to create committed beliefs.

Chandler, Hallet and Sokol (2002) described epistemic development as recursive. Once individuals begin to question their epistemological presumptions there is the potential to “poison their own well of epistemic certainty,” which provides the impetus for movement onto the next
Developmental movement though is more accurately described as recursive because developmental change entails rethinking and revisiting earlier epistemic positions. The topic of recursiveness is also found in literature on spirituality. Tisdell (2003) described “spiralling back” on one’s spiritual beliefs, something that both Fowler (1984) and Parks (2000) described in faith development. The opportunity and importance of “spiralling back,” to revisit both one’s earlier beliefs and epistemic assumptions is the central paradox of Stage 3 and 4 thinking. Participants want their beliefs to be open to new influences and perspectives. Their desire implies the potential for “spiralling back”. But, the desire for openness in Stages 3 and 4 precludes examination of epistemic assumptions. These stages avoid examination because of the presumption of relativity, the equity of all opinion and the absence of any form of justification.

According to Chandler, Hallet and Sokol (2002), epistemic development can also be propelled by one’s peers because lack of development can “invite[s] the prospect of ‘epistemological loneliness’” (p. 163). Similarly, Fowler (1996) explained that movement in faith development is precipitated from “within and from without – from internal processes of trying to “keep our balance,” and from external influences that impact and threaten the balance we try to maintain” (p. 72). The prospect of epistemological loneliness relates to the individualistic nature of spirituality and is important when considering the findings from the present study. Many participants described little opportunity to discuss and critique their beliefs with others and this isolation might contribute to restricted development.

**Spirituality is in opposition to religion**

One of the findings of Estanek’s (2006) review of phenomenological literature on spirituality showed that, for many people, choosing to be spiritual and not religious was a tacit critique both of religion and of the dominant epistemology within academia. Estanek noted that
much of the research on spirituality has been phenomenological and so many definitions of spirituality have emerged from studying the lived experience of spirituality. Rejecting one’s religious tradition was a common finding in these phenomenological studies. Estanek posed the question of whether the rejection of one’s religious heritage is part of a developmental stage, which is what Fowler (1996) and Parks (2000) proposed, or whether it is a way of being in the world, which is what the phenomenological studies suggested. These findings described by Estanek are important to consider in relation to the present study. Participants in the present study certainly rejected religion. It is hard to say though whether participants in the present study explicitly saw their beliefs as developmental or as a way of being in the world, although participants certainly did presume their spiritual beliefs would change over time, which suggests an implicit developmental framework on the part of participants. Whether participants chose spirituality as an implicit rejection of the rationalism and objectivism common to mainstream academia is unknown, but is an interesting question.

Bibby (2009) raised the question of whether the demise of religious belief will contribute to a diminishment of socially-sanctioned values.

No less than 95% of young people who “definitely” believe in God or a higher power also believe that such a Supreme Being or entity “expects us to be good to each other” – an idea endorsed by only 3% of their atheist counterparts. . . If theistic teens believe what they say, such a belief may have very important implications for interpersonal life. (p.170)

Bibby pointed out that stated values and self-report studies are not conclusive evidence that individuals will act on those beliefs. Nor does his poll describe what spiritual but not religious teens believe about the value of goodness. In the present study, participants’ perceived and experienced their spirituality in positive and hopeful ways. Participants who believed in a higher power expected that the presence of a higher power was there to protect them, and for most
participants, their spiritual beliefs provided them comfort in many ways. Some participants explicitly talked about how they appreciated their spiritual beliefs because those beliefs helped them to do “good” things, like help strangers or lost dogs.

**Coming of age narrative**

Participants, in a variety of ways, mentioned the influence of larger social and cultural influences upon their spiritual beliefs. These influences were cited as cause for rejecting institutional religion because participants wanted to be able to choose and develop their spirituality independently of what they perceived as a religious hegemony. Taylor (2007) commented that all beliefs are grounded in an implicit cultural background. These cultural narrative schemas are totalizing and act as a kind of unconscious information filter and scaffold. Taylor explained that “all beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent” (p. 13). This is referred to as the background. In *A Secular Age* (2007), he examined the historical influences that have led up to the current influence of secularity. He proposed that in the human search for “fullness”, our background has shifted, from an earlier “naive” background of unexamined or unproblematically accepting the Western Judaeo-Christian belief system, to an expectation that our beliefs need to be more reflective, more individual, and more secular. He argued that we are seeing for the first time a framework of “exclusive humanism:”

It is this shift in background, in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness, that I am calling the coming of a secular age, . . . How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naively within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which everyone’s construal shows up as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option? (p. 14)

This has become a background which Taylor described as a “coming of age narrative,” which is to say that maturity and self-realization in the 21st century can only be attained by rejecting the
earlier naive stance on religion: the faith of a child. The coming of age narrative is such that self-knowledge and individuation is understood as a process best undertaken on one’s own. This secular coming of age narrative seems central to what participants are seeking in spirituality, and also matches research by Roof (1999). According to this research, there is an increased tendency to perceive religion not as received knowledge but as a quest, and part of the quest includes a presumption of doubt. Roof described the following: “If I may doubt the practice of medicine from the operating table, if I may doubt the political system from the voting booth, if I may doubt the institution of marriage from the conjugal bed, why may I not doubt religion from the pew?” (p. 47). Roof’s observation shares similarities with Fowler’s (1984) Individuative-Reflective stage in faith development theory. Fowler explained that in this stage there is an “interruption of reliance on external sources of authority” (p. 179). The modern “background” of mistrust for anything inherited likely is an important influence upon why participants chose spirituality over religion, and the idea of religion as a quest is also likely why spirituality, for participants, was understood to be a personal journey of self-realization. This modern “background” might also explain why participants are so cautious and tentative in their beliefs since they recognize that a naive acceptance of the divine, when judged within a scientific framework, is problematic.

And yet, at the same time, participants consistently described a desire to feel connected, usually to Nature or to something larger, and this desire shared common features with the discourse on spirituality described by Bourgeault (2003) in the Christian contemplative literature, Eckhart Tolle (1999) and others. My concern, however, is that without an opportunity to develop more complex epistemological perspectives, participants will miss out on the opportunity to develop well-integrated and well-founded spiritual beliefs. The lived experience
of participants’ spirituality was not described as a deeply emotional and committed experience. Participants seemed to be spiritual tinkerers, but not spiritually committed.

**Alternative ways of assessing spirituality**

Watson (2003) described an opposition in religious education between cognitive and experiential ways of knowing. It seemed that most of the participants in the present study, particularly those who scored in the pre-reflective and quasi-reflective stages, chose their spiritual beliefs for the emotional support the beliefs provided, and were deliberately imposing a separation between reason and emotion. Choosing beliefs for their emotional support was one of the content categories for the definition of spirituality described by Zinnbauer et al. (1997), although this category was far less frequently cited than other definitions. Partitioning off emotion from reason helped participants to create a kind of personal mythology for themselves. Their mythologies did not necessarily reject reason, but they preferred to try to operate beside it. Karen Armstrong, in *A Short History of Myth* (2005), observed that “Myth does not question itself; it demands a degree of self-identification” (p. 99). Most participants made their beliefs true not through high-level cognitive assessment, but by the normative process self-identification with these beliefs created. This seems related to what Solomon (2002) described as belief being self-actualizing. Belief does not need to be elaborated on or justified but rather belief and truth operate synonymously.

