Examining Faith Conviction in Students and Their Writing

Luke Daniel Brake

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EXAMINING FAITH CONVICTION IN STUDENTS AND THEIR WRITING

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how religious students conceive of and compose their faith convictions in the composition classroom. This work explores how to respond to conviction within the classroom by looking at the American Pragmatists, showing how religious conviction could be necessary for producing a particular kind of writing and unlocking certain methods of writing for students that are inaccessible without allowing religious conviction to be present in the classroom. It then examines conviction itself, looking at what faith is, differentiating religious identity from religious conviction. This work then examines in-depth, qualitative interviews with four religious students at a secular university. These students describe several instances where they believed that expressing their conviction could threaten their grade, or times when they kept their religious conviction hidden out of fear of disrespect or retaliation from their classrooms, they also demonstrate how their religious conviction, when allowed to be expressed, gave their work life, beauty, and purpose. Allowing faith convictions to be expressed and discussed within the classroom contributes to, rather than detracts from, the pluralism of the classroom, as well as helps contribute to the beauty and purpose of student writing.
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Introduction

On my Conversion

I felt the carpet bite into my knees as I knelt in my bedroom at 7 years old. Praying the “sinner’s prayer” or something like it was always something I knew Christians did, but I was not motivated by this. I knew that I must repent. Repentance was not a matter of desiring to join the faith community of my church (I was already in that community) or to earn the goodwill of my parents. I knew Christ was real and alive, and I wanted to be with Him. That experience marked my “new birth” into Christianity. This new birth has been with me decades later. Christ is real and vital. I can’t stress how vivid this reality is.

If you grew up in any faith community, this language is undoubtedly familiar, perhaps even cliché to you. “Give your life to Jesus,” “Sinner’s Prayer,” “repentance,” “born again” are all terms that carry with them tremendous cultural weight (and baggage), but that experience, of outright conversion, has always seemed to me to be poorly represented by most social categories of description. I am, as a Christian, a part of a social group, an inheritor of a tradition, a socio-cultural participant in a historical community, and someone who self-identifies as a Christian; but these are the things that accompany my Christianity, they are not its defining element. It is my belief in Christ and the relationship of my soul toward Him, not my participation in the Church, identification with Christians, or social performance of Christianity, that defines my “Christianity.”

However, my faith tradition is important to this study. I am a low-church Evangelical Christian. I have, for the most part, gone to Southern Baptist churches. I go to church regularly, I read the Bible, I pray. I genuinely believe that Jesus Christ is the most important person in the
universe, that He is God, that He rules everything. My tradition is deeply influenced by the persuasive momentum of evangelism. My tradition is deeply centered in the study of the Christian Bible. I grew up hearing an altar call almost every Sunday morning, and I have certainly carried those rhetorical tendencies into my writing and teaching. As a result I really do see conviction as something not just important, but crucial to life. I believe that faith conviction is extremely relevant to every action I take. I not only hold religion as important, but hold my particular faith conviction (Christianity) as fully and completely true, to the exclusion of others. It is dangerous to not believe that this tradition will impact my research. It is also foolish to try and downplay, or step away from, these parts of my faith. This will, inevitably, shape my research. However, I am also an academic.

Before I went to college I remember hearing claim after claim constructing the archetype of the “liberal professor” intent on persuading students away from their faith. In 2014, Christian media company Pure Flix released the film God’s Not Dead directed by Harold Cronk and starring Kevin Sorbo (he was Hercules in the 90’s). In this film, a Christian student is brought to a crisis in an atheist philosophy professor’s class, as the professor (played by Sorbo) orders every student to write on a piece of paper that God is dead, so that they can (perplexingly) skip all theistic related philosophy in their course. The student refuses to write this phrase, holding to his conviction, and as a result must debate the professor on the existence of God before the class. He bests the professor in several rhetorical bouts, and (among many other plotlines) the story ends in the professor getting hit by a car and converting to Christianity before he dies. There have since been three sequels and there is no sign of them stopping.
This narrative and its archetypes are far older than 2014, however. I can remember receiving chain emails telling a story about an atheist professor who dramatically tempts God, telling the class that they should stand up if they think that God exists, taunting them by saying that if God existed, he would stop a piece of chalk that he is about to drop from breaking. Eventually, in this story, one student “stands up for God,” and the chalk, rather than breaking, lands on the professor’s shoe and rolls off harmlessly, after which the student shares his faith with the classroom and the classroom listens in rapt attention. (Mikkelson, 1999)

There are many versions of this story, but all of them center on the archetype of the Atheist professor who, through a desire to deconvert religious students, uses his (in these stories he is nearly always a man) power in the classroom to humiliate or shame the believer into silence, until the brave believer stands up and is vindicated through argument or a miracle.

I always considered these stories to be exaggerated fear mongering. At my Christian undergraduate institution, I found professors warmly open to discussing faith and academics together, as compatible processes that built on each other. I did not find the supposed aggressive atheism of the academic world or the anti-intellectualism of the Christian world at all. This was, perhaps, in large part to the religious faculty of my institution, but I never felt that tension in my education apart from the healthy, regular tensions of having my priors challenged and being asked to thoughtfully consider my belief. Being able to engage with faith conviction in an environment that allowed that conviction to indwell my work was enormously beneficial.

Entering into graduate school at a secular institution demonstrated no “challenge” or rival to my faith. While certainly my professors, fellow students, and colleagues believed and articulated ideas contrary to and even hostile to my faith, those tensions are a normal, expected part of religious life. I expect to hear frustrated, angry comments about Baptists (a title that
almost never means to people who aren’t Baptists what it is to those who are). I expect to hear absolute confusion and ignorance about what Christians believe. I expect to hear the ethical system of my faith described as outdated, foolish, or evil. Those are not surprises, nor would I consider them to be examples of oppression or social injustice: people are not obligated to believe what I believe, nor should I expect them to understand my faith conviction (though I am sometimes surprised at how little we know about each other). I must extend grace and charity to comments made out of deep pain from harm done by people professing the name of Christ, even people deep within my denominational “tribe.” As a Baptist, my tradition is no stranger to misunderstanding, maligning, or treating poorly those who are different from us.

However, I must also be careful in my triumphant talk. I have had the enormous benefit of a rigorous, thoughtful, Christian education that prepared me to understand and respond to these differences and ignorance. Many of my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ have not had that luxury and must deal with those ignorant, frustrated comments without any kind of training whatsoever. While the stories of “God’s Not Dead” and that chain email are certainly exaggerated, I imagine the comments that I weathered with familiarity and understanding could provoke intense crises and feelings of isolation in other believers. I am trained as an academic, even an apologist: my students are not always similarly equipped.

The conflict indeed still exists. My research in graduate school proved to demonstrate that this conflict was also present in the minds of teachers. The “conflict narrative” of “God’s Not Dead” and chain emails was also alive, to my estimation, in the minds of secular scholars. As I will discuss later on, even the most sympathetic scholars toward religious students often present religious students as problem students, students that must be watched out for. Everyone seemed poised for battle, expecting a fight, over religious issues in the classroom.
I don’t want to diminish that reality. Currently, public universities are faced with intense pressure by state governments who seek to inject a kind of conservative politics into course material that often is associated with faith conviction. It might seem ridiculous to even consider this “faith conviction” as an important area of concern, when in many states, the forces attempting to encroach on the rights of faculty to be free to teach what they need to teach are aligned with pseudo-religious forces.

It was this pressure, the overwhelming pressure from both academic and religious institutions to reenact an archetype of conflict in the secular classroom, that led me to want to write this dissertation. I want to help us solve the “problem” of faith conviction by more closely examining how faith conviction operates, how it is enacted through writing, and how students compose (or avoid) their faith convictions in the university classroom.

I therefore view this dissertation as an academic text but also an act of devotion. I pray that God establishes the work of my hands as I write. I pray that this text is holy and pleasing to Him, an intellectual offering given to help better shape this earthly world to more resemble what it ought to be. I hope to help other religious people better understand the difficult position many scholars are placed in when confronting faith conviction. I hope to help scholars better understand the difficult position many religious people are placed in when writing their religious commitments in the secular classroom. I pray that this text helps the academic research apparatus take a step closer to understanding faith, the foolishness to the world that is wisdom to God.

**Summary and Impetus**

When preparing to write this dissertation, I initially planned to focus on the concept of student religious identity, hoping to connect that conversation with the variety of conversations
ongoing in Rhetoric and Composition about identity. However, as I will describe at length later, the witnesses of my participants, my theoretical development, and my own experience kept colliding with this concept of religious identity. I quickly realized that what I was really attempting to study (and what I was asking my students about) wasn't religious identity, but rather faith conviction. As a result, my work centers on the concept of faith conviction, not religious identity.

In order to have this conversation, I must begin by defining conviction as a firmly held belief that does not rely on sensory/observable evidence. I exclude belief that relies on sensory/observable evidence for a few reasons. First, in common usage, we do not typically refer to conviction in those terms. If I have seen that it rained today, I believe it rained today, but I am not convicted that it rained today.

Secondly, this does not exclude observable phenomena from qualifying as conviction. I could be convicted that it is wrong to deny a person life-saving medical care. We could easily assemble a variety of evidence-based reasons this is true. However, the conviction itself does not require this evidence; the conviction does not rely on sensory/observable evidence. Convictions can change; people can be persuaded out of them and into them, but they operate differently than other truth claims.

Determining how religious or spiritual students position themselves in the classroom is a project that concerns not just writing studies, but all academics. As we are seeing classrooms that are increasingly religiously diverse, we need to conduct more research examining how classrooms can adapt to this environment. Examining teacher strategies, as much of the research has done in the field, is an effective way to begin this process, but without examining student
response and positioning, we risk writing pedagogy that is irrelevant or ignorant to student needs. In order to make sense of this, I will discuss the concept of faith conviction as my participants described it, looking at how a framework of conviction better accounts for what my participants described (and desire to write) than a framework of religious identity, which I believe is the predominant framework in current research. By examining faith itself, and the way we can conceptualize faith conviction, I will try to create a better way of viewing conviction, both so we can better understand ourselves and our students, as true believers, or convicted individuals.

Before I propose a theory for understanding faith conviction, it is important to discuss how Rhetoric and Composition scholars have dealt with faith conviction in the classroom, how the examination of faith conviction has pedagogical and ethical importance, and how the construction of secularism in the context of conviction makes this conversation a matter of justice. This is what leads to the first chapter: my literature review.

The second chapter considers theory and is written in two parts. The first will attempt to construct a framework for understanding faith conviction as instructors. This will rely on American Pragmatism as a basis for focusing on what faith conviction does in our classrooms, looking at conviction as a quality that produces a particular kind of writing, unlocking certain methods of writing for students that are inaccessible without allowing faith conviction to be present in the classroom. The second section will lay out in more direct terms what faith conviction is, and how it differs from religious identity. This is not only useful to justify my approach in this study, but provides crucial context for how faith conviction is not just serious, but essential for the thought and presence of many of our religious students. It is by allowing and encouraging students to write their conviction that we are able to invite the student's reasoning
(and self) most fully into the classroom. This chapter will end by discussing how conviction can often form a hierarchical heuristic, with some convictions existing in a more *primal* position than others.

Chapter three will describe the study itself, looking at how I constructed my study and providing a methodological argument for my approach. This chapter will make an argument for the use of a feminist methodology which helped me construct my methods. This chapter will also introduce the reader to my participants.

Chapter four will cover the results and analysis of this study, looking at how faith conviction is described by my participants, particularly focusing on how that conviction relates to writing. This chapter will be subdivided into multiple themes which emerged from my interviews, providing immediate analysis of how those themes interact with the two sections of chapter three (Pragmatism and Conviction).

Finally, chapter four will focus on what kind of actionable/practical conclusions we can draw from this research, offering a few sample assignments that could enact these conclusions in the classroom.

**Defining Faith, Conviction, and Religion**

These terms can be challenging. We all know these faith convictions and religions have something to do with regulating one's life. We all know they have something to do with social practices. We all know that they have something to do with God, divinity, and transcendence. We all know they have something to do with virtue and holiness. We all know they have something to do with belief. We all know they have something to do with meaning and purpose. But we also all know that not everything we call a religion or a faith conviction fits all of these categories.
Some religions, like some forms of paganism, make no demands on the moral life of their practitioners. Others do not claim to engage with divinity at all. Because of this difficulty, it can be tempting to not define these terms, to simply let us all know what we mean, and figure out what the boundaries of that are when they become relevant. However, it is this very complication, however, that also makes religions difficult to reckon with in the classroom.