The new discourse on spirituality depicts a non-dogmatic, pluralistic and yet individual and interpretive spirituality such as that described by Bourgeault (2003) in the Christian contemplative tradition. This was the type of spirituality that participants admired and described as their own, although ironically Stage 3 and 4 participants frequently utilized dogmatic thinking and interpretation was misconstrued as unjustified opinion. Participants, especially those who
scored in Stages 3 and 4, also emphasized a-rational ways of evaluating their beliefs, and this might be meaningfully interpreted through other, post-rationalist perspectives on epistemology which are anti-essentialist and interpretive, such as that described by Rorty and Vattimo (2005) in *The Future of Religion*.

Reybold (2002) described a pragmatic epistemology, which in contrast to the cognitive emphasis in personal epistemological models, proposed the importance of attending to the cultural aspects of personal epistemology. A cultural model, according to Reybold, “supports a concept of personal epistemology as both a *way of knowing* and a *way of being*” (p. 539). Similarly, Van Manen (1995) described a way of knowing that is embodied, relational and situational, which is different from the type of highly cognitive and rational way of knowing that is emphasized in King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model.

**The intersection of spirituality and personal epistemology**

The last area of research relevant to the present study is research at the intersection of spirituality and personal epistemology. Desimpelaere, Sulas, Duriez and Hutsebaut’s (1999) study was an examination of epistemological styles and religious belief in which they showed a progression in complexity in religious belief that was similar to Fowler’s (1984) model. What is especially relevant for the present study from Desimpelaere et al.’s findings is their discussion of the difficulties present in attempting to accurately depict complex and often tacit, possibly even unconscious concepts such as spirituality and personal epistemology. There are a number of personal epistemological models which compete in the literature, such as those by Kuhn (2001 and Schommer-Aikins (2002). Among the different models there are areas of disagreement on the concept itself, along with concerns about research methods and measurement. Still, the authors concluded that:
Nevertheless, in spite of its short-comings, psycho-epistemological research appears to be able to contribute to the understanding of other concepts in psychological science because psycho-epistemological dimensions represent a personal worldview, which has an enormous impact on all aspects of an individual’s life. (p. 133)

The present study also relates to Dale’s (1995, 2005) studies which measured reflective judgment levels in male seminary students. Dale was interested in at what stage levels students would score when their academic training specified a foundationalist epistemology, which is explained as an epistemology that is founded on certain beliefs which require no justification. The present study was interested in reflective judgment level when there was no specified epistemology, but some spiritual beliefs imply a certain degree of foundationalism, or at least the potential for that epistemological perspective. We have wondered whether participants in the present study would score higher on a standard reflective judgment questionnaire with set problems. It is possible that the ineffability present in a topic such as spirituality compounded the difficulty in critical assessment. In Dale’s (1995) study, undergraduate participants scored differently depending on the whether the problem was secular or described a problem related to religious belief (creation and evolution). Participants scored significantly lower on the problem that asked about creation and evolution than they did on the secular problems. Dale’s later study used Master of divinity students and found no difference between types of problems and stage level (2005). These findings match with numerous other studies on the topic of education level and reflective judgment score (King & Kitchener, 2002).

Related to the above is Weinstock’s (1999) study that examined whether epistemological level had any significant effect on a “real-life” problem such as juror reasoning. This study concluded that lower stages tended to draw conclusions with greater certainty and saw fewer alternative possibilities. Their findings are relevant here because Stage 3 and 4 participants in the present study seemed to assess institutional religion similarly. In fact, they elected to be
spiritual in order to avoid the dogmatism they perceived as universal to religion, and this rather unilateral perspective on religion was likely influenced by their epistemological level.

**Limitations**

Imposing a structural developmental model upon a phenomenological analysis may seem like an odd pairing at first glance. However, the intent of this study was to utilize the reflective judgment model in a way it has not previously been used. The reflective judgment model has been applied to how individuals, with committed religious belief, puzzle through both secular and religious problems. It has not been applied though to how young, non-religiously affiliated adults evaluate their spiritual beliefs, a difficult to define topic which is what the reflective judgment model is designed to assess. The goal of this study is not to ultimately classify participants, but to provide a new lens into how they think about their beliefs. I believe that from this perspective the two research methods are not incommensurate. Throughout my research I have kept in my peripheral vision an axiom attributed to Perry but recounted by Parks (2000): “The person is always larger than the theory” (p. 45).

The relative importance of the topic to participants is a possible limitation. It is hard to say how important spirituality was to the participants who volunteered for the study. A requirement for participation in the present study was an interest in spirituality and no religious affiliation, but it is difficult to know with any confidence the degree of interest participants had. In Dale’s (1995, 2005) studies participants were registered at a Christian seminary, so one can reasonably presume that for these students religious/spiritual matters were of significant importance.

Related to the limitation of importance is the choice of research method, which was interpretative phenomenological, for the first research question. This method is an experience-
driven design that seeks to describe participants’ lived experiences. The findings from the present study suggest that participants’ experience of spirituality was not that deeply grounded in their lives, but this was not a factor we could have known in advance of the study.

Controlling for verbal ability is another potential limitation, but we were aware of this as we scored and worked to avoid letting verbal ability be an inadvertent influence.

Another potential limitation relates to gender. Research in personal epistemology has proposed gender influences on ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997) and gender and ethnicity differences in reflective judgment level (King & Kitchener, 2002). The present study did not set out to examine gender influences on personal epistemology and there were no gender differences noted in the first research question, which described participants’ spiritual beliefs. There were gender differences noted in the second research question. All participants scoring in Stages 4-5 and up were male. King and Kitchener (2002) warned that samples vary in numerous ways beyond gender and so one should draw conclusions about gender differences with caution. In the present study there were also differences amongst participants in level of education and ethnicity, but because this study was designed to assess a small sample size, variables such as gender, ethnicity and level of education was not investigated in any detail. There are many reasons why this distinction in gender might be present, none the least being that possibly males who were more confident about their beliefs chose to participate while less confident males did not.

There were several limitations that occurred as a result of the research design. The sixth interview question asked what participants had found useful in defining their beliefs. The word define was frequently interpreted by participants as asking who had influenced them, what were their authorities. My intention in choosing the word define was to encourage participants to
describe how they constructed their beliefs, how they evaluated the role of authority and
evidence, or how they lived their beliefs. I see now that a more effective word choice might
have been to ask how participants enacted their beliefs. The fifth interview question, which
asked: “In what ways, if any, can you defend or support the beliefs you’ve described above?
Please elaborate using the beliefs you’ve identified,” had been designed with the intention of
asking how participants verbally justified their beliefs. The sixth interview question was
intended to elicit participants’ assumptions about the nature of knowledge, how they know
something to be true, and I deliberately included this question in case participants justified their
beliefs in ways that were not as verbal or focused on using reason, but it was not an effective
interview question choice. For the most part participants were confused by the question.

Some participants were also confused by the fifth interview question. Two participants
did not answer this question and several more answered with a single sentence stating that they
did not know. The confusion here though lay more with participants’ view of knowledge.

Impact and Importance

Impact and importance address how research is judged. This judgment includes the
theoretical, socio-cultural and practical applications the research might have. The present study
provides another perspective on the areas of spirituality and personal epistemology, particularly
in the intersection between these two areas. Research has the potential to have a wider effect on
the culture beyond scholarly literature, and my hope is that research in the two areas of
spirituality and personal epistemology might gain greater awareness in the larger public
discourse outside of the academic world. Discourse on a topic has a wide ranging influence on
how we think about something, our practices, advice, and choices. A change in epistemology
can have dramatic effects. Awareness of the influence of epistemology on something as personal as spirituality could have valuable socio-cultural influences.

Awareness is also important for the value of university-level courses that include discussion of religion and epistemology, courses such as the psychology of religion, epistemological courses that examine multiple ways of knowing, and closest to the researcher’s heart, the history of psychology. Awareness of the value of these courses might have the potential to help protect and ideally increase their numbers in the academic curriculum.

Lastly, some participants commented that this research opportunity was the first time they had had an opportunity to articulate their beliefs, and the opportunity to discuss their beliefs might inspire further examination and review on their part. When participants were asked if they would like a copy of the findings chapters, and asked to respond, nine participants replied and asked for copies. Two participants sent me their comments after reading the chapters. One participant commented that she could not critique my work because her views on spirituality were “currently scattered.” The use of the word currently seemed to suggest her desire to one day elaborate on her beliefs, and the use of the word scattered matched with the Findings on assessment which placed the majority of participants in Stages 3 and 4 reflective thinking.

The other participant that responded was Eta. Eta was the only participant who scored at Stage six. He provided a 1200 word summary of his thoughts. He confirmed the use of the phrase “spiritual exegesis” in Chapter Four because:

. . . it relates to the construction of the “spiritual narrative” outside of established religion; and it seems this term means self-interpretation of one’s own narrative. But it really intrigues me because this term is used in particular for biblical interpretation! – and so, I find in it a very small trace of irony that I think you touch on later.

Eta quoted from page 99 where I described an inconsistency in participants’ desire to reject religion because of its perceived limitations of dogmatism and simple-minded faith, and yet in its
place their need to create an intellectually defensible system for themselves was not paramount.

Eta stated that he interpreted my observation as “pointing at the potential hypocrisy of self-created spirituality, namely that one rejects religion’s dogma for a dogma of one’s own.”

Eta also confirmed that, for him, the narrative process was a kind of personal mythology, which he described as *mythopoeisis*. He responded positively to my use of the term *bricoleur*, which he believed was apt in describing how participants seemed to utilizing a marketplace approach to spirituality. He stated “in some cases, I feel that certain religious points – karma, relatives’ guiding-spirits – are taken as analogues and incorporated into a larger scheme, sort of a “picking and choosing” of religion.” He also pointed out that he agreed that spiritual development was a kind of journey, but “your point that this road is a busy place also ironically states that the spiritual quest, while professedly individual, may not really be for some.” Eta also wrote about how synthesizing his beliefs was something that was active rather than passive, and stated that:

> All in all, participating in this study allowed me to gain more from myself, but it also alerts me to what else is out there in reading the work. Actually being in the study allows me to compare myself more immediately with other testimonies, as opposed to reading another study in which I was not a part. There’s a personal element here – that the other testimonies come from peers – that I find useful.

Last, Eta observed that he would like to have seen more discussion about the lack of modern mythologies that possess complex, nuanced meaning. He wondered what the predominant 21st century myths were, and noted “I guess that the whole “mythmaking” side to your work is what interests me the most, and that’s why I’d like to see a further embellishment on this topic.”

Elaborating on *mythopoeisis* and spirituality in young adults might provide a fruitful opportunity for future research, which leads into the next portion of this chapter.
Implications for Future Research – Spirituality

One of the consistent findings in the present study was participants’ opposition to institutionalized religion. While not having any religious affiliation was a requirement for participation, this opposition to religion is a finding reported consistently in other studies (Bibby, 2009; Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). There is little doubt that institutional religion seems to have garnered a bad reputation recently, which has social implications. It seemed that many participants construed religion in the most literal and simplistic terms. The influences for this perspective are multiple, and presumably include normative influences such as individualism, secularism and epistemology, along with popular culture. Dawes (2000) commented that the media tends to only report the most literal of Christian perspectives, probably because reporting on a phenomenon like religion which is so personal, complex, nuanced and potentially divisive, is challenging to accurately comment on. In this secular age where religion is rejected out of hand there seems to be a call for a deeper understanding of young adults’ construal of religion. A valuable research question could focus on religion as both a construct and an experience in two groups of young adults, one group who described themselves as religious, and the other group who described themselves as spiritual but not religious.

In the present study we were concerned about how committed participants were to the topic, how deeply their lived experience of spirituality was. The present study was created out a concern that participants might not have a forum to discuss, compare and evaluate their beliefs, thereby diminishing their opportunities to develop more mature, grounded beliefs. My presumption was that young people who draw upon the support of their religious community would have more complex, integrated beliefs that presumably would score at higher stages. It would be interesting to test this, and this could be accomplished by comparing the current study
to a group of young adults who describe themselves as spiritual and religious, using the reflective judgment model to interpret their beliefs.

We also wondered about how much participants’ spiritual beliefs might have been influenced by our West Coast pluralistic and somewhat “New Age” culture. Perhaps factors such as the plethora of book stores in Vancouver that are dedicated to an examination of spiritually-related topics, the spiritual presence of British Columbia’s aboriginal people, local artists, such as Emily Carr, which represents a reverence for our rainforests and the traditions of aboriginal people, are socio-cultural influences that have been overlooked in the present study. After all, Vancouver, British Columbia is the home of Eckhart Tolle (1999).

Other local influences that are also likely contributors to participants’ stance on being spiritual but not religious include the lack of an institutional religious personality in the American northwest (O’Connell Killen, & Silk, 2004). This lack has been attributed to diverse immigration trends that represented a wide range of religious/non-religious perspectives. In its stead the West Coast has developed its own unique form of spirituality which includes a reverence for our natural landscape. Wallace and Shields (1997) described how respect for British Columbia’s environment originated with the ability of the indigenous people to live harmoniously in their environment, and more recently is represented by the environmental movement. These authors noted that Vancouver, British Columbia was the original home to Greenpeace and the Sierra Club originated nearby. Appreciation for the environment and respect for indigenous spirituality contribute to this region’s pluralistic New Age spirituality. The government of British Columbia’s double entendre on “SuperNatural British Columbia” can refer to both the Province’s beauty and mystical influences on spirituality from its indigenous people. Douglas Todd (2008), who frequently writes on the topic of religion in the Vancouver
Sun newspaper and has recently published a book on spirituality and the Pacific Northwest, predicted an increase in what he described as non-dogmatic secular spirituality. Todd (2009) pointed out that: “In no region of the continent will this open approach of “secular spirituality” be more pronounced than in Cascadia, which includes Washington, Oregon and B.C” (B1). According to Todd, in the Pacific Northwest region a distinct spirituality of place is practiced that is eclectic, informal, and individualistic. Future research could explore our local spirituality in greater depth and examine the links between spirituality and the Pacific Northwest. An interdisciplinary study that joins cultural anthropology and psychology could describe the lived experience of our West Coast “secular spirituality” and elaborate on the presence of local cultural influences.

**Implications for Future Research – Personal Epistemology**

Another interesting area to pursue is the role epistemic doubt has to play in shaping adolescents’ and young adults’ spirituality. Boyes and Chandler (1990) examined the relationship between social-cognitive development and epistemic doubt in adolescents and reported that epistemic development corresponded to the identity development model first proposed by Erikson (1968) and later elaborated on by Marcia (1980). Because spirituality and its contribution to identity, in the present study, was implicit in participants’ understanding of their spirituality, it would be valuable to look more closely at the role of epistemic doubt and identity achievement in producing well-founded spiritual beliefs.