The fraught nature of terms surrounding belief, religion, faith, conviction, and identity makes it essential that I use consistent, coherent language to describe these phenomena. The most immediate problem to this exercise is that these terms are not used consistently by the works that I will be working with in this dissertation. When I define faith one way, this definition will inevitably look different than how other scholars have used the term. However, in order to be as consistent as possible, and in order to be as faithful to these terms, ideas, and most importantly, my participants, I will endeavor to provide some kind of taxonomy for faith conviction.

Barnhart and Olan (2022) define faith as “a complete trust or confidence in someone or something.” This definition they use to further define religious rhetoric as “language related to faith” (177). This definition, drawing on work by DePalma 2011; Juzwik and McKenzie 2015; Rand 2001; ThomsonBunn 2017; Vander Lei and Kyburz 2005, works relatively well with Kierkegaard, who I will be relying heavily on in my theory section.

The only necessary addendum to this definition that I must make is that in this context, “complete trust” must not be underestimated. Complete trust is not the same thing as reasonable certainty or even total certainty. This is a totalizing trust, one that encompasses everything you are. In the context of spiritual or religious faith, faith is complete trust that helps order and orient meaning itself.
However, certainty is not the same thing as trust: faith is not a belief in a proposition. To believe in something is to hold it to be true. As I will cite Kierkegaard later, “Faith's posture is not in relation to a teaching, whether it is true or not, but is the answer to the question about a fact” (Kierkegaard, 1846/2002, p. 66). You do not have faith in a logical proposition, you have faith in “someone or something.” So faith is “a complete trust or confidence in someone or something,” but this act of complete trust is done in such a way that defines and reorients the faith-full individual. In the case of many religious and faith traditions, this faith is faith in God, or perhaps Goodness.

If faith is “complete trust in someone or something,” then a faith conviction is the way in which that trust manifests in a belief. Conviction bridges the gap between trust and belief. I have faith in God, my faith conviction is that God is Good. Again, this is not quite the same as a logical proposition. It is, however, a truth claim about reality that transitions more into a “belief” than faith alone.

Religion I will define as a series of faith convictions that are connected to each other in relation to a tradition or group oriented around a faith. This definition, stemming from our previous definition of faith, encompasses both institutionalized religion and non-institutionalized religion.

It is important to differentiate religion from faith. There are many who hold to faith convictions that are not religious (as I will argue later, everyone holds to faith convictions). Pew Research Center has closely followed the religious “Nones" in America. This group makes up about 28% of US adults. They tend to not hold to any particular religion, but believe in “God or another higher power” (Pew Research Center 2024, p. 46)
If religion is “a series of faith convictions that are connected to each other in relation to a tradition or group oriented around a faith” perhaps it is fair to categorize the “nones” as often taking issue with some, but not all, of these faith convictions.

“two-thirds of ‘nones’ say they question a lot of religious teachings or don’t believe in God. Many also bring up criticisms of religious institutions or people, including 47% who say that one extremely or very important reason why they are not religious is that they dislike religious organizations.” (Pew Research Center 2024, p. 9)

The nones are fast growing, and there can be no doubt that they will continue to be a significant aspect of the faith landscape of the USA. This makes understanding faith and learning to differentiate it from religion all the more important.

To present this more directly:

**Faith**: a complete trust or confidence in someone or something

**Faith Conviction**: the way in which faith manifests into a belief

**Religion**: a series of faith convictions that are connected to each other in relation to a tradition or group oriented around a faith
Chapter 1: Literature Review

In order to examine these admittedly difficult concepts, I will begin by examining how the field of rhetoric and composition has answered the immediate question: Should religion or faith convictions be in the classroom at all? After this, I will look at the relevant literature related to the inclusion of faith conviction, examining how we in the field have attempted to include religion. The vast majority of research in the field directly deals with religion. As a result, much of my literature review will focus on religion, leaving the interesting (and growing) space of those with faith convictions and without religion untouched. This review will lead into a discussion of one particularly promising strategy of writing about faith: successful technique-centered research. Finally, I will discuss the ethical and pedagogical impetus of the field’s interest in this subject, looking at the student’s right to their own language and how this concept intersects with the study of faith conviction writing.

Should Faith be in the Classroom?

One of the central questions in the research in writing studies surrounding faith in the classroom is if it deserves a place within the academic classroom at all. Arguments against the inclusion of faith in the classroom positions the classroom as a space of inquiry and doubt, whereas faith (more directly discussed in the literature as religion) seems to be focused more on affirmation and unquestioned belief. Douglas Downs describes religion as a discourse of Affirmation, a system built on affirming and believing concepts, which is fundamentally opposed to the discourses of Inquiry, discourses built on questioning and challenging the systems and known truths (Downs 2005). By this approach (an approach Downs significantly complicates in
his article) there is little to no space in the classroom for religion or faith conviction. Many scholars have pointed out, however, that as we widen the realm of what is deemed an appropriate area of inquiry in the classroom, we must include faith conviction. Vander Lei and Fitzgerald (2007) write in reference to a student who has just received a bad grade from a professor for a piece that dealt heavily with her faith conviction:

“Had the student written about any other aspect of her identity—her race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and/or disability—Lauren would have applauded her for using her new-found freedom. But in a shockingly familiar scene of identity politics, this student found instead that she had to ‘keep that identity closeted,’ as Shari Stenberg puts it (279). Why do we respond to religion in such troubling ways?” (Vander Lei, Fitzgerald, 2007)

This claim should not cause us to equate religion with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, or disability, but the connection is apt: religion is a significant identity marker for students. If instructors were to forbid its presence in the classroom, they would be forbidding the presence of a part of their students. As Skerrett puts it, “Ostracizing religious literacies from education may foreclose significant learning opportunities for young people in increasingly multicultural and multifaith societies” (Skerrett, 2014, 237). The challenge, then, seems to be how instructors can help students to engage with faith (or anything that matters to them) with an inquiring, curious mind.

This presents a hearty challenge to instructors: how do we include student religion or faith conviction in the classroom without jeopardizing the fundamental principles the classroom is built upon? Or to put it another way: are there ways to include religion in
academic discourses that both respect the religion and respect academic inquiry? Scholars and practitioners have answered this challenge in a variety of ways.

The most prominent and easiest method of acknowledging the faith convictions of students, but maintaining a traditional classroom environment, seems to be to remind students of the audience for their writing. This technique tells the student that while their religion may be personally important to them, they should avoid the topic of religion when addressing larger, potentially unbelieving audiences. This favors avoidance of religious topics by convincing students that the topic will not be relevant to the target (academic) audience. This process functionally excludes the topic from the classroom by calling the student's attention to the difficulties of addressing a secular audience.

Bronwyn Williams describes how students can be dissuaded from writing about religious topics by reminding them about audience concerns in this way. However, he laments that often the papers produced by those students after he has persuaded them to abandon their religious topic are stale, unexcited, and seem to be written for the assignment alone. (Williams 2005). Avoidance, while perhaps necessary at times, seems to not produce the kind of writing we want in the classroom.

This concept is further dealt with by Bizzell (2008) in her response to Elbow’s Believing Game as it relates to religion. In response to the idea that religious writing should be considered unacademic, and therefore unfit for the classroom, Bizzell draws a comparison to a student’s right to their own language, recalling how

“these arguments about appropriateness: they came to seem inadequate. For one thing, students quickly caught on that a language they were not allowed to use in school was
not valued by school, no matter what polite words the teacher said about it. This was not empowering. For another thing, both students and teachers discovered that there was intellectual work to be done that could be done only if a wider range of languages was employed than Standard Edited English.” (Bizzell, 2008, p. 34)

This critique, which will be explored more later in this section, demonstrates a central issue for how we view religion in the classroom: we must respect and honor religious student’s religious discourses, but this may require us to deal with discourses that Downs would categorize as discourses of assent.

**Methods of Inclusion**

Other scholars take the opposite approach, emphasizing the importance of taking student religion or faith conviction seriously by allowing them to express their convictions through their coursework. Finding ways to help students express their faith while still allowing them to write critical, analytic work can be a challenge, particularly when students may see the classroom as a potential source of proselytization. I categorize the main approaches to this incorporation as:

*Using Conflict, Using Audience Concerns, Using Personal Expression*

**Using Conflict**

Rather than ask students to ignore their religion or argue directly for the claims of their religion, one strategy used by scholars and instructors is to ask students to examine a conflict within their religion or religious position. One such method asks students to use the inherent conflicts in their religious, class, gender, or sexual identities (Geiger 2013, Depalma 2011) to establish ground where critical examination can grow. This approach seeks out these sources of tension in order to help students find an area ripe for contemplation while still allowing students
to write critically in their religious tradition. This provides an arena for inquiry, where the presuppositions of religion are still relevant, but are not placed against directly rival truth claims.

For example: Were we to ask students to explain why believing in their faith conviction is preferable to unbelief, we would receive a paper written to convert the reader, a paper that doubtless will feature persuasive writing, but will not likely involve much self-reflection.

This prompt, while seemingly simple, would pose an existential challenge to the student’s faith. The question "why is your faith conviction valid?" is one that invites the reader to adopt a defensive, apologetic posture. This will, as a result, likely feature rhetorical techniques that shy away from exploratory or questioning writing. It is easy to imagine why this is the case. If you’re asked to defend your faith, you will defend it unequivocally. However, a paper written examining a particular practice or controversy within a faith tradition (asking a Christian to defend their view of Baptism, for example) will create a place where inquiry and tension is present and real without posing an existential threat to the religious position. Geiger (2013) describes how he encourages students to collide their sexual identity with their religious identity, establishing tension between the two that allows for critical discourse. His students often seemed to acknowledge tension between their sexual behaviors and what they thought was required of them in their religious tradition. This allows for inquiry to flourish in his classrooms. This method runs the obvious risk of assuming tension or contradiction between student sexual behavior and religious position, and it also seems to invite or almost require that students interpret themselves as living in contradiction with their faith. However, it avoids posing an existential threat to the religious commitments of the student, instead offering a chance for students to explore how they hold their faith, or in what way their faith influences their action.
Audience Concerns

Another method of inclusion involves paying careful attention to audience concerns (Ringer 2018, Worth 2003, Petrucci 2002, Marzluf 2009). Here students are asked to write about religious topics, but are asked to do so specifically considering the unique demands of an unbelieving or diverse audience. Unlike the strategy of avoidance, this strategy asks students to consider changing rather than avoiding their message in order to best reach diverse audiences. This forces students to engage in what Ringer (2018) calls values articulation, where students determine how to articulate their religious values within the context of a new set of communal, audience values, demonstrating the overlap between faith conviction and the values shared by the audience.

This approach is difficult for students, as often it can be challenging to establish this kind of common ground, particularly when dealing with opposed truth claims. However, there are obvious intellectual and civic benefits to this kind of discourse.

Of particular note is how this strategy both helps the student think critically about how their religious claims and experiment with how to articulate those claims persuasively to secular audiences. This, perhaps, then meets both the goals of academic and religious discourse.

Personal Expression

A third method of religious writing in the classroom focuses on allowing religious writing within the context of writing that is geared toward personal expression or exploration (Perkins 2001, Vander Lei 2007, Vander Lei, Fitzgerald 2007). This strategy is the least disruptive to the classroom--after all, writing produced in personal, exploratory genres is not expected to be critical or analytical, however this inclusion also risks relegating an essential
aspect of students to personal assignments. As discussed earlier, faith can be intensely personal, but also intensely social. It can be singular and communal. To relegate religion to the realm of the personal is to make a claim about what faith is. Indeed, the personal itself is analytic, critical, and political. To see personal expression as a way to “deal with” faith conviction in the classroom is to rely on problematic frameworks of both faith conviction and what boundaries we should set around what is “personal.”

These three strategies, Using conflict, Audience concerns, and Personal Expression are frequently discussed in the literature surrounding religion in the composition classroom. There is also frequent talk surrounding how to examine religious composition by looking at how religious students uniquely employ their writing, focusing on the successful techniques of religious writers.

**Successful Technique-Centered Research**

There has been some substantial work already accomplished in Rhetoric and Composition related to looking at unique ways that religious students compose and strategies they use to negotiate their faith convictions. In Jeffery Ringer’s Vernacular Christian Rhetoric and Civil Discourse, he conducts three qualitative case studies of Evangelical Christian students who write religious works for their composition courses and as a result manifest rhetorically flexible tools for expressing religious ideas to hostile crowds. He describes religious students as having to articulate their non-majority values within classroom spaces—an act of rhetorical dexterity. This dexterity, these strategic rearticulations of values, articulates how religious students, living in a culture different from their own, must develop persuasive and value-adapting rhetorical techniques. Further, Ringer (2020) writes about how students can be
asked to write within their faith traditions as a method of appealing to in-group audiences in order to persuade in-group members of positions that they may have difficulty otherwise accepting. He references Evangelical Christian and environmental activist Katharine Hayh as an example of someone writing through their religion to persuade people within that religion of positions that they typically do not find compelling (here the need for action on climate change). This illustration of his earlier work is a strong example, in scholarship, of religious student writing being taken seriously and as a source for rhetorical ability.