Related to the above concern is the continuing debate in personal epistemological literature about whether or not models such as the reflective judgment model are truly developmental. Some researchers argue that development is recursive, or not developmental at all (Chandler, Hallett & Sokol, 2002). Related to this discussion of epistemic development are
faith developmental models which propose that religious belief is developmental. Parks (2000) proposed that the rejection of religion is a developmental stage, and not a way of being in the world, as Estanek’s (2006) review of phenomenological studies suggested. Future research could inquire into how educators can effectively promote development in the areas of spirituality and personal epistemology. More specifically, future research could concentrate on how to best foster critical assessment of spirituality and meaning of life questions, along with concepts such as trust and intuition. Asking these questions is especially relevant in a climate that privileges reason with such exclusivity.

Alternative ways of knowing, such as those described by Van Manen (1995), Reybold (2002) and others, might also be fruitfully elaborated on in terms of its relation to spirituality. In particular, Partridge (1999) described an epistemological perspective of “individualism” in participants who defined their spiritual beliefs as New Age. “Individualism” was described as a type of truth which was understood to be something that was produced on one’s own, authorities were mistrusted, and the self was construed as the ultimate authority. This sounds very much like how participants at all stage levels in the present study described their personal epistemology, with successive reflective judgment stage levels contributing to increased complexity and effective justifications. Participants in the present study did not describe their spirituality as New Age, but it would be valuable to explore whether the growing numbers of young adults who describe themselves as secularly spiritual draw upon a super-ordinate personal epistemology of “individualism” that influences reflective judgment. A personal epistemology of “individualism” is also likely strongly affected by the “coming of age narrative” described by Taylor (2007), and local influences described by Todd (2008) and others.
Implications for Educational Practice

We were concerned that participants who scored at Stages 3 and 4 in this study had not critically evaluated their beliefs more effectively. There needs to be more of a challenge to young people to encourage critical assessment in all areas of their lives. King and Kitchener (2002) pointed out that while the reasoning of many third and fourth year university students operate at Stage 4 in the reflective judgment model, Stage 4 thinking still remains inconsistent and so students “may look to authorities for firm, unqualified answers. This suggests that there is not only room for improvement, but that there is an urgent need to address this situation” (p. 54). Instructional strategies that help to promote reflective judgment are described by King and Kitchener (2002). These specific strategies are briefly described in the Reflections on the Research Process and Outcomes section of this chapter. Research has also suggested that epistemic differences in specific topic areas show that epistemic assumptions might be linked more to a specific context and are less global and uniform than developmental models presume (Bell & Linn, 2002). If epistemic development is recursive and context specific then it is especially important to teach and encourage critical reflection upon large “meaning of life” questions, although this discussion will be hampered by the academic taboo around discussing and critically evaluating spirituality (Love & Talbot, 1999; Parks, 2000).

The present study helps contribute to an understanding of the spiritual development of young adults. Because this is a topic rarely elaborated on in the social sciences, especially pedagogically, opportunities to initiate discussion with colleagues should be encouraged. One suggestion might be a symposium organized around the topic of spirituality and education. This could help to facilitate discussion and awareness of the importance of the topic.
My interest in the present study was originally born out of my teaching of the early historical and philosophical foundations of psychology. This course in particular provides an opportunity to critically examine some of the large “meaning of life” questions. My goal in class is to provide opportunities to engage in critical thinking on topics that have historically influenced psychology. This includes discussion about the nature of the discipline and the important influence epistemology has both individually and culturally. The past decade though has seen a diminishment in university curricula of history of psychology courses. The history of psychology is increasingly perceived as less relevant than other mainstream areas within psychology, and as a result these courses are diminishing in the curriculum (Bhatt & Tonks, 2002). Access to academic courses such as the history of psychology relates to how we move young adults to higher stages of critical reflection on large meaning of life questions, since movement obviously begins with awareness of the topic.

**Reflections on the Research Process and Outcomes**

Reflecting back on the research process and its findings has led to the following thoughts. I continue to be reminded of what I share in common with participants. It seems to me, that as a young person, one of the few opportunities available to help me inquire into meaning of life questions was through my university education, in particular literature classes. I remember literally feeling as if I were intellectually starving in late adolescence, and that starvation propelled me into a community college classroom when I was 21. When I was able to enter a university program full-time a few years later, I remember pinching myself to make sure that my good fortune at being present in a university classroom was real. Thirty years later and I am still wondering about questions such as what is goodness, which suggests that the topic I chose to investigate speaks as much about my own interests as it does the broader social questions of
access and support for a critically aware spirituality. Perhaps my interest was partly due to a lack of opportunities to inquire into such topics when I was a young person. If so, it is this lack of opportunity that is the link to the present study since I fear that little has changed in terms of access for young people today. This then raises the question of how to help young people access and inquire into these important questions which are so critical in contributing to individual development and a better sense of one’s global citizenship.

Clearly there are numerous obstacles which impede changes to the educational process that could encourage inquiring into goodness and spirituality, none the least of which are concerns about who or what defines goodness. Alexander (2001) commented that the “children of the Enlightenment are searching for a concept of the good life” (p. 41). Such a concept is deeply embedded in webs of beliefs which are tacit, unexamined and founded on social trends that are so entrenched they are difficult to see. The research process has given me a greater appreciation for the difficulty of trying to surface not just the beliefs but the web they are imbedded in. Beliefs are slippery and complex and trying to inquire into the phenomenon of belief in any kind of holistic, comprehensive way is very challenging. The present study set out to inquire into one type of belief, spirituality, in two ways: 1) by describing shared themes in participants’ spiritual beliefs, and 2) by using a personal epistemological model to interpret how they evaluated those beliefs. But these are only two approaches to a very complex phenomenon, and seem a little like setting out to “capture,” an ever-changing terrain that begins on the bottom of the ocean and rises up into a mountain range.

What I have gained though is an even greater appreciation for what participants want. I think they are searching for a vision of goodness, although they probably would not define their search in that way. Participants see spirituality as something that can help with identity
development. Their perception of individual development subsumes values such as goodness and meaning of life. This, I believe, illustrates the primacy of individuality in Western norms. There are other powerful trends at play here, such as the influence of consumerism, which contributes to their desire to shop around for the best in values. But, imagine what a difference a shift in hierarchy would create, for example, if primacy was accorded to a search for what is goodness. Such a shift would help them to really define their own spirituality, and provide them with a foundation on which they can build their values, goals, and other beliefs. By not encouraging critical analysis that operates at a level beyond the pre and quasi-reflective levels, and by not encouraging young people to pose these questions, young people will continue to be restricted in their opportunities to develop spiritual beliefs that they feel committed to.

Another result of my study is a continued desire to provide a wider range of educational activities which encourage students’ examination of their questions pertaining to meaning of life questions, and which also include critical assessment of these questions. This entails dedicating more class time to discussion of the nature of knowledge and providing opportunities for students to apply their understanding of knowledge to their own “real-life” questions. King and Kitchener (2002) have seven recommendations for encouraging this, and include: showing respect for students’ assumptions about knowledge regardless of developmental stage, discussing controversial problems that are ill-structured in class, provide many opportunities to analyze others’ points of view, teach critical thinking skills systematically, provide frequent feedback, help students to explicitly address uncertainty in making judgments and examine their assumptions about knowledge, and encourage students to practice critical assessment outside of the classroom.
Recommendations for Future Researchers

For future researchers who might wish to inquire into the slippery nature of belief and its assessment, the following are a few of my thoughts about what is especially important to a study of this type. To access complex, often tacit and possibly unconscious concepts such as spirituality and personal epistemology, I believe that data collection must at minimum include an interview. However, because analysis of complex data of this type is time consuming and challenging, it might also be tempting to utilize a questionnaire. For example a questionnaire, Reasoning about Current Issues (RCI) (n.d.), has been developed to assess reflective judgment. In the present study, coding for stage levels was difficult, in part, because only two questions were designed to explicitly assess participant’s understanding of the nature of knowledge. Future researchers might wish to consider including more elaborative questions related to construal and assessment of knowledge. Using a questionnaire such as the RCI, in addition to an interview, might help to supplement and validate interview findings. I suspect however that Desimpelaere et. al (1999) are correct when they comment that “psycho-epistemology may well be impossible to capture fully, even in a good questionnaire, since it is such a personal variable” (p. 135).