Marzluf, in “Writing Homeschooled Students into the Academy,” notes this flexibility as well, remarking how homeschooled students (who he says are largely Evangelical and often Fundamentalist) possess the ability to be extraordinarily tolerant of other ideas, while still adamantly disagreeing. He also points out how these students often are skilled at shifting tone and rhetorical terms to suit different assignments with religiously charged issues (Marzluf 2009).

Rand (2003) further describes communities of faith as “communities of resistance” looking at how faith communities see themselves as working with a separate authority structure than the world. Rand articulates how religious frameworks can be looked down upon in the academic sphere and explains that many Christians (the focus of his article) describe their faith as an opening and freeing thought that allows them to think more clearly and creatively. Goodburn similarly describes religious rhetoric as a rhetoric of resistance (1998).

Mannon and Privott (2023) examine rhetorical transfer, and how Evangelical students demonstrate skill transfer of rhetorical ability learned in their churches, as well as how what the authors term “backward transfer” occurs, where students use what they learn in rhetoric and writing classrooms to reflect on and consider their religious identities and convictions. In general, this study demonstrates the importance of further study of religious students. This study
suggests that faculty “invite students to connect their religious backgrounds to academic writing without delving into thorny beliefs or doctrine” (Mannon and Privott, 2023, p. 639) While my work suggests that perhaps those beliefs and doctrine can, too, be useful in the classroom, Mannon and Privott’s work demonstrates several significant concepts for my project: religion can be and often is a source of rhetorical ability and skill in our students, and helping students think through this is beneficial for the classroom and the student.

In all these instances, religious students are conceived of as possessing rhetorical techniques and negotiation strategies that come from them writing through their faith experience. Their faith is seen as a tool that allows them to enact particular rhetorical strategies. Rather than seeing these students as problem students who hold views that may jeopardize the peace of the classroom, these instances see religion as a site of invention, a potential tool for persuasion that religious students have access to. This approach requires, however, that instructors view student religious writing as an important aspect of student selves.

**Student's Right to Their Own Language**

This concept, that aspects central to who a student is must be allowed to flourish in the classroom, is hardly new to Rhetoric and Composition. The field of Rhetoric and Composition has made huge strides in accommodating identity and student perspectives through our pedagogy. We have worked hard to make the composition classroom a space that helps students enact and understand their various identities and perspectives through writing. This is undoubtedly a strength, and this strength perhaps comes through with the most clarity in the discussion of students’ right to their own language. English cannot be understood to be a single English but rather is best understood as a series of Englishes, all of which are understandable to
English speakers to varying degrees, but furnish their own proclivities, leanings, and knowledge. This movement must also consider religious language as an important part of student language.

The concept of “Englishes” in the classroom as it relates to the duties of teachers is outlined in CCCC’s “Student’s Right to their Own Language,” (1975) in which CCCC declared that students have a “right to their own patterns and varieties of language— the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.” While the academic classroom has often been seen as a space for helping students lop off and stretch their Englishes into a Procrustean Academic English, CCCC, and thus the field of Rhetoric and Composition, seeks to challenge that approach by allowing students to speak (and think) in their own Englishes, while still granting them the rhetorical flexibility to skillfully navigate a world full of a variety of ways of writing.

This statement further emphasized that teachers have a responsibility to have “experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.” (CCCC, 1975) It is not enough that instructors respect student backgrounds in how they compose, but they must join the students in this process by being educated about different ways of writing and how those ways of thinking and writing are to play out in the classroom. We are not just to listen to alternate perspectives and accommodate for diversity when it happens to come up, we are to seek out diversity within the classroom and to encourage students to express, write, and think within their diverse, multifaceted selves.

If it can be said that faith conviction impacts a student’s writing in a way that makes it their own, then Composition instructors have an ethical obligation to not just help students express this, but encourage them to express their religious writing in the classroom.
declaration doesn’t mention faith convictions explicitly in its text, faith conviction has often been considered to inform the many “Englishes” that students possess. When CCCC released its updated bibliographies for the anniversary of the Student’s Right to Their Own Language (2006), they included many works that mentioned religion as one of the “languages” instructors need to be aware of. This inclusion means that instructors must not just accommodate for religious writing, but that religious students have a right to write in a manner that enacts their religious commitments; that is, they must be able to embody their faith in writing, engaging in a process that reifies, confesses, and professes their conviction. In 2020 these statements of emphasis transitioned into explicit demands. The July 2020 CCCC issued a position statement demanding that “teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm, which reflects White Mainstream English.” This demand reaches into pedagogy, demanding that instructors “stop teaching Black students to code-switch! Instead, we must teach Black students about anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy” (CCCC, “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” 2020). Student’s Right to their Own Language is here declared to not just exist as a best-practice, or a necessity, but as an ethical demand for instructors.

The 2020 statement explicitly and exclusively discussed Black Language as what must be demanded. I do not intend to co-opt any of the power of this statement. There is a specific and timely need for Black Language to be privileged in this discussion, and I do not intend to equate or compare what I am discussing with faith convictions with this issue. To draw this difference out further, a “dialect” (or, perhaps more accurately, a non-mainstream English) is reasonably differentiated from a “discourse,” which may make more immediate claims about reality than a dialect. That being said, it is relevant to my study to acknowledge the intensity
and urgency within this statement that we instructors dismantle our concepts of “standard academic English,” a process that will include the ways those standard “Englishes” consider religious language, which manifests itself as a discourse and a dialect. There can be no question that standard academic English within the classroom, as discussed earlier, is not accustomed to including religious language. Even in areas where religious language is allowed, it is allowed at arms length, or within very particular boundaries. In the process of dismantling this structure, we must turn our attention somewhat to faith convictions.

**Brief Summary of the Literature Review**

Therefore, we see that the scholarship has explored a variety of ways that religion can be included in the classroom. We see that there has been tremendous success in examining specific composition strategies employed by religious students, and we see that instructors have an obligation, produced through a demand, to dismantle and disrupt traditional academic writing in order to privilege writing practices of students.

These observations from the literature create a strong exigence for us to study religious student composition practices. As a field, the study of faith convictions is imperative for achieving the just, equitable, and virtuous pedagogical practices that we need. This research demonstrates a need for more research into student faith conviction, which has led me to write this dissertation.

However, before moving forward, it is important that we examine how the field has specifically conceptualized of religion. While religion has been a subject of moderate focus, many of these conceptualizations have relied on viewing religion as a form of identity.
Identity and Religion in Composition Scholarship

Religion as an identity category is one of the dominant frames through which our field chooses to examine faith. Rand (2001) describes religion as “a primary identity that frequently restricts ways of being, as do race, class and gender” (351) and she relies on this frame in her work, involving a compelling argument for incorporating religious language and thought into her classroom. Like Rand, in the passage I cited earlier, Vander Lei and Fitzgerald (2007) compare religious identity with other identity markers, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, arguing that while religious identity is similar to these other categories, unlike these other markers, religious identity is discouraged from being expressed in the classroom.

Vander Lei and Fitzgerald’s argument connects faith conviction to core, central identity markers, markers that cannot be shaken. There are more researchers who have used this frame, but I bring up these two in particular because both of them use the frame as an entry point for establishing the validity of religion as a topic of discussion. Vander Lei and Fitzgerald call the exclusion of religious thought from the typical identity discussion a scene of “identity politics” and Rand argues that scholars are suspicious of religion, but should overcome that because religion is so important to identity. Religion is seen as a sort of underdog, an unspoken identity marker that is often ignored, sometimes reviled. This position assumes an antagonism from the beginning between the secular identity tendencies of the academic world and the neglected religious identity, and both authors make compelling arguments for why they are assuming this antagonism.

This identity approach (as well as the antagonism) comes through in other prominent research in the field. Carter (2007) argues that the evangelical religious identity fundamentally
produces minds that are unequipped for the dexterity required in the classroom, arguing that instructors need to take special care to help reshape and reformat student understanding of their religious identity to help them navigate the challenges their faith identity presents them in the classroom. While Carter’s position ends up similar to Rand’s, this position enacts an antagonism similar to the antagonism Rand, Vander Lei, and Fitzgerald critique, in part because of Carter’s frustration at her students inability to hold their religious identities with flexibility. While Rand, Vander Lei, and Fitzgerald seem to be rhetorically positioning themselves with the religious identity as a neglected identity, the outcome (antagonism) is similar to Carter’s outcome, and both end up advocating for similar techniques of helping students contextualize their religious identity within their broader, intersectional identity. Geiger (2013) uses this frame most directly, arguing that helping students connect their religious identities to their broader intersectional identities can help tease out conflicts between the student's religious identity and other aspects of their identity, causing crises that can help the students soften, or perhaps abandon certain attributes of their religious identity.

Cope (2020) provides an example of excellent work looking at this issue through the lens of identity. Her work offers paths forward for studying religious identity that help religious students hybridize their secular and religious identities. Notable for my current work is that Cope sees the compartmentalization of identity as a real problem in religious student writing, arguing that it does not meet the cosmopolitan goals of the university. Compartmentalized identities produce students who are not fully present in the classroom. This conclusion, of significant importance to the field, could only be reached through the use of identity as a framework for understanding religion.
These scholars have contributed greatly to this discussion, and their work has been essential to my own development as a scholar. Using identity as a way to understand religious students is reasonable, and research using this approach has been productive, but for this study, I will attempt to acknowledge, but move away from viewing religion as primarily a source of identity. I should clarify, however, that by stepping away from identity as a marker, I am not really stepping away at all from the work of these scholars. The use of identity in the research that comes before me served to distinguish faith conviction from other, less significant truth claim. The word was used to emphasize the centrality and immovability of faith conviction to the convicted. As I will discuss at length later in this dissertation, these characteristics of faith conviction are not only true, but essential to understanding how to approach faith conviction. By pushing back against the word identity I am not rejecting or refuting past scholarship, but attempting to help us better explore what we mean when we say identity when it comes to religion. While I believe that religious identity is a useful term, and has a significant place in scholarship, I believe that it would benefit us to discuss religion in other ways as well as we continue to better understand religion and faith conviction. Identity should not be removed or discarded, but rather we should acknowledge that religion operates within and without identity.

While identity is an important part of understanding religion, focusing on viewing religion in the classroom as identity ends up resurrecting old conflicts between personal writing and academic writing. The focus of the conversation related to religion as an identity ends up being, primarily, about identity, not religion. While there are doubtless some instructors who would bar them from writing about their faith in personal assignments, allowing the presence of religion in that circumstance seems relatively uncontroversial. I instead wish to examine my results through faith conviction and conviction, rather than religious identity.
Categories such as race, gender, or sexual identity tend to center around acceptance, tolerance, and other pluralist values. In contrast to this, religion as a source of identity often (though not always) views itself as true to the exclusion of other beliefs. While not unheard of, it is not common for someone to speak in a manner that would convert others to their race in the same way as they would religion. This kind of proselytization can cause difficulties in the classroom, a space that is traditionally pluralist. An instructor can reasonably reconcile differences of perspective between two students from two identity groups, but religious identity (perhaps more like political identity) very often is built on the idea that others should also hold to the same convictions.

The question of how to accommodate religious writing within the writing classroom will, as a result, invoke questions of what kind of pluralism we want to exhibit in our classrooms. Scholars Juzwik and McKenzie (2015) discuss pluralism with what they term “cosmopolitan dialogue,” dialogue that allows many different views as valid within the conversation. Cosmopolitan dialogue values valuing for its own sake and seeks to understand, not convince. They see this kind of validity as necessary for academic discussion, and they hope this pluralism would allow for religious difference within a room of many different ideas.

This research seems to frame persuasion and conversion as hostile acts that are anti-dialogue, implying that if a student does not surrender their belief in their truth as the truth, then they cannot truly be cosmopolitan. They apply this concept in their research to two evangelical men, one a writing instructor in a high school and the other a student in the other’s class. The authors contrast cosmopolitan approaches to writing with what they term populist approaches, rhetors who prioritize defending their group and conviction against others.
The authors see the teacher, who seems to be more open to dialogue and discussion, as cosmopolitan and the student, who more actively seeks to persuade others of his faith and is bothered by atheists who disparage his faith, as populist (Juzwik and McKenzie 2015). However, it seems that the teacher’s cosmopolitan identity is more a product of rhetorical savviness and experience as a teacher than it is an indication of a different approach to faith than the student. The certainty and persuasive expression of faith of the student seems (to the researchers) to be acting in bad faith against the pluralist society of the classroom.