Secondly, giving participants an opportunity to first think about and write their responses helped them to focus on a topic that, I now recognize, was largely unexamined and tentative. For most people the nature of knowledge is a tacit cognitive process. Participants’ written responses also provided me with an opportunity to think about what they believed, how they experienced those beliefs, and how they justified them. This also helped me to develop appropriate probes in advance of our interview.
Last, participants explained that their spiritual beliefs were largely private and unexamined. At first I had planned on using a focus group to help generate discussion about spiritual beliefs, but in retrospect I think that would not have been a fruitful forum to help elicit the kind of private, inchoate and difficult to articulate responses that this type of research asks for.

**Conclusion**

Participants in this study described a wide variety of spiritual beliefs. What these beliefs seem to share in common are: participants’ appreciation for an eclectic spirituality, an openness to new ideas, a perception of spirituality as an individual journey, a dislike for institutional religion, and a desire for positivity, individuality, purpose and comfort. When asked to justify their beliefs, most participants believed that describing their beliefs was equivalent to justification, or explained that they had not thought about justifying them. Most participants explained that their beliefs did not require justification, and this explanation has been interpreted, through King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model, as being typically representative of Stage 3 and 4 thinking. Participants’ understanding of the nature of knowledge has contributed to producing spiritual beliefs that are tentative and not well-justified. Consequently, participants’ beliefs do not seem to have been fully tested, nor do participants seem deeply engaged with their beliefs. Participants seem content with the openness of their beliefs, and this appreciation also likely stems, at least in part, from their embracing of both the relative nature of knowledge and a secular social narrative.
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Appendix A-Advertisement for study

Research participants are needed for an interview-based study. Participants should be between 19 and 26 years of age, have little or no formal religious affiliation, but possess an interest in spiritually-related matters. Participation in the study will take approximately two to three hours in total. A stipend of $50.00 will be paid upon completion. Participants will also receive course credit through Kwantlen’s research pool.

Interested participants should contact Ivy Ng, Psychology Lab Supervisor (604 599 2161), or Betty Rideout at betty.rideout@kwantlen.ca.
Participants needed for research on spirituality

This is a study designed to examine young adults’ attitudes towards spirituality.

Participants should be between 19 and 26 years of age and have little or no past or current religious affiliation.

Time commitment: two to three hours

For information, please contact Betty Rideout: betty.rideout@kwantlen.ca
Or Ivy Ng (Psychology Lab Supervisor) 604 599-2161

A stipend of $50.00 will be paid upon completion.
Appendix C-Interview Questions

“Please give some thought to each of these questions, and write your answer to each with as much detail as you can.”

1. What does the term spiritual mean to you? Could you give some examples of this in your own life?

2. Drawing from your response to the above question, please describe what spiritual beliefs you hold.

3. Is there a difference between spirituality and religious? If so, please elaborate upon their differences.

4. Where did your spiritual beliefs come from, do you think?

5. In what ways, if any, can you defend or support the beliefs you’ve described above? Please elaborate using the beliefs you have identified.

6. What have you found useful in defining your beliefs?

7. Have you had experiences that might be described as sacred?

8. In what ways, if any, are your beliefs different from those held by most of the people you know?
Appendix D-Consent Forms

Title of Research Project: The Description of Spiritual Beliefs and Analysis of Personal Epistemology in Non-religiously Affiliated College-aged Adults.

Data collected in this research will be used to fulfill requirements for a doctoral dissertation, and may eventually be published in scholarly journals.

Principal Investigators: Dr. Richard Young, Faculty of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education 604 822 6380
Dr. Susan James, Faculty of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education 604 822 6664

Co-Investigator: Betty Rideout brideout1010@telus.net

Voluntary participation:
This consent form explains the research study you are being asked to join. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time. Please ask the co-investigator listed above (Betty Rideout) any questions you may have about this research study. You may also ask questions of her at any point during the research. The co-investigator will share with you any new findings that may develop while you are participating in this study.

Purpose:
This research is interested in identifying the kind of spiritual beliefs that College-aged adults, with little or no religious background, possess, and how they evaluate these beliefs.

Study Procedures:
In the first stage of this study you will be asked to write your responses to eight questions related to spirituality. This will likely require between 30 minutes to one hour. You will then be asked to email your responses to, Betty Rideout at: brideout1010@telus.net.
In the second stage of the study you will be asked to participate in an interview with the co-investigator. This interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and will be based upon your initial responses. You will be asked if this interview can be audio-taped. All tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet.
The last stage of the study will include posting the co-investigator’s description and analysis of the written and interview data (all identifying features will be removed) onto a restricted access web site, and you will be asked to comment. This should occur some time during Spring or
Summer 2008. You do not need to comment if you feel you have nothing to add. Your total participation in this study will take approximately from one to three hours.

**Potential Risks and Benefits:**
The probability of any type of harm is very low, but there might be a slight risk of discomfort from describing and discussing your beliefs. Part of the study will include tape recording an interview. There is a slight risk of embarrassment if you were to be identified by your voice on tape, but this risk is minimal since these tapes will be carefully stored in a locked cabinet. There are potential benefits to participating in this study. It can be rewarding to articulate and assess one’s beliefs. It can also be helpful to see what other people believe on the same topic. Very little research has been conducted on individuals who have little or no religious affiliation, and so participation will help to add to research in this area.

**Compensation:**
Participants will receive an honorarium of $50 upon completing the study. If you do not complete the full study, compensation will be pro-rated.

**Confidentiality:**
All of the information you contribute to this study will be treated confidentially. All names will be changed to codes, and computer data will be password protected. A full description of the study, along with the primary researcher’s conclusions, will be posted on the restricted access website, and you may read the findings if you wish.

**Persons to Contact:**
If you want to talk to anyone about this research study because you think you have not been treated fairly or think you have been hurt by joining the study, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604 822-8598 or through email to: RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Once you have read this document and you have been given the chance to ask any questions, please sign below if you agree to take part in the study. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your records.

Print Name of Participant:__________________________________________________________

Participant Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________
Consent Form – Bonus Marks

Title of Research Project: The Description of Spiritual Beliefs and Analysis of Personal Epistemology in Non-religiously Affiliated College-aged Adults.

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Potential Risks and Benefits:
The probability of any type of harm is very low, but there might be a slight risk of discomfort from describing and discussing your beliefs. Part of the study will include tape recording an interview. There is a slight risk of embarrassment if you were to be identified by your voice on tape, but this risk is minimal since these tapes will be carefully stored in a locked cabinet. There are potential benefits to participating in this study. It can be rewarding to articulate and assess one’s beliefs. It can also be helpful to see what other people believe on the same topic. Very little research has been conducted on individuals who have little or no religious affiliation, and so participation will help to add to research in this area.

Compensation:
You will be eligible for course credit (up to 3%) by participating in Kwantlen’s Psychology Participant Pool.

Confidentiality:
All of the information you contribute to this study will be treated confidentially. All names will be changed to codes, and computer data will be password protected. A full description of the study, along with the primary researcher’s conclusions, will be posted on the restricted access web site, and you may read the findings if you wish.

Persons to Contact:
If you want to talk to anyone about this research study because you think you have not been treated fairly or think you have been hurt by joining the study, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604 822-8598 or through email to: RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Once you have read this document and you have been given the chance to ask any questions, please sign below if you agree to take part in the study. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your records.

Print Name of Participant: ______________________________________________________________

Participant Signature ____________________________________________________________ Date
Consent Form: Honorarium

Title of Research Project: The construction of spiritual belief in non-religiously affiliated College-aged adults.

Principal Investigator: Betty Rideout

Application #

Voluntary participation:
Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time. Even if you do not want to join the study, or if you withdraw from the study, you will still receive the same quality of instruction. Your decision also will not jeopardize your grades or studies. Please ask the principle investigator listed below any questions you may have about this research study. You may ask her questions in the future if you do not understand something that is being done. The investigators will share with you any new findings that may develop while you are participating in this study.

This consent form explains the research study you are being asked to join. Please review this form carefully and ask any questions about the study before you agree to join. You may also ask questions at any time after joining the study. See below for persons to contact.

My research is interested in identifying the kind of spiritual beliefs that College-aged adults, with little or no religious background, possess, how they evaluate these beliefs, and examine their relationship to a sense of well-being. A significant amount of research has described normative personal epistemologies and related them to levels of education. Describing what spiritually-related beliefs young adults without religious education hold, and the rationale they utilize to support that, is useful in light of the larger body of literature on this topic.

In the first stage of this study you will be asked to write your responses to a series of questions related to spirituality. Email your responses to the principle investigator, Betty Rideout at: betty.rideout@kwantlen.ca. In the second stage of the study you will be asked to participate in an interview with the principle investigator. This interview will take approximately 30 minutes, and will be based upon your initial responses. The last stage of the study will include posting some or all of the transcribed interviews (all identifying features will be removed) onto an electronic bulletin board, and you will be asked to comment on my analyses of these. You do not need to comment if you feel you have nothing to add. Your total participation in this study will take approximately two to three hours. The probability of any type of harm is very low, but there might be a slight risk of discomfort from describing, discussing and reflecting upon your beliefs.
All of the information you contribute to the study will be treated confidentially. A full description of the study, along with the principal investigator’s conclusions, will be posted on the electronic bulletin board.

**Persons to Contact:**
If you want to talk to anyone about this research study because you think you have not been treated fairly or think you have been hurt by joining the study, or you have any other questions about the study, you should call the principal investigator, Betty Rideout at 604-599-2451, or call the Kwantlen Office of Research and Scholarship at 604-599-2373.

Once you have read this document, or the document has been read and explained to you, and you have been given the chance to ask any questions, please sign or make your mark below if you agree to take part in the study.

Print Name of Subject:_____________________________________________________

Signature or Mark of Subject or Legally Authorized Representative ____________  Date ____________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent ________________________  Date ____________

Witness to Consent if Subject Unable to Read or Write (Must be different than the person obtaining consent) ________________________  Date ____________

Signed copies of this consent form must be 1) retained on file by the principal investigator, 2) given to the subject and 3) placed on file in the Office of Research and Scholarship at Kwantlen University College.
Consent Form: Psychology Participation Pool – Bonus Marks

Title of Research Project: The construction of spiritual belief in non-religiously affiliated College-aged adults.

Principal Investigator: Betty Rideout

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time. Even if you do not want to join the study, or if you withdraw from the study, you will still receive the same quality of instruction. Your decision also will not jeopardize your grades or studies. Please ask the principle investigator listed below any questions you may have about this research study. You may ask her questions in the future if you do not understand something that is being done. The investigators will share with you any new findings that may develop while you are participating in this study.

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Once you have read this document, or the document has been read and explained to you, and you have been given the chance to ask any questions, please sign or make your mark below if you agree to take part in the study.

Print Name of Subject:______________________________________________________________

Signature or Mark of Subject or Legally Authorized Representative ____________________________ Date __________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent ______________________________________ Date __________

Witness to Consent if Subject Unable to Read or Write (Must be different than the person obtaining consent) ____________________________________________ Date __________

Signed copies of this consent form must be 1) retained on file by the principal investigator, 2) given to the subject and 3) placed on file in the Office of Research and Scholarship at Kwantlen University College.
**Title of Research Project:** The construction of spiritual belief in non-religiously affiliated College-aged adults.

**Principal Investigator:** Betty Rideout

**Approval to tape-record interview**

I give approval to have the following interview tape-recorded. I understand that all data, tape-recordings and consent forms will be stored in a locked, secure location. All participants will be assigned subject codes and no data that will be stored will contain names or traceable information.

Print name of Participant: ________________________________

______________________________________________   ___________________
Signature or Mark of Participant or Legally Authorized Representative: Date

______________________________  ____________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

**Approval to post transcriptions on an electronic bulletin board**

I give approval to have some or all of my transcribed interview posted on an electronic bulletin board. I understand that all identifying features will be removed before these transcriptions are posted. I understand that the purpose of this posting is to provide participants with an opportunity to comment on the analysis of this project.

I understand that all data, tape-recordings and consent forms will be stored in a locked, secure location. All participants will be assigned subject codes and no data that will be stored will contain names or traceable information.

Print name of Participant: ________________________________

______________________________________________   ___________________
Signature or Mark of Participant or Legally Authorized Representative: Date

______________________________  ____________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date
Appendix E - Ethics Certificates

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Richard A. Young
INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Education/Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
UBC BREB NUMBER: H07-02268

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Site</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>N/A</td>
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Other locations where the research will be conducted:
Kwantlen University College

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Susan James
SPONSORING AGENCIES: N/A

PROJECT TITLE:
The Description of Spiritual Beliefs and Analysis of Personal Epistemology in Non-Religiously affiliated College-Aged Adults

CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: October 25, 2008

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Consent Forms:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Consent form, permission to audiotape and post transcriptions, analysis</td>
<td>Version One</td>
<td>October 18, 2007</td>
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<td>Version One</td>
<td>September 14, 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests: Interview Questions</td>
<td>Version one</td>
<td>September 14, 2007</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Other:
A restricted web page will be created in the Spring or Summer to post transcriptions and analysis. Participants will be asked to read and comment on these if they wish. The site will have restricted access for the primary contact (Betty Rideout), principal investigator and co-investigator, and participants only. The site will be open until the primary contact has completed and posted her analysis, which should be by the end of the summer 2008. Participants are asked to read and comment (if they wish) on the initial analysis, which should be in the spring 2008, and are invited to read the final analysis, which should be posted by the summer.

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair

https://rise.ubc.ca/rise/Doc/0/FVOQOJ7TSVMKJ47N77HNGTAU94/fromString.html 13/01/2010
# Certificate of Approval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Betty Rideout</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>2007-014</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Institution where Research will be carried out:  
Kwantlen University College

Co-Investigators:

Sponsoring Agencies:

**Title:**  
The construction of spiritual belief in non-religiously affiliated College-aged adults

**Approval Date:**  
September 24, 2007  
Documents Included in the Approval:  
Application for Ethics Review Cover Page

**Term (Years):**  
1 year

**Certification:**  
The protocol describing the above-named project has been reviewed by the Committee and the experimental procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Chair, Interim Research Ethics Board

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the experimental procedures.
Appendix F–Summary of Fowler’s Faith Development Model

Fowler was influenced by Kohlberg’s (1984) theory of moral development, Erikson’s (1963) theory of psychosocial development, and Piaget’s (1965) theory of cognitive development. Drawing upon these authors’ influential work on epistemological and moral structural development, Fowler proposed that faith moves through similar stages. Beginning in infancy faith is undifferentiated. An infant, nonverbally, forms a stance of trust versus mistrust. This is a preliminary to Stage 1 and sets the emotional foundation for the next stages. Stage 1 emerges in early childhood, and is characterized by the converging of thought and language, which enable symbolization.