However, it is not that the two individuals hold different beliefs about proselytizing or evangelism, but rather the positioning of the individuals that makes the rhetor cosmopolitan or populist. This conflict seems to come from viewing religion as the same sort of identity marker as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Those forms of identity are defined by their difference and can exist within mutual frameworks. Treating religious identity in the same way will make religious individuals who attempt to express their conviction in their exclusive claim to metaphysical truth seem, as the authors put it, populist, or at the very least unreasonable. If we are to understand religious rhetoric, we must transform our expression of pluralism to account for views of thinking that cannot coexist.

While this distinction may seem trivial, it can have profound effects on how religious writing is conceptualized. We will next examine two examples from scholarship that illustrate this tension. While these sections offer some critique to these examples: it is important to point out that my critiques are of the examples-as-text: that is, I am critiquing and responding to the written description given to me in these articles, a flattened object for analysis. Since I did not conduct this research and was not in these classrooms, my responses are almost certainly
incomplete and inadequate to the actual circumstance. This is to be strictly read as me responding to the text, not the event.

*Example 1: Luke*

Goodburn (1998) writes about a religious student who is otherwise bright and engaged. This student (an Episcopalian) successfully seemed to integrate his religious identity at appropriate points in the classroom, and generally seemed to respond well to the class.

However, this student seems to “fail” to understand a basic reading of a poem. This failure is centered on the reading of a poem retelling the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The aspects of this retelling that the teacher wants to discuss include the way quests for pure knowledge and metaphysical truth often harm others, especially in how they fall along gendered lines, thus reifying the sexist framing of the contemplative man and the physical woman. However, these concepts seem to be fully lost on the student, who responds to the reading by describing it as a misreading of the Biblical text, arguing that the Genesis text does not support this poetic reading. Goodburn identifies this loss, or refusal on the part of the student as a result of his religious identity, because the student’s “fundamentalist” conviction prevented him from engaging with the poem as it was written. As she puts it, “Luke's discourse gives precedence to religious identity over gender” (Goodburn, 340).

*Example 2: Tina*

Perkins (2011) describes her interactions with a student named Tina, who Perkins describes as lively and engaged, quick to speak and collaborate with others in the classroom. Tina’s outspoken nature in the classroom is well known, but Perkins observes that this nature changes when Tina is given an assignment asking for her to write about her faith, or something
she has faith in. As she is an Evangelical Christian, this faith makes exclusive truth claims about reality. Tina becomes nervous, concerned, and defensive. She is unable to change her articulated convictions to accommodate a pluralistic audience that would disagree with her. In particular, the most controversial moment is when Tina admits in her work that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ will suffer judgment. Perkins seems to interpret Tina’s inability to change her conviction in that exclusive truth claim about Jesus Christ to a failure of Tina’s ability to compose. For Tina to be seen as a reasonable student, Perkins expects her to admit and articulate a more pluralist understanding of humanity’s relationship with God. Perkins comes to this conclusion partly through identifying Tina’s faith conviction as primarily an identity, asking “Why did Tina’s investment in her own Christian identity prevent her from engaging her peers on the subject that mattered the most to her?” (Perkins, 83-84). Perkins sees the difference between Tina’s earlier, more lighthearted convictions and her more heavy-hearted convictions about faith and hell as stemming from Tina’s inability to have an expansive and developing view of her faith. This is an important observation, however, because this would certainly be true, were we to interpret Tina’s religion strictly through the framework of identity.

If we see religion as primarily a cultural identity, something that the student holds in tandem with other identities, but can drop or pick up at will and in flexible ways, then we miss something significant here: Tina really believes that her classmates, perhaps even her friends, within the classroom are in need of salvation. This isn’t a cultural plea for similarity, or intolerance, but she really, tangibly believes that if her classmates do not worship Jesus Christ as God, they are unable to truly commune with ultimate goodness, and are in danger of (and deserving of) eternal judgment. Despite her obvious discomfort, Tina is willing to speak directly to this peril, offering to the students around her the only and most potent way out of this
problem. If we take this position seriously, could we expect any different from her? If she acted otherwise, hiding this conviction from her classmates, would she be acting ethically? If her act of contextually appropriate proselytization is not an authentically ethical relationship with her peers, I’m not sure what would be an authentically ethical relationship. While Perkins demonstrates some helpful and insightful observations about religious composition in this piece, her approach from the context of the identity of Tina rather than the conviction of Tina causes her to, I believe, misread this significant moment in her class.

I offer these examples to highlight how centering research of religion on identity can cause aspects of student religious writing to be obscured. Focusing on religious identity as an identity that needs to be brought into harmony with the other identities in a classroom is an important addition to the conversation of pluralism.

However, if we conceive of Luke and Tina’s religious identity as a part of a network of identities that need to engage in pluralistic compromise with each other, we may limit our ability to understand the firmly held conviction of these students as conviction. Luke’s inability to admit that obedience to God could be the wrong thing to do, or Tina’s inability to say that there can be salvation from the wrath of God outside of Jesus Christ may be best understood other than an identity that is refusing to budge against a plurality of identities. A focus on identity collapses the genuinely held conviction of Tina and Luke into a simple stubbornness or unwillingness to consider others.

**What's Wrong with using Identity?**

Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) articulate a reasonable and clear depiction of how researchers and scholars can view identity. Drawing on Black Feminism, they describe the
broader project of intersectionality, seeing identity as fundamentally about the intersection of a variety of identity markers, all of which ought to negotiate with each other given the individual’s position, power, and privilege.

This intersection helps us understand how identity is not just monopolar, but multipolar, and the intersection of identities produces an intersection of power. Context, position, and audience will dictate how power is produced by identity, and will dictate which identities express themselves within a given situation.

Of particular interest to our discussion is the concept of positionality. They define positionality as relational, historical, fluid, particular, situational, contradictory, and intersectional. Let’s focus on Particular, Situational, and Contradictory here. They clarify these points with examples:

“Particular: What it means to be a devout Hindu differs among individuals ascribing to the same religion.

Situational: What it means to be a woman of color is different in the boardroom than it is in the courtroom than it is in her aunt’s kitchen.

Contradictory: What it means to be a successful technology professional may be perceived to conflict with what it means to be an immigrant, even for a person who is both.” (Walton, Moore, and Jones, 2019).

What we see here is that identity, within this framework, exists primarily in the identification of the identity holder. That is, what it means to be a devout Hindu is fully up to how the individual worshiper defines Hindu. It is nonsensical to say there is a true Hindu, just as it would be
nonsensical to say there is a true German. There is no true identity because identity is fundamentally situational, relative, and personal. The conflict between contradictory identities isn’t coming from a conflict of truth claims, or convictions, but rather from the difficulty of occupying a variety of cultural spaces that seem to have contradictory demands. As a result, the tension can be “dizzying and straining, confusing and painful” (182) but it is that exact tension that creates identity.

This analysis is certainly helpful when understanding identity in a sense of personal, individual definition. This analysis is also helpful when understanding religious identity. Many of us and our students will find analysis like this familiar to their experience as religious individuals. However, this approach to identity will not be sufficient for examining faith conviction. This is not due to a deficiency in Walton, Moore, and Jones’ conception of identity; faith conviction does not fit within this framework of identity. Attempts to examine religion from the perspective of a particular, situational, and contradictory identity will obscure the aspects of faith conviction that are not particular, situational, or contradictory. faith conviction is very often connected to a concrete series of fundamental a priori beliefs about reality, beliefs that transcend (though accompany) the contradictory nature of identity. When we treat faith conviction as identical to religious identity, we risk misunderstanding what is motivating and shaping the actions and beliefs of the religiously convicted. We also risk misunderstanding some important potential conflicts between religious identity and faith conviction. It is important to acknowledge or be able to acknowledge individuals who may possess religious identity but not conviction, or perhaps faith conviction but not identity.
Examining Evangelical

To explain and demonstrate this concept, I will use the term Evangelical, a religious term that is surrounded by contentious definition and counter-definition. I believe that this term illustrates how differently we must treat identity from conviction. It is my goal in this section to demonstrate, with an example, how using identity categories to discuss faith conviction can lead to significant problems in how these categories end up portraying conviction. While religious communities themselves often use strict categories for defining membership, when these terms are used in wider culture, even in academic culture, they often are used in manners that are distinct from their use within the faith community. This is not uncommon, nor is it unique to religion, but often the religious term becomes a wider-used ideograph, taking on a political, social, and vacuous form, plastering itself to political categories that obscure, rather than illuminate, conviction.

To illustrate this concept, I will interrogate the word "Evangelical." I choose this word because it has been examined often within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, particularly as it relates to Evangelical students. Of particular note to this section is Cope and Ringer’s (2014) “Coming to (Troubled) Terms Methodology, Positionality, and the Problem of Defining ‘Evangelical Christian.’” Cope and Ringer here explore how the terms we use to define religious groups create problems for how we conduct research and how we view religious people in general. In this piece they “call for rhetoricians to interrogate, unsettle, and revise definitions of key terms that can serve to delimit the contours of Christian rhetorics in overly narrow ways” (p. 121). This troublesome term, evangelical, is revealed by Cope and Ringer to often limit or hamper the ability of scholars to get an accurate picture of the group it intends to describe. I will, similarly, explore this term. Cope and Ringer are correct that this term is muddy, difficult, and
often unhelpful, I believe that within that muddiness lies a significant observation: a good portion of the difficulty of this term comes from the conflation of identity and conviction.

Evangel

Coming from the Greek Evangelion, for messengers, Evangelical shares the root ἀγγέλος, or angelos, where we get the word "Angel". An Angel is a messenger, the term angel for a supernatural being here referring to a supernatural messenger. An Evangel is one who brings good news, an evangelist. For Christians, the “good news” of the evangelist is the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that He is God, that He lived a perfect life, that He died on the cross for the sins of the world, and that he rose again on the third day, offering salvation to all who believe in Him, then ascending into heaven after commanding those listening (and by proxy the whole Church) to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20)

An evangelist is one who takes on that command, spreading the Gospel and making Christians through baptism. Virtually all Christian denominations practice evangelism.

Theological Evangelicals

An Evangelical, however, is more narrowly defined in Christianity. The term is notoriously slippery, but is generally agreed to have begun in the early 18th century as a theological position disconnected from denominational affiliation, and this flexibility has remained, with Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Anglicans, Methodists, E-Free, even some Catholics, etc., claiming the title. If we are to understand Evangelical as a theological term
(which perhaps is most faithful to the origin of the term) then we must understand what has
theologically bound these denominational groups together.

Perhaps the most pervasive recent definition of the term was provided by historian David
Bebbington, referred to as Bebbington's quadrilateral. These four theological distinctives define
a rough understanding of the necessary theological commitments of Evangelicals. As he puts it:

“here are the four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion:
conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the
gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called
crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a
quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism” (Bebbington p. 2-3, 1989)

These criteria are fascinating both in how many denominations they could include and in
which groups they exclude. These distinctives encompass a variety of congregations within a
variety of denominations, but do not fully encompass most denominations. Biblicism, strictly
understood, would even exclude most Charismatic or Pentecostal churches, who see divine
revelation through the Holy Spirit as a way to know more of the word of God than contained in
the Bible. This is to say, Evangelical in its orthodoxy and orthopraxy, operates apart from
political or denominational categorization. It can encompass a wide variety of Christians from a
variety of denominations, political alignments, and social positions.

Cultural Evangelicals

There is another definition of Evangelical that is more widely used, particularly as a
political definition of Evangelical. This definition, rather than theological, is cultural, identifying
“Evangelical” as someone who holds to conservative politics with a general positive disposition
toward institutions of faith. This term seems to relate more to how people self-identify as evangelicals, rather than looking at particular theological distinctives. This title is, as Joustra (2019) writes, “a highly polarized and politicized understanding of Christianity in the United States of America.” When we hear that 80% of Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump (CNN, 2022), it is this definition we first think of. This definition is not based on conviction but rather based on culture and self-identification. It’s nearly impossible to escape this definition, which dominates public thinking about the term. I do not intend to trace the historical reasons this theological term has been entangled with this political term (Joustra’s article provides an excellent and succinct description of this process).

This cultural Evangelicalism extends away from theological Evangelicalism in surprising ways. In 2020, 27% of self-identified Evangelicals report never or seldom attending church, and perhaps even more surprisingly, “half of Muslims who attend services at a mosque more than once a week and align with the G.O.P. self-identify as evangelical.” (Burge 2021). While this selection is admittedly a small group of religious practitioners, as Burge puts it, “Americans are coming to the understanding that to be very religiously engaged and very politically conservative means that they are evangelical, even if they don't believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ.”

These contrasting definitions provide an interesting problem for understanding this term. It can be easy to measure religious affiliation by self-identification, after all, who are researchers to determine who “counts” as a religious person? However, if we were to truly want to understand the religious/theological movement of Evangelicalism, we would be unable to access much if any self-identified data about Evangelicalism, because of its socio-theo-political positioning as a term. The term not only includes too wide a variety of people, but excludes many as well, as Joustra (2019) points out, “there remain evangelicals who do not fit this
ethno-political definition. American evangelicals are also black, Hispanic, or Asian-American, moderate or Democrat, among other demographics that defy the picture that the now-famous 81 percent statistic paints.” This is not to say that the political definition has no use: there are plenty of uses for understanding the broad tent of political evangelicalism, however, the self-identification data is functionally worthless for understanding the theological movement.

The Evangelical identity, then, is a distinct, though related, cultural force from theological Evangelicals.

Consequences

To define a movement through cultural self-identification rather than conviction is to define the movement as an outsider. It is to treat the movement as a cultural phenomenon, not as an experience. This can be extremely useful, after all, conviction-based definitions could easily lead to a “No True Scotsman” problem, where the goalpost for what counts as a true believer (in this case, a true Evangelical) can be defined away from unpleasant realities until it is simply a morally perfect person (No-True Evangelical exists, perhaps, outside of Jesus Christ). However, there is another danger of refusing to listen to what a group of people claim they believe, preferring to understand what a broader, and differently defined group of people do.

This argument is connected in part to the project put forward by DePalma, Ringer, and Webber (2008), that rhetorical attempts by liberal democracy to understand (and refute) religious “fundamentalism” fail to consider religious people using the terms or frameworks they themselves use. They in particular examine Crowley’s “Toward a Civil Discourse,” arguing that the most striking difference is apparent in what Crowley calls each of the factions - "liberalism" on the one hand and "fundamentalist Christians" on the other. She names one faction by its
philosophy (liberalism) whereas the other she names by its adherents (fundamentalist Christians), indicating a potential motivational disparity. Teasing out each of the definitions substantiates this possibility. Equally important, Crowley's featured terms in each definition serves to reinforce her argument that fundamentalist Christian discourse falls outside of - and thus must be converted to - liberal democracy. (DePalma, Ringer, and Webber, 2008)

Crowley examines liberalism by its set of liberally democratic convictions. She examines fundamentalist Christians, however, by their adherents, by their self-identified population. DePalma, Ringer, and Webber argue that this disparity, along with many other examples, leads to an undemocratic discourse, one that fails to understand or even seek to understand the positions and convictions of the religious “fundamentalists” within society. If we want to understand conviction, we cannot rely on identity, or self-identification, to help us. We have to listen to people who are attempting to hold to particular convictions.

*Ideographs*

Part of the problem with the self-identification Evangelical is that this term, unlike the theological term, is functioning as what McGee (1980) would describe as an ideograph. The Ideograph is a word-idea that is not defined clearly, but rather exists as a set of relationships, associations, and significations. These terms represent power and mass consciousness, a consciousness manifested in the ambiguity of the term. (McGee 1980) An Ideograph exists as an object separate from its connotative or denotative meaning: the facets of a word that exist in a zero-sum political/social/cultural sphere. Ideographs make up “a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief” (McGee, 1980, p 6) In most conversations, it doesn’t matter what Evangelical means theologically, it matters what sets
of loosely defined allegiances it represents. Evangelical, as an identity, is not an idea, but an ideograph.

Evangelical as a cultural ideograph exists within a bundle of loose associations. You cannot be Black and Evangelical (pollsters will describe you as Black Protestant). You cannot be economically progressive and Evangelical. You cannot be pro-immigration and Evangelical. You must support Donald Trump to be Evangelical. None of these requirements have any meaningful relationship with the theological definition of Evangelicalism, but they are vitally important to the ideograph, and cultural definition, of Evangelicalism.

While the two are not perfectly matched, and should by no means be seen as identical, I would argue that defining and studying religion as an aspect of identity more closely resembles the ideographic identity marker of evangelical rather than the theological conviction of evangelicalism. Indeed, an ideograph seems to be what happens when a conviction is conflated with identity. It is the confusion of identity and conviction that creates some ideographs.

I would argue that convictions are more immovable than identities. While an identity cannot be discarded but instead remains with the identity holder regardless of will or intention, a conviction seems to operate differently. I do not dismiss my conviction that the earth is round simply because I enter into a group of people who disagree. I do not deemphasize my conviction that we ought to do something about climate change simply because I am in a group who denies the problem. While I may not voice, or articulate, that conviction, it doesn’t make sense to use the word “emphasize” or “deemphasize” in the context of a conviction. You have it or you don’t, but it also comes from firmly held conviction. If we were to conflate these two things, identity and conviction, then we risk missing the way conviction operates in and of itself. A martyr,
standing before the persecutor, does not change her conviction based on the rhetorical context. She will speak the words that condemn her because they are a conviction. She will testify to the truth regardless of the collision of intersectional identities going on in her. When Paul the Apostle appealed to his identity as a Roman citizen, or appealed to his identity as a Jewish scholar, those acts are certainly acts of a dynamic identity responding to a variety of circumstances and contexts. However, when Paul stood before the Emperor, facing the executioner’s blade, but refused to say “Caesar is Lord,” there the dynamic identity was not sufficient, there he chose to rely on conviction, losing his life (and gaining it).

These two kinds of “Christian” are different. The identity, while extremely important, operates differently than the conviction. And I would say that, in a similar way, the ideograph operates differently than the theological conviction. This relationship between the ideograph and the theological definition has caused significant issues with the ways researchers and teachers have engaged with religious students.

This is by no means restricted to the term Evangelical. Nearly every religious category: Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, etc., are conflated with and intricately aligned with other social/identity/national categories. This is not to say that examining those aligned categories will not be valuable in the context of understanding faith convictions. However, to only view a religion through an ideograph, or only through the lens of identity, is to only view religion as a cultural phenomenon, and not as the conviction system that many religious firmly believe and articulate that their religion is.
What do we do about this?

As we can see with the examples from scholarship and wider culture, religious identity often conflicts with religion and faith convictions. If we ask questions best asked of religious identification, but answer with faith conviction, or vice versa, we risk misunderstanding what we are discussing from the beginning. As mentioned above, if we are measuring conviction based on a different point on the Burkean pentad than we ought to, we are going to get a flawed picture of what we are talking about.

I believe that in order to understand the faith conviction of our students, we are going to need to examine what conviction really is, and analyze how we are to conceptualize student religious commitment outside of primarily viewing religion as an identity category.

How have we dealt with Conviction?

With the exception of Ringer’s work, the usual approach to student faith conviction seems to focus on how instructors can position themselves in order to best accommodate students. In order to understand this necessary positioning, however, we must also understand how students position themselves within the context of the university.

In examining how religion plays a role in student behavior, it is important to consider what aspects of religion are significant as a faith act and what could be held in doubt in a safe or faithful manner. In order to navigate the complex territory of religion, teachers must have high levels of religious literacy, or they risk essentializing or tokenizing religion and religious students. In Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon describes how homogenous and stereotypical understandings of how Islam operates have obscured the ability of instructors to adequately
discuss not only the religion Islam, but also have rendered incomprehensible any attempt to understand politics in predominately Islamic countries. It is important to understand how a passing knowledge of customs, beliefs, and understandings is not enough when it comes to discussing religion. It can be easy to stereotype or categorize faiths based on broad summaries that may be present in a world religion class, but to attempt to connect that basic understanding with the actual careful knowledge required to discuss religion or understand it in a classroom is a deep error. This demonstrates how teachers cannot rely on simply their knowledge of faiths but instead must create spaces that are open for multiple literacies, including religious literacy. There are plenty of examples of times when a lack of religious literacy has caused problems within classrooms. Wendy Clein describes how Sikh students respond to bullying in the contexts of their religion, particularly responses to bullying targeting the religious turban that male Sikhs wear. The article centers around notes taken during a class about bullying put on by a Sikh organization. In this class the students were asked to observe an acted-out skit that modeled a type of bullying, and then they would offer responses to what should have been the bullied Sikh student’s response in the situation. Most significant to religious students in the classroom is how, in response to a video of a coach telling a Sikh student to remove his turban for a basketball game, all the Sikh students observing insisted that the student should sooner quit basketball than take his turban off, for to do so is to give up on his religion. Even in an academic setting with an authority figure asking for a momentary lapse in behavior, these Sikh students saw preserving their religious obligations as of highest concern, to the point that even momentary violation is to give up on their faith convictions. Instructors who ask students to say or do things that may even momentarily contradict their faith will be faced with a student who is not just positioned as uncomfortable at the suggestion, but who would sooner forsake education than their faith.
While most instructors would (hopefully) understand not to ask students to give up a religious garment like the Sikh turban, it is important to acknowledge that many of the tasks associated with writing and analysis (examining texts, challenging readings, finding alternate approaches etc.) can, when connected to faith convictions, produce behavior that seems threatening to religious practice. For example, Ayala Fader looks at how Hasidic communities enforce cultural boundaries between them and other communities, particularly examining religious difference. This piece examines how in the Hasidic community, questions defying religious texts are either ignored or deemed unacceptable, as questioning the text is tantamount to questioning the community. While there are answers to the questions presented within the theology of the Hasidic Jews, the questioning itself is a dangerous activity, not because it could risk the faith of the asker, but rather because it demonstrates a lack of trust in religious and cultural authority figures. While interrogating faith conviction from a critical perspective may seem like the necessary work of the classroom, instructors must understand that asking a student to perform that analysis may be something that runs directly contrary to the faith of their community. Instructors must learn to create a classroom that allows for multiple literacies: literacies related to faith convictions must be allowed to dwell in some capacity within those multiple literacies, but instructors must be careful not to accidentally present a student with a scenario that asks them to do something that directly runs counter to their faith or they risk losing the student altogether and performing a form of violence upon the student.

Allison Skerrett describes how an instructor (in this instance a High School instructor) engages her students in their faith convictions in the context of fostering multiliteracy in the classroom. This article reinforces the idea that language and thought of faith should be
counted as one of many literacies made available and taught within the classroom. Viewing this through the lens of multi-literacy is helpful in establishing what our duties might be as instructors who are facing an increasingly religiously diverse classroom. The teacher in Skerrett’s case study uses religious literacy (though she herself is not described as religious) to help students connect to texts, to help students draw allusions, and to help mitigate conflict within the classroom, calling upon faith convictions as a source of common ground between students. Here we see an environment where students are comfortable sharing religious language and ideas, so they engage in Ringer’s values articulation. Offering students an environment where they are expected to articulate their values (and therefore conviction) directly allows for students to see their faith conviction as not just relevant, but wanted in the classroom, as well as allows for students to operate with discernment as to what religious values they think should be articulated.

Now that we have seen how the field has dealt with conviction, I will theorize a new way of looking at religious students. I believe that by using American Pragmatism and by renewing our understanding of faith conviction, we can come to a more robust and helpful understanding of how our religious students compose their faith within our classrooms. By looking at their religious writing through conviction, we can make more sense of religious student behavior and writing, as well as develop more effective and responsive pedagogical responses to faith in the classroom.
Chapter 2: Theory

An Introduction to Pragmatism

American Pragmatism, as it is expressed by William James, is predominantly concerned with how ideas work, rather than whether or not they are verifiably true. James conceives of ideas not as abstract concepts that are either true or false against an immovable universe, but as technologies that are dialogically shared between people, a construct that can help us reconcile our reality to our convictions. As he puts it, “Ideas (which themselves are parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience” (James, 1995, p. 23). Since ideas are socially shared and constructed items, it is best to conceive of them as tools for our use, and if they better bring our experience into harmony with other parts of our experience, then they become true (that is, until another idea comes that better reconciles them together.)

James constructs his argument by examining what he terms rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism is a platonic belief in universal, discoverable logical truths about abstract reality. Empiricism trusts only that which can be observed and verified by the scientific method. These two contrasting beliefs are seen by James to be wrong about their epistemology, but both are also necessary for human life. We rely on the moral and ethical certainties of abstract thinking, to the point that we are often more sure of these rationalist thoughts than we are our own experiences. We also, however, require the empirical method of thinking in order to be grounded in our concrete reality. These two methods of certainty and thought are necessary to human functioning, but James believes that these two methods are by nature contradictory. The methods
of certainty in empiricism are powerful, but cannot bring anyone peace when it comes to questions of, say, ethics or morality.

This concept is poignantly articulated by Steven Katz (1992) in his work “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust.” Here Katz outlines how a reliance on empiricism and expediency alone, a kind of relentless, amoral rationality, produces disturbing and immoral rhetoric. He gives the example of expedient, evidence-based language within the technical manuals for Nazi gas chambers. According to Katz, if we solely allow thoughts that are expedient and clearly based in scientific reasoning, we will ignore and empower obvious moral outrages. For example: we cannot conduct peer-reviewed research or observe whether or not the killing of a toddler is immoral, but we can still say with near certainty that it is. Without the certainty of moral reasoning we cannot have ethical empirical reasoning, even though the two forms of thought seem contradictory. These two methods of thought are two, among many methods of thought, that James believes are necessary for human operation but are by nature incompatible with each other.