From about two to seven years of age, children relate to their environment with rudimentary logic, magical and egocentric thought processes and imaginative fantasies. In this stage children experience first self-awareness, and first awareness of death, sex and other powerful cultural taboos. As children move into concrete operational thought, their imagination at this stage begins to give way to distinctions between what is real and what just seems to be real. Stage 2, Mythic-Literal faith, appears in childhood, although adolescents and adults can use this way of thinking as well. Beliefs, symbols, morality, and myths from their community become appropriated and utilized in black and white ways. Their thinking now enables more continuous, narrative constructions of meaning and the ability to take more complex perspectives. At this age, Fowler (1981) described their narratives as being anthropomorphic. “For this stage the meaning is both carried and ‘trapped’ in the narrative. The new capacity or strength in this stage is the rise of narrative and the emergence of story, drama and myth as ways of finding and giving coherence to experience” (p. 149).
Fowler noted that factors that help precipitate movement to Stage 3 are the inconsistencies apparent in some of their narratives, which causes their literalism to collapse, and a new “cognitive conceit” to emerge along with the potential for disillusionment with traditional authority. Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional faith, broadens environmental influences to include family, school, work, peers, street society, media and possibly religious culture. This stage typically appears in adolescence, but for many adults this is also the stage from which they perpetually construe their faith. Stage 3 structures the world interpersonally, and is described as ‘conformist’ since the expectations and judgments of others take precedence over other concerns. Fowler (1981) noted: “While beliefs and values are deeply felt, they typically are tacitly held - the person ‘dwells’ in them and in the meaning world they mediate. But there has not been occasion to step outside them to reflect on or examine them explicitly or systematically” (p. 173). Stage 3 faith is an ideology that individuals are often unaware of. The emergence of a personal mythology and its relationship to identity can begin in this stage. Stage 3 thinking may begin to disintegrate due to contradictions between authorities, the opportunity to critically reflect upon faith, belief and values, and life experiences that promote self-examination.

Stage 4 faith, Individuative-Reflective faith, is most typically apparent between late adolescent and adulthood. Fowler explained that this stage forms in early adulthood, although many adults do not move into this stage, and for a significant number of adults this type of faith may not emerge until the mid-thirties or forties. Identity at this stage becomes less dependent upon one’s peers, roles or others’ meanings. “In many respects this is a ‘demythologizing’ stage. Creeds, symbols, stories, stories and myths from religious traditions are likely to be subjected to analysis and to translation to conceptual formations” (Fowler, from Slee, 2004, p. 30).
Individuals become aware of conventions and previously unconsidered beliefs, scrutinizing and often rejecting them for beliefs that support a more explicit worldview.

Movement to the next stage can occur as the individual attends to troubling emotions: “Elements from a childish past, images and energies from a deeper self, a gnawing sense of the sterility and flatness of the meanings one serves - any or all of these may signal readiness for something new. Stories, symbols, myths and paradoxes from one’s own or other traditions may insist on breaking in upon the neatness of the previous faith” (1981, p. 183). This disillusionment helps prepare for Stage 5, which is described as more dialectical and multidimensional. Stage 5 faith, known as Conjunctive faith, appears to ‘remythologize’ individuals. Fowler identified a paradox inherent in this stage:

Conjunctive faith involves the integration into self and outlook of much that was suppressed or unrecognized in the interest of Stage 4’s self-certainty and conscious cognitive and affective adaptation to reality. This stage develops a ‘second naivety’ (Ricoeur) in which symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meaning. Here there must also be a new reclaiming and reworking of one’s past. There must be an opening of the voices to one’s ‘deeper self’. . . The new strength of this stage comes in the rise of the ironic imagination - a capacity to see and be in one’s or one’s group’s most powerful meanings, while simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial, and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality. (pp. 197-198)

The last stage described by Fowler is Universalizing, which represents a type of faith rarely achieved. Fowler suggested that outstanding individuals such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa and Dag Hammarskjold exemplify this stage. These individuals challenge our typical conventions and actively live religious imperatives of love and justice. The self at this stage is Socratic-like in preparation for another transcendent reality.
Appendix G–Summary of Reflective Judgment Model

The seven stages of the reflective judgment model are organized into three periods: pre-reflective (Stages 1 – 3), quasi-reflective (Stages 4 and 5), and reflective (Stages 6 and 7). Stages are also organized across two overarching dimensions: 1) nature of knowledge, which includes view of knowledge, right versus wrong knowledge and legitimacy of differences in viewpoints, and 2) nature of justification, which includes concept of justification, use of evidence and role of authorities in making judgments.

Early stages begin with what Perry (1970) described as a dualistic epistemology – the nature of knowledge is such that, for Stage 1 thinkers, knowledge can be known completely, and is known by what is seen. Consequently there is no need for inquiry or controversy since there is no need to question. This outlook is rarely encountered in high school-aged individuals.

For Stage 2 thinkers, absolute knowledge is attainable, and one’s views, along with certain “good” authorities, are simply right. But, what distinguishes Stage 2 from Stage 1 is the acknowledgement that some truths might not be known immediately. The presence of uncertainty allows for a beginning appreciation for differences of opinion. Those differences though are typically dismissed as wrong, and there is yet an appreciation for the possibility of problems that are ill-structured. Stage 2 thinkers presume that all things can ultimately be known with certainty and that all problems are clearly structured. Knowledge is something that is acquired through “right” authority or through their first-hand experience.

Stage 3 is characterized by the belief that in some areas authorities might not be able to provide the truth, which means that in those cases truth has the potential to be malleable. The presence of uncertainty helps to divide the nature of knowledge into two areas: there is knowledge that is known by authorities, and knowledge that cannot be known, at least at this
point in time. In those areas that are not yet known, personal opinion is an adequate replacement and since there are no qualitative distinctions made about opinion, any and all opinion are viable options. Opinion is evaluated by what feels right, which King and Kitchener (1994) noted is “a rather whimsical basis for judgment” (p. 55). Since the nature of knowledge is still perceived as something that can ultimately be known with certainty, evidence is understood concretely as “what really happened” or “the truth” and is tied by the moment to each situation (p. 55). King and Kitchener explained the transition between Stage 2 and 3 as a move from: “the world is how authorities tell me it is” to “in some areas authorities don’t know the truth, and people can therefore believe what they want to believe” (p. 55). Because truth can be known with certainty, evidence that is probabilistic is rejected as being arbitrary.