If we consider Jamesian pragmatism, however, this incompatibility is no obstacle; the fact that these methods of thought work and provide helpful structures for thought makes them true. Reality is too complex, too large of an apparatus for our ideas to be able to holistically cover, and therefore ideas are tools that allow humans to reach certain positions of power and clarity.

Jamesian pragmatism allows for a certain flexibility with truth and can be quickly seen as a useful tool when addressing the previously mentioned objections to religious writing within the academic classroom. While it’s true that many religious claims cannot be “verified” in the same
way as scientific research, this does not make the claim untrue, nor does it make the claim unhelpful within the academic classroom. Under a Jamesian framework, rather than ask *Are the claims this student is making about reality true?*, instructors should ask *What aspects of reality do this student’s truth claims allow them to access?*, or, to put it another way, *What do these claims help the student do?*

**Terministic Screens**

In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Kenneth Burke (1966) similarly examines how language functions as an action, beginning his discussion of terministic screens by differentiating between scientistic and dramatistic approaches to language. The scientistic approach sees language as built “on the proposition such as ‘It is, or it is not.’ The ‘dramatistic’ approach puts the primary stress upon such hortatory expressions as ‘thou shalt, or shalt not’” (Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* 1966 p. 44). Scientistic language is more platonic, dealing more in absolutes, where dramatistic language indicates direction and is by itself a symbolic action. While all language has some element of definition/scientistic language, all language also contains some element of directional/dramatistic language. More directly, all language proposes a particular frame of reality. Language shapes the way that reality is perceived, and thus language further shapes and changes how things are. As Burke puts it, language “directs the attention” (1966, p. 45) to particular slivers of reality, obscuring others.

As an example, Burke offers different writing on infant behavior, noting how infant language is categorized differently by different writers based significantly on their ideological and metaphysical convictions. He notes how behaviorists categorize baby sounds by their actions in response to stimuli, psychologists through social interactions, and he even quotes Augustine,
who lists “rest” as a state a baby can be in, ultimately pointing toward “rest in God,” a concept important to Augustinian theology (Burke, 1966, p. 49). This leads Burke to claim that

"All three terminologies . . . directed the attention differently, and thus led to a correspondingly different quality of observations. In brief, ‘behavior’ isn’t something that you need but observe; even something so ‘objectively there’ as behavior must be observed through one or another kind of terministic screen, that directs the attention in keeping with its nature."" (Burke, Language as Symbolic Action 1966 p. 49).

This understanding of truth constructs truth socially, looking at how screens have been developed through dialogic social functions. Bruce McComiskey (1994) connects Burke’s work to the sophist Gorgias, who, along with Burke, believed that “the human mind interacts dialectically with reality, and this interaction occurs through language” (McComiskey 1994, p. 20). This connection with Gorgias further puts Burke’s terministic screens at odds with the scientistic, Platonic understanding of truth and language. McComiskey goes on to point out how this sophistic tradition emphasizes how humans construct knowledge through “social and linguistic interaction” (1994, p. 21). Truth and knowledge are created in the social, dialogic moment of interaction, and this creation is guided and controlled by the terministic screens of the rhetor.

Burke articulates the danger of neglecting how symbolic systems like terministic screens function in his work Permanence and Change (1984), where he describes how we prioritize a form of a utilitarian ethic over the symbols we possess. He describes how the utilitarian ethic often is presented as more important/powerful than the symbolic screens we hold, giving the example of how the felling of a large, beautiful tree would be a sign of sorrow, but our utilitarian screen demands that we dismiss these kinds of symbolic meanings in favor of our utilitarian
approach (Burke, Permanence and Change, 1984 p. 72). Burke describes this kind of action as a “symbolic outrage” (Burke, 1984 p. 71) that goes against our established screens. These kinds of transgressions against screens we possess are transgressions against what Burke broadly terms “piety” or a “schema of organization [that] involves the putting together of experiences” (1984, p. 76). How many times in the classroom have students been asked to set aside their metaphysics in exchange for the utilitarian impiety of academic discourse? Burke would say that instructors need to focus on the integration of a conscientious rhetor, a speaker who can both value the screens and pieties of their audience while still allowing for communication and expression.

While it can be easy to read terministic screens as some sort of deficit (I cannot understand x belief because I come from y culture, etc.), Stob (2008) clarifies how Burke, using James, describes his terministic screens as tools that allow humans to access certain (pragmatic) truths about reality that are not accessible from other frameworks. Terministic screens (and all ideas, according to James) can grant us the privilege of perceiving truths that we couldn’t get without them.

According to this pragmatic view, the world is too complex for one set of ideas. We cannot cram all knowledge and reality into a single set of concepts or a unified theory. Bizzell (2008) describes religious thought in a similar way. Religion, to her, is best understood as deeply connected to emotion. She, using Lynn Worsham, defines emotion as a tight braid of affect and judgment. This definition fits well within this pragmatic frame. Emotion is a type of judgment, a way to process and render as useful the largeness of the world. The religious students in our classrooms are engaging in this process when they pull upon their faith conviction.
I would, of course, want to expand this characterization if we are to apply it to faith. Emotion, as Bizzell points out, is often unfairly contrasted with reason; they are not permanently opposed forces. However the core, faith-based *a priori* assumptions we must make often hold the judicious quality of Bizzell’s definition of emotion but may exist without the same degree of affect. While faith conviction certainly often holds massive affective significance, this significance may not be essential to faith conviction. I believe that judgment itself is the essential quality. The act of judgment, rendering the world into sense, is an act of faith. Thus everyone, religious or secular, employs terministic screens to create/understand truth. All ideas require assumptions of faith that allow them to pragmatically work. As Stob (2008) puts it:

> Every system of exhortation hinges about some definite act of faith, a deliberate selection of alternatives. When this crucial act is not specifically stated, it merely lies hidden beneath the ramifications of the system. . . . Here, in all its nudity, is the Jamesian 'will to believe.' It amounts in the end to the assumption that good, rather than evil, lies at the roots of human purpose. And as for those who would suggest that this is merely a verbal solution, I would answer that by no other fiction can men truly cooperate in historic processes, hence the fiction itself is universally grounded. (Burke, Permanence and Change p. 235-36)

All of our knowledge-making processes, therefore, come from these faith assumptions—*a priori* beliefs that come strictly from non-observed, non-experiential truths. If this is to be taken seriously by writing instructors, then we cannot simply dismiss religious assumptions or terministic screens as unprovable without also implicating our classrooms and research in that unprovability. How would our standards of ethics in our classrooms, from inclusivity to democratic pluralism, hold up if we demanded that every point be empirically
provable? We should not dismiss empiricism, but we cannot believe that we are free from a priori beliefs, and the religious student is not. There is no such thing as an individual who holds no faith. We all must place complete trust in something in order to reason. We cannot have ethics without preferring one outcome to another, an act of faith. We cannot have law without establishing a preferable outcome that we take on faith. We cannot consider aesthetics without a sense of *faithfulness* to either an abstract beauty, or a situated, contextual beauty, both of which require faith to adhere to. But more seriously, if we prevent students from writing within their own screens, (a circumstance all four of my participants were familiar with) we are running the risk of both forcing them to engage in rhetorical impiety, but also blocking off our classrooms from pragmatically true knowledge making processes.

Drawing on James and the American pragmatists, I believe pragmatism’s approach to religious utterances is enormously helpful to understanding religious student writing practices. Jamesian pragmatism allows for a certain flexibility with truth and can be quickly seen as a useful tool when addressing the previously mentioned objections to religious writing within the academic classroom. While it’s true that many religious claims cannot be “verified” in the same way as scientific research, this does not make the claim untrue, nor does it make the claim unhelpful within the academic classroom. Under a Jamesian framework, rather than ask *are the claims this student is making about reality true?* instructors should ask *what aspects of reality do this student’s truth claims allow them to access?* or, to put it another way, *what do these claims help the student do?* This theoretical basis also harmonizes well with Burke’s idea of terministic screens as they both deal with how conviction informs writing and thought. This theoretical lens has been present in a few scholars who study religious rhetoric, particularly DePalma (2011).
A Word on Moral Relativism

One of the more enduring dangers of pragmatism is the threat of moral relativism, a loose grip on reality in general, that considers all reality so positional, so pragmatic, that there can be no meaningful interaction with Truth. Perhaps this reply is too cheeky, but if pragmatism disregards a concept of Truth in favor of what ideas can do, it still has to answer why we prefer some outcomes to others, and we are back again to metaphysics. However, this issue has not been neglected by pragmatists. While there are plenty of ways pragmatists have attempted to avoid this problem, perhaps the easiest way, and the way most relevant to this project, is to view pragmatism pragmatically.

I am not proposing that we use pragmatism epistemologically: that is, I am not asking that all of what we know to be true should be measured to be pragmatic rather than real (in whatever sense absolute Truth can be real). Pragmatism in this context should be viewed as a process of reconciling and understanding Truth, rather than creating or forming that Truth.

Bernstein (2010) describing pragmatist Charles Pierce explains how Pierce helped navigate this problem: “Pierce does not doubt that there are real things that are independent of our own thought and that constrain our opinions. But he challenges the claim that we can have direct, immediate, intuitive knowledge of what is real. All such knowledge involves or presupposes inferential processes” (111) Pragmatism does not require that the Truth itself is relative, but rather is a process that helps us form truth that better corresponds to the Truth.

More than this, Pierce admits that presuppositions, or foundational beliefs (what I call convictions), are necessary for thought. Bernstein again writes, by Pierce, “all knowing has a foundation in the sense that there are tacitly held beliefs which we don’t doubt and take for the
bedrock of truth” (34). Our truths are created and tested as ways to better understand Truth, but they are also dependent on what we assume to be True. We cannot have truth without Truth, but we cannot have Truth without truth.

The world of the pragmatist has colossal Truths that we cannot comprehend. These are mediated by synthetic truths that we can only judge as true/false based on if they effectively produce outcomes that we believe line up with what little we know of Truth. This is to say that Truth, to the pragmatist, is something that is still of consequence, but the everyday interactions we have with truth claims must be judged by how these claims pragmatically affect reality. If those outcomes are in concert with the little glimmers of the Truth that we hold to a priori, then they can be considered true.

Because of this, Pragmatism is a way to help us mediate the differences between contradictory belief systems. Bernstein again, this time describing William James, describes his view of “Engaged Pluralism” saying that this kind of pragmatic approach to pluralism helps meet the “need to engage with other centralizing factors.” He quotes James directly saying we can use pragmatism to “reach out to the points of contact where we can critically engage with each other” (62).

I likely have substantive metaphysical disagreements with my neighbor about why we should build a just society, but because we share the pragmatic goal of building that society, we can work together in most things and establish what is (I hope) a just society that aligns with the shared areas of Truth that we hold. Pierce, in “The Fixation of Belief” gives the example of colors: “We can see that a thing is blue or green, but the quality of being blue and the quality of being green are not things which we see; they are products of logical reflections.” (Pierce, 1877,
p. 12) It is wrong to describe a leaf as “green” in the sense that there is no quality of *greenness* fundamentally in the leaf. *Greenness* is a pragmatic category we use to categorize color. The metaphysical quality of *green* is not nearly as important in a discussion of what color a leaf is as is our shared category of *green*. Colors are useful truths, but they are truths, not Truths. Our metaphysical differences are important, and likely will produce conflict between some of our ideas, but we can, together, reach a pragmatic “truth” that we can collaboratively use. Pragmatism is a way to help reconcile difficult differences in our understandings of some Truths in order to construct truths that can help us discover more pluralist Truths.

**Pragmatism and Belief**

In order to better understand the relationship between faith convictions and pragmatism, I will examine Charles Pierce’s understanding of conviction in “The Fixation of Belief” (1877) to explain how his understanding of belief informs my project here. His use of *belief* is not the same as, but is similar to, my use of conviction. It will become clear after this section what this distinction is, but for the sake of being direct and clear with Pierce, I will use the term *belief* in this section.

Belief, to Pierce, is the natural state of the mind, and is the antidote to the pain of doubt. When our minds are faced with uncertainty, we feel discomfort until they rest in belief. As a result, while you may have held many positions in doubt, those positions are vastly outnumbered by the number of positions you hold in belief. Belief is the resting place of thought and doubt is the agitation of thought, agitation that will demand to rest in belief again. As a result, every fact, logical structure, or question you have is necessarily founded on a constellation of firmly held beliefs. These beliefs are more than important, they are essential. As Pierce puts it: “Our beliefs
guide our desires and shape our actions” (12). As a result, true inquiry (the process of resolving doubt through genuine examination) is often thwarted or challenged by a desire for comfort, or many other competing motivations besides Truth.

Pierce offers a taxonomy of these motivations:

1. *Authority belief* is a belief that is held because authorities over the holder have forced/shaped them to hold this belief. This is the most peaceful method of belief, as it shows no resistance to dominant culture, and allows the most harmony with people around the believer, however, as Pierce describes, it torments the believer. What some people would term cognitive dissonance, Pierce describes as a torment from faithlessness to the Truth. If you know that something is wrong, and respect the Truth, then to live against that is to live in torment. Belief dictated by and shaped by authority, rather than the other methods, is a torment.

2. *A priori belief* is to hold a belief on its face simply because you believe it. This makes truth a matter of taste, or impulse, rather than a search for what is true. This approach is, like Authority, comfortable, in that it does not account for any struggle, but rather simply denies any kind of necessary examination of belief. This is, perhaps, the closest of methods to what we may term Relativism, viewing all truths as fluctuating based on the relative position of the believer and their taste.

3. *Tenacity belief*, similar to a priori, involves belief isolated in the believer, but this belief is examined, reasoned through, and believed to be true beyond taste. This belief however, has no external evidence or realities that others can hold, and is therefore impossible to
share. Pragmatically, while this is an admirable method of belief as it demonstrates a power and firmness in the truth, it cannot be true in a pragmatic sense, as it cannot be made to be true in the community of humanity.

4. *Scientific belief* is belief that can be proven to have pragmatic, experiential reality. This belief, while not fully concrete, can be found to be useful, or pragmatic, by the fact that it can reasonably be shared and held by a community of people, evidenced by its reality in their lives. Scientific belief, according to Pierce, “has had the most wonderful triumphs in the way of settling opinion” (Pierce 22). While he does not declare which is more cosmologically true (he cannot make this claim, as a pragmatist) Pierce sees scientific belief, belief founded on the evidence perceived, as the most effective at creating consensus, most effective at ending disagreement.

Pierce prefers the scientific method of belief, holds respect for tenacity, and finds the other two to be sub-optimal (and sometimes shameful).

Most belief requires other beliefs behind it. Thus, there must always be assumptions we rely on in order to have thought. These assumptions cannot be fully ascertained through the scientific method. This presents a problem for Pierce’s scheme, which he addresses thusly:

“To satisfy our doubts, therefore, it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs may be caused by nothing human, but by some external permanency—by something upon which our thinking has no effect. Some mystics imagine that they have such a method in a private inspiration from on high. But that is only a form of the method of tenacity, in which the conception of truth as something public is not yet developed. Our external permanency would not be external, in our sense, if it was restricted in its
influence to one individual. It must be something which effects, or might effect, every man.” (Pierce 1877, 20-21)

Here Pierce categorizes faith conviction through the mystic (though sometimes he connects it to authority) as a form of tenacity. However, I do not believe this applies to all faith convictions. Faith conviction is only the method of tenacity if we assume that the mystic, or the person receiving divine inspiration, is by themselves, and the inspiration is wholly internal and untestable. This is, however, not the claim of most religious people. The Christian is relying on a variety of texts from a variety of supposed eyewitnesses, as well as accounts from many people of the veracity of their beliefs. The claims of the Catholic Church about miraculous Saint’s lives and miracles are subjected to rigorous verification courts, complete with prosecution and defense. Here we have beliefs claiming to be founded on non-human causes from a variety of observers. Can we call this a belief caused by “nothing human, but by some external permanency”?

Of course, I do not believe all faith convictions to be true. I cannot ignore that many faith conviction systems hold to claims about reality that run directly opposed to what I believe. As a Christian, I believe that Jesus Christ is God. That’s a pretty big claim, and runs in the face of what Mormons, Muslims, Unitarians, and many other religious people believe about Jesus Christ, God, humanity, etc. These kinds of direct claims about reality, foundational, fundamental truths, can be opposed to each other. This area of collision, however, is where Pierce’s project becomes helpful again. Negotiating differences of conviction is made possible through pragmatic consideration of conviction. While a devout Muslim and I may disagree on the divinity of Christ, we still pragmatically create truths between us to help us negotiate the Truths we do share. To expand this example: the Truth I hold of Jesus Christ, the Truth a Muslim holds of Allah are (to
my understanding) irreconcilable. However there are truths that stem from our Truth positions that are nearly identical. I believe, because of Jesus Christ, that I have an obligation to care for the poor. The Muslim believes in this obligation as well: Zakat is one of the five pillars of Islam. The truth, the pragmatic valence of almsgiving, is shared between us, which helps us negotiate our Truths into a pluralist society. I do not have to forsake my faith in Jesus Christ to recognize my Muslim neighbor’s almsgiving. Similarly, I do not have to forsake my faith in Jesus Christ to honor the generosity of Secular Humanists. I could stand with a Secular Humanist and a Muslim in defense of generosity as a practice without compromising any of my conviction. Pragmatism creates an arena for discourse and pluralism that does not demand ideological allegiance to a kind of metaphysical, ontological pluralism, but rather accepts the stark and genuine conviction differences between Truths as mutually able to construct truths.

Perhaps this dissertation itself can be an example of this principle. This work of mine is unquestionably the result of a Christian. This work of mine also relies heavily on a wide variety of scholars from a wide variety of religious positions that fundamentally disagree with what I consider to be fundamental to reality. Pragmatism does not force me to agree with my fellow scholars on the a priori assumptions that create their conviction. Pragmatism allows me to both use and agree with the truth of those different than I am while still holding the utter incompatibility of our Truths. Thus as a result I, a Christian, would and have benefitted from the work of Muslims, Atheists, Buddhists, etc. on this very topic, not just in the secular nature of their work but in the religious nature of their work.

Therefore, as we can see from this section, American Pragmatism sees most ideas as tools rather than fully true, in as far as they help us accomplish things. These ideas allow us to have access to certain kinds of thought and writing. As a result, you cannot write truthfully without
your assumptions and convictions. American Pragmatism still holds to the existence of Truth, but sees the pragmatic lower-t truths as necessary for understanding and applying the Truth. Pragmatism separates belief into different categories, preferring the scientific (pragmatic) belief as the best means of reconciling differences.

**Why Students Need Access to their Pragmatic conviction**

I believe this pragmatic framework best models the kind of pluralist environments we face in our classrooms. With the exception, perhaps, of a class in metaphysics, typically the truth claims that students are dealing with stem from, rather than directly involve, their faith convictions and metaphysical Truths. If we are to help students understand and interpret course material through their writing, we must allow them to use the screens and assumptions that allow them to write truthfully and with conviction. A student attempting to produce writing and adhere to the metaphysical conviction of their instructor, their course material, and scholars of the field will fail to successfully accomplish the task of writing, or at least that task will be made unnecessarily difficult.

I propose we, for the sake of this project, consider faith conviction pragmatically within the classroom, that is, we consider what religious students can do with their conviction, and what sorts of truths and knowledge we are missing by restricting or avoiding the expression of faith conviction in the classroom.

Depalma (2011) employs pragmatism in his study of student conviction by helping students navigate or discuss direct conflicts between their faith convictions and their material, seeing value in this process as rising from the antagonism or conflict inherent in these ideas, DePalma describes religious faith as working to inform and shape fundamental ideas in the
student that, while sometimes carrying over into conflict, can also function as effective rhetorical devices. He urges composition instructors to look at what religious faith is doing from a pragmatic sense. He offers an example of a student performing a writing assignment where they describe a time the Holy Spirit convicts them of their faith. This moment, while solidly outside the typical knowledge-making processes of the university, displays powerful pragmatic skill at doing the job of articulating why this student believes what they believe. While the method to examine this phenomenon was certainly abnormal, when viewed from the lens of pragmatism, the Truth the student communicates through pragmatic truth helps the reader and the student both approach a shared third Truth.

This kind of pragmatic process can help students become more willing to listen and examine alternate viewpoints. If students are encouraged to understand their conviction through the lens of the shared ground of pragmatic truth, while still holding onto their conviction as True, they will be better equipped to enter a world with real, concretized, pragmatic convictions while still navigating their own convictions. Without this, we run the risk of telling students that “the only legitimate way for students to write about their faith in the academy is critically” (DePalma 223).

This risk has severe consequences for student learning. These are pragmatic consequences. If students are not able to access the Truths they have convictions about to communicate pragmatic truths, then those Truths will be either immediately challenged or kept carefully away from any critical discourse, so as to avoid the danger of critical engagement. Vander Lei (2014) says that this separation of faith from academics not only hurts critical engagement in the academy, but also emboldens another, dangerous temptation in the student to see the academy as a financial transaction, a process that is a business but has little to no impact
on the lives of the person purchasing the skills given. This transaction approach to faith is critiqued widely, and Vander Lei argues that the student who cannot employ religious concepts to his or her writing has now been pushed to consider his or her conviction as not present or relevant to the classroom, preventing the student from engaging that conviction in the rigorous, fruitful processes of academic life.

Further, Barnhart and Olan (2022) argue that excluding religion entirely from the classroom eliminates the opportunity to use religion as a method of establishing a pluralistic classroom, a technique they believe can “establish equity and inclusion...promote criticality through discourse, and to foster tolerance and communication across difference and diversity” (177)

Pragmatism, therefore, can look at faith convictions and all a priori beliefs as a potential site for invention. Students otherwise bored, frustrated, or irritated by course material can use their religious (or non-religious) faith conviction as a source of writing. If my participants are any indication, we have before us a wealth of potential sources of invention, but often neglect to invite our students to use this source.

It is worth pointing out that this framework is strained and difficult. A priori beliefs must be accepted as part of reasoning: faith underlies all thought as it is necessary for thought. That necessity demands a certain amount of respect, but also we cannot simply cede all a priori beliefs as true, or unchallengeable. Surely we can all identify a priori beliefs that we find to be not just repulsive, but evil (regrettably, evil is yet another a priori belief). Indeed, as will be discussed later, many religious faiths as well as other philosophies find proselytizing, evangelizing, sharing faith, etc. to be essential to their practice. The challenging and changing of
a priori belief is not off limits or untouchable. However we must know what it is that we are doing when we do challenge such a belief. We also must not assume that we can ask someone to “turn off” an a priori belief when writing. Those convictions may indeed be central to that person’s reasoning, so central that writing without them seems impossible or greatly diminished.

We have discussed theory extensively here, and we have seen examples of how a pragmatic approach can help students. I will next categorize and elaborate on these potential benefits of allowing students access to their pragmatic truths.

**Benefits of Pragmatism to the Classroom**

Encouraging writers to write using their conviction provides meaning, beauty, and power to their writing. Students will be able to produce writing that connects with their understandings of meaning and reality, making coursework become significant. Having students write through their conviction produces purpose, beauty, life, depth, and meaning for the students. This, in turn, will provide enormous benefits to the classroom.

Approaching faith convictions (and all a priori belief) pragmatically seems to offer a classroom environment defined by the expression of conviction as well as the negotiation of pluralist, pragmatic truths within that space. Under a pragmatic view, a student would not be expected to surrender, or keep silent, any conviction, but rather use conviction to articulate the truths necessary to uphold the pluralist environment. This will necessarily involve more student interaction with faiths and convictions that they find bizarre or perhaps false, but it will also demonstrate how those convictions (and Truths) can contribute to a pragmatic, constructed truth. A student could hold to their conviction as true while simultaneously recognizing the convictions of others (while regarded as false) as useful for pragmatic truths. Furthermore, a classroom that
has students producing writing that is defined by purpose, beauty, life, depth, and meaning will have a far easier time creating a community of engaged, interested learners.

This does not need to stop at the classroom either. We all should write transparently from our a priori pragmatic frames. We do not have some kind of scientific neutrality defining our first principles: first principles cannot be scientific. Perhaps scholars and academics, too, can experience more of this purpose, beauty, life, depth, and meaning by allowing ourselves to write through our faith convictions, whether religious or not.

Now that we have examined faith writing as a source of pragmatic truth and rhetorical invention I will now move on to the second theoretical principle: the apparent conflict between faith as an identity and faith as a conviction.

**Introduction to Conviction**

A pragmatic understanding of religious faith is important to help facilitate religious student writing, as well as to help us as composition and writing instructors understand and contextualize the convictions of our students. It allows us to take faith conviction seriously while still understanding that many religious believers will hold to truths that are not able to be held by everyone to whom they are speaking. This is critical as we learn to build pluralist, humanistic classrooms.