Movement into the next level of reasoning, quasi-reflective, occurs because knowledge is now beginning to be construed as something that cannot be known with certainty. In Stage 3, uncertainty is something that is perceived as only a temporary instance. Dove (1990) analyzed answers to the Reflective Judgment Interview and reported that individuals in Stages 4 and 5 spoke of uncertainty in their knowing much more frequently. In Stage 4, because knowledge claims are understood to be potentially incomplete, individuals become more tentative in their conclusions. Justification of knowledge also begins to be understood as an abstraction, and legitimation by authority begins to be seen as possessing qualitative differences. The application of justification to knowledge though is still unclear. King and Kitchener described the logic that influences this as: “because neither evidence nor evaluations of evidence are certain, any judgment about the evidence is idiosyncratic to the person making the judgment” (p. 58). How evidence is chosen is idiosyncratic and Stage 4 thinkers tend to choose evidence that fits their prior beliefs, or acknowledge contradictions without trying to resolve them. In Stage 4,
individuals begin to acknowledge that their opinion may not be adequate, but are not sure how to develop or justify their opinion. Consequently, it is common in Stage 4 for individuals to choose evidence to support their personal beliefs without assessing other evidence. This is described as irrational belief persistence. It is this confusion around relating appropriate evidence to belief that leads to a belief that *all* knowledge claims are arbitrary. This is what Perry (1970) described as pseudo-relativism – because we can know nothing for certain we cannot judge others’ opinions. All people have the right to their opinion becomes generalized to all opinions are created equally, and so I will not judge others’ opinions.

Stage 5 reasoning is characterized by the belief that while there is much that people may not know with certainty, within specified contexts one can interpret evidence. People who reason from Stage 5 are able to relate two abstractions, but this relation is not yet developed into a system that allows for comparisons across contexts. The example King and Kitchener provided is how one compares the process of knowing and justification in science and the social sciences. The resolution of problems though can still be idiosyncratic; rather than weighing the evidence in multiple examples and deciding on the most appropriate evidence, Stage 5 thinkers might shift focus or choose evidence temporally. Knowledge is seen as contextual and subjective and it is assumed that one may know only interpretations. Beliefs are justified within a particular context, using the rules for that context, but people who reason within Stage 5 do not compare and contrast evidence across contexts.

Reflective thinking differs from quasi-reflective thinking because in Stages 6 and 7 individuals acknowledge that knowledge for ill-structured problems is something that must be actively produced. Knowledge is not something that can be known with certainty, but valid evidence can be chosen and applied. Reflective thinking also recognizes that knowledge claims
should be open to reevaluation. King and Kitchener explained that the major development in Stage 6 reasoning is the recognition that complex, ill-structured problems require some kind of active thinking. The understanding that knowledge is uncertain and is best interpreted in relationship to context and appropriate evidence continues from Stage 5, but evidence is applied less idiosyncratically, rules of evidence begin to be synthesized into larger systems, and knowledge is perceived as more probabilistic. People who reason from Stage 6 can compare the properties of two different views on the same issue. They are able to identify common elements within these views and begin to map these views into an abstract system. They are unlikely to view knowledge as right or wrong, but will choose one view as more reasonable based on evidence, and make distinctions between competencies of authorities. What Stage 6 lacks though is a mature, larger system of knowing in which their assessment of problems is embedded.

King and Kitchener described people who reason from Stage 7 as being active agents in constructing knowledge:

Knowledge is constructed by using skills of critical inquiry or by synthesizing evidence and opinion into cohesive and coherent explanations for beliefs about problems. It is possible, therefore, through critical inquiry or synthesis, to determine that some judgments, whether they are the judgments of experts or one’s own, have greater truth value than others or to suggest that a given judgment is a reasonable solution for a problem. (p. 70)

In Stage 7, knowledge is understood as an ongoing process and so is open to constant reevaluation. People who reason from this stage are willing and able to critique their own reasoning.
Summary of Reflective Judgment Stages

Pre-reflective Thinking (Stages 1, 2, and 3)

Stage 1

View of Knowledge: Knowledge is assumed to exist absolutely and concretely; it is not understood as an abstraction. It can be obtained with certainty by direct observation. Concept of Justification: Beliefs need no justification since there is assumed to be an absolute correspondence between what is believed to be true and what is true. Alternate beliefs are not perceived.

“I know what I have seen.”

Stage 2

View of Knowledge: Knowledge is assumed to be absolutely certain or certain but not immediately available. Knowledge can be obtained directly through the senses (as in direct observation) or via authority figures. Concept of Justification: Beliefs are unexamined and unjustified or justified by their correspondence with the beliefs of an authority figure (such as a teacher or parent). Most issues are assumed to have a right answer, so there is little or no conflict in making decisions about disputed issues.

“If it is on the news, it has to be true.”

Stage 3

View of Knowledge: Knowledge is assumed to be absolutely certain or temporarily uncertain. In areas of temporary uncertainty, only personal beliefs can be known until absolute knowledge is obtained. In areas of absolute certainty, knowledge is obtained from authorities. Concept of Justification: In areas in which certain answers exist, beliefs are justified by reference to authorities’ views. In areas in which answers do not exist, beliefs are defended as personal opinion since the link between evidence and beliefs is unclear.

“When there is evidence that people can give to convince everybody one way or another, then it will be knowledge, until then, it’s just a guess.”
Quasi-Reflective Thinking (Stages 4 and 5)

Stage 4

View of Knowledge: Knowledge is uncertain and knowledge claims are idiosyncratic to the individual since situational variables (such as incorrect reporting of data, data lost over time, or disparities in access to information) dictate that knowing always involves an element of ambiguity.

Concept of Justification: Beliefs are justified by giving reasons and using evidence, but the arguments and choice of evidence are idiosyncratic (for example, choosing evidence that fits an established belief).

“I’d be more inclined to believe evolution if they had proof. It’s just like the pyramids: I don’t think we’ll ever know: Who are you going to ask? No one was there.”

Stage 5

View of Knowledge: Knowledge is contextual and subjective since it is filtered through a person’s perceptions and criteria for judgment. Only interpretations of evidence, events, or issues may be known.

Concept of Justification: Beliefs are justified within a particular context by means of the rules of inquiry for that context and by the context-specific interpretations as evidence. Specific beliefs are assumed to be context specific or are balanced against other interpretations, which complicates (and sometimes delays) conclusions.

“People think differently and so they attack the problem differently. Other theories could be as true as my own, but based on different evidence.”

Reflective Thinking (Stages 6 and 7)

Stage 6

View of Knowledge: Knowledge is constructed into individual conclusions about ill-structured problems on the basis of information from a variety of sources. Interpretations that are based on evaluations of evidence across contexts and on the evaluated opinions of others can be known.

Concept of Justification: Beliefs are justified by comparing evidence and opinion from different perspectives on an issue or across different contexts and by constructing solutions that are evaluated by criteria such as the weight of the evidence, the utility of the solution, or the pragmatic need for action.
“It's very difficult in this life to be sure. There are degrees of sureness. You come to a point at which you are sure enough for a personal stance on the issue.”

Stage 7

View of Knowledge: Knowledge is the outcome of a process of reasonable inquiry in which solutions to ill-structured problems are constructed. The adequacy of those solutions is evaluated in terms of what is most reasonable or probable according to the current evidence, and it is reevaluated when relevant new evidence, perspectives, or tools of inquiry become available.

Concept of Justification: Beliefs are justified probabilistically on the basis of a variety of interpretive considerations, such as the weight of the evidence, the explanatory value of the interpretations, the risk of erroneous conclusions, consequences of alternative judgments, and the interrelationships of these factors. Conclusions are defended as representing the most complete, plausible, or compelling understanding of an issue on the basis of the available evidence.

“One can judge an argument by how well thought-out the positions are, what kinds of reasoning and evidence are used to support it, and how consistent the way one argues on this topic is as compared with other topics.”

(From King and Kitchener, 1994, pp. 14-15)