However, this pragmatic understanding has severe limitations when attempting to understand the way in which conviction itself works. Truthfully, I do not hold my faith conviction to be an abstract “tool” that allows me to make sense of the phenomenon I see. My
faith conviction has made my world more confusing at times. Furthermore, I do not believe that I hold to my faith in Jesus Christ in the same way that I, say, believe in Democracy. Democracy is useful, I believe it works well enough for me to support it as an ideal. But were Democracy as a concept to stop delivering on the “goods” of a society, or the well being of people around me, I would be willing to move on. I believe in Democracy, but I believe in it pragmatically. I hope and genuinely pray that I would have courage enough to hold to my faith far, far outside of pragmatism. “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my [Jesus Christ] sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25, ESV). My faith is the “pearl of great price” that I sell all my belongings for to get a chance to dig it out of the earth (see Matthew 13). I don’t just believe Christianity is good for the body and good for the soul, but I genuinely believe in a crucified, resurrected Jesus Christ, God and Man, who is going to come back on a white horse in the final judgment.

Certainly, pragmatism has pragmatic value, in that it allows the composition classroom environment to exist as a community-driven space where writing can flourish. But it runs the risk of misunderstanding faith conviction. The religious person who holds to faith conviction likely does not believe they are holding this idea pragmatically (I certainly don’t of myself!) but rather they may believe their claims about the world to be wholly true. As a result, we must theorize what faith conviction itself is, and how we should view our student's convictions.

**Faith Conviction and Epistemology**

A priori conviction operates as fundamental to the reasoning of the convicted. While these convictions can change through a variety of means, these core assumptions cannot be based in reason/evidence processes, as they are the fundamental building blocks for reason to
occur. As we discussed in the earlier with American Pragmatism, we typically gain or lose core assumptions based not on reason or argumentation, but on the inability for those assumptions to render a clear or meaningful expression of reality. Perceiving this inability is a long, complicated, and nuanced process, a process that I believe cannot be meaningfully performed in a classroom, nor should it be attempted at being performed. Again, this is not to say there is no value in critically examining core assumptions—that is a valuable exercise at the heart of education, however, selecting which assumptions should be pressed or considered valuable to pursue in the classroom requires careful judgment and a careful understanding of the different ways conviction can be held epistemologically within the classroom.

A Hierarchical Heuristic of Conviction

I will propose a hierarchical heuristic to understand conviction. We believe some things to be more True than others, even in our convictions. I distinguish these as primary and secondary conviction.

Primary Conviction is held as true regardless of rival truth claims. When confronted with another position, typically, primary conviction will subordinate that position to itself. Secondary Conviction is held as false when other meaning making apparatuses contradict it. This is a hierarchical heuristic for interpreting knowledge: the apparatuses of faith conviction and the apparatuses of other knowledge making processes can, with a wide amount of variation, be placed on some sort of hierarchy, as some truth sources give way to others in trustworthiness, but perhaps more accurately in their centrality to the person’s conviction.
This binary is obviously overly simplistic: surely persuasion could change a primary conviction into a secondary conviction, or vice versa, but this framework is valuable in understanding the relationship between conviction and identity.

Those who hold their faith conviction as a primary conviction will see reality as necessarily adhering to that conviction. Thus, any attempts to present alternate depictions of reality will be immediately met with suspicion. This concept sounds anti-academic at first glance, but I would argue all thinkers, academic or otherwise, hold essential primary convictions. If someone were to tell me, with certainty, that there is no such thing as a cat, they’ve never existed, and it is foolish to claim to have interacted with them, I would immediately treat that claim with intense suspicion. This is amplified when the convictions challenged are of ethical and spiritual importance. When someone makes an assertion based on racist beliefs, that immediately will run counter to a primary conviction of mine, making me treat it as untrue. Similarly, when someone makes an assertion against the primary conviction of my faith, I will treat it with suspicion.

**Religious Primary Conviction**

To better articulate primary conviction and the way it operates, I will turn to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s reflections are exclusively articulated through the framework of Christianity, and while he and I both share and uphold Christianity, what he says about conviction is helpful both for studying Christianity and faith in general. He, in his work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, describes how Christianity is not the same as a doctrine, or an intellectual belief. Rather:
"The object of faith, understood Christianly, is not a doctrine, for then the relation is merely intellectual. Neither is the object of faith a teacher who has a doctrine, for when a teacher has a doctrine, then the doctrine is more important than the teacher. The object of faith is the actuality and authority of the teacher; that the teacher actually is. Therefore faith's answer is absolutely either yes or no. Faith's posture is not in relation to a teaching, whether it is true or not, but is the answer to the question about a fact: Do you accept as fact that he, the Teacher, actually exists? Please note that the answer to this is a matter of infinite concern. Of course, if the object of faith is only a human being, then the whole thing is a sham. But this is not the case for Christians. The object of Christian faith is God's historical existence, that is, that God at a certain point in time existed as an individual human being." (Kierkegaard, 1846/2002, p. 65)

Here faith, what I shorthand as a primary conviction, is not the same as a belief: it’s more of a totalizing statement for all reality. Kierkegaard continues:

“The immediate identifying mark of every misunderstanding of Christianity is that faith is changed into a belief and drawn into the range of intellectuality—a matter of understanding, of knowledge. Infinite interestedness in the actuality and authority of the Teacher, absolute commitment, becoming Christian - that is the sole passion and object of faith.” (66)

The relationship between the believer and faith, for Kierkegaard, is far more significant than the relationship between the believer and other, secondary convictions. Faith is not just a thing you believe, it founds the very basis of reality and is enacted through your living. While you could, perhaps, be reasoned out of your secondary convictions, to attempt to reason someone
out of faith is to misunderstand how faith is established. Kierkegaard’s famous “leap of faith” belies reason, and serves as the foundation for living: something we cannot reason with.

Knowledge itself seems to operate differently with faith convictions. Bruno Latour (1947), in his work Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech, discusses the difference between religious utterances, proclamation, and the scientific certainty of other modes of rhetoric. “We might as well admit it straight away: there is no information in matters of religion, no maintenance of constants, no transfers of relationships intact throughout the stream of transformations. And so, sadly, no knowledge of the kind the humblest map provides, no science, no reference, no access, no mastery, no control, nothing we can dominate by sight.” (20) While the idea that there is no information in religion might not be shared by many religious believers, the essential claim here, that religious faith operates in a more urgent, more essential way than other forms of rhetoric demonstrates how the primary convictions of religious students are to be considered differently than we would consider more secondary conviction.

The Certainty of a Relationship

The image Latour uses perhaps most frequently in the book is the image of two lovers. One lover says to the other “do you love me” and the other lover must respond. For Latour, this is a test, and the way to pass is to profess “I love you” in a particular, specific way. This is not an informational question, after all, it would be ridiculous for the lover, when asked the question “Do you love me?” to respond “Why are you asking me this, I told you the answer last month, don’t you remember the answer?”

The lover, in this instance, is supposed to profess love, not confess it. This profession is itself a speech act, which we will discuss in the next section. That is to say, the very act of
saying “I love you” is a transformative one, one that changes the speaker and the one spoken to into a deeper, more intimate relationship, and therefore one that can remain the same. To assume that the rhetorical situation of the question “do you love me?” is informative instead of transformative is to make a significant, categorical error. Latour likens religious utterances, and religious commitments, to this kind of request. It is not the request of science, to define clear boundaries, but rather the request of a relationship, a request of love.

This essential quality to faith is reinforced by the Christian rhetoric referring to a “relationship” with Jesus. This phrase has had relative contemporary popularity in evangelical circles, but holds a strong historical reality within Christian thought. The kind of “knowledge” that you have in a relationship, the utterances and professions you make in coherence with this relationship, and the sense of conviction in that relationship are all different than other forms of knowledge.

Imagine how ludicrous it would be to attempt to convince someone that they did not have a relationship with their mother. Imagine how impossible it would be to attempt to disprove the existence of someone you have known for years. Imagine how profane it would feel to attempt to say that your mother exists by reason of the fact that we have seen her name published in a yearbook. The knowledge of your mother operates differently than other kinds of knowledge, and it does so irrespective of reason (which is not to say it is unreasonable) I do not know that my wife exists because reason has told me that she does. While reason certainly could be used to prove her existence in some capacity, it could never match the severity with which I know, and have faith in, my wife. Those who hold to a religious “primary conviction” are holding to something significant, something that extends beyond reason. As Kierkegaard says,
“A king’s existence is demonstrated by way of subjection and submissiveness. Do you want to try and demonstrate that the king exists? Will you do so by offering a string of proofs, a series of arguments? No. If you are serious, you will demonstrate the king’s existence by your submission, by the way you live. And so it is with demonstrating God’s existence. It is accomplished not by proofs but by worship. Any other way is but a thinker’s pious bungling.”

Again, this is not to say that there is no possible way to demonstrate logical, ethical, or evidential proofs for God’s existence (though Latour would say so, and Kierkegaard would describe such an event as a waste of time), rather this is to say that the logical, ethical, and evidential proofs will be communicating for and against a process that is irrelevant to the foundation of the primary conviction. To reference Kierkegaard again: “Philosophy cannot and should not give faith, but it should understand itself and know what it has to offer and take nothing away, and least of all should fool people out of something as if it were nothing.” (Kierkegaard, 1843/2020). Our reason-centered philosophy, what James would call Rationalism, and our evidence-centered skepticism, Empiricism, are both unequal to the task of responding to or meaningfully challenging faith.

**Religious Utterances as Speech Acts**

There is another, vital angle of theory that must be discussed when discussing primary conviction. Rhetoric accomplishes pragmatic tasks, yes, but one of those tasks is the enactment of conviction. As a result, what we ask students to write in our classrooms can very often be a matter of religious observance as well as the articulation of conviction. Speech, and writing, are not just the expression of conviction but also the enactment of conviction.
John Poulakos (1983) identifies many of the Sophists as focusing on circumstance and the desires of individual audiences. This focus makes rhetoric “the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible” (Poulakos 36). By presenting rhetoric in this fashion, Poulakos’ Sophists make rhetoric a process of opening an “other” world, a world of possibility that the self could enter, if the self accepts the call of the rhetor. Rhetoric is contextually bound and wrapped up in the presentation of a reality. Rhetoric is an act of formation. To speak is to change not just reality, but yourself.

This is similar to J.L. Austin’s (1955) concept of performatives, where speech is an act, and enacting a certain thing within boundaries. While Austin’s concept is not a perfect fit (these instances are not established/customary, nor are they shared communally, typically) the concept of speech that performs an action of transformation on the speaker and does not serve to persuade those around them, is relevant to this study. Of particular interest is Austin’s claims about transformation. He describes how a performative act, when undertaken by the right person and at the right time, transforms reality through that performance, like when an officiant “marries” two people, transforming their status from single to married.

I find this particular example interesting in part because, to at least a Christian, but in many other religious traditions as well, the priest’s language is not what marries the couple, rather the priest, or pastor, or officiant, is speaking a pronouncement (a performance) of the joining of the two people together in marriage in God. The performative here is in part the officiant, but far more the performance is coming from God. This distinction is helpful in that it elaborates how performance within religious faith is often the union between human and
divine will, the use of language to align the self to the will of God and the transformation of the self through that process.

While we may not accept the Sophistic view of rhetoric, and Austin’s view is certainly too limited to encompass religious rhetorical expression, I believe these approaches provide a good foundation to theorize religious rhetoric as a form of speech-act—rhetoric that does not reaffirm religious commitment, but rather enacts it, transforming the speaker closer to God.

Perhaps the most cogent communication of this rhetorical positioning can be found in Augustine of Hippo’s On Christian Doctrine (Augustine, 397). In book four, Augustine is attempting to solve both a rhetorical and a theological problem. Augustine admits that no one can be persuaded to true things without the intervention and action of the Holy Spirit (a conviction some of my participants share). Because of this, it seems contradictory to attempt to be persuasive: after all, if God’s going to determine how it ends up anyway, why bother to make it persuasive? Augustine replies to this challenge by saying that Christians are to be persuasive and rhetorically savvy, not to persuade their audience, but out of duty and love for their audience and God.

“as the medicines which men apply to the bodies of their fellow-men are of no avail except God gives them virtue (who can heal without their aid, though they cannot without His), and yet they are applied; and if it be done from a sense of duty, it is esteemed a work of mercy or benevolence; so the aids of teaching, applied through the instrumentality of man, are of advantage to the soul only when God works to make them of advantage, who could give the gospel to man even without the help or agency of men.” (Augustine 397, p. 86)
Religious speech and (according to Augustine) all speech by religious people can be seen as an act of holy duty toward God, rather than an act that primarily serves the rhetorical triangle. As a result, the communication of a faith conviction, of primary conviction, can be seen by students to be a religious necessity. And to ask a student to utter or write something they believe violates God is not a way to make them stretch, or grow, but serves to ask them to forsake their duty to true things. It goes against the leap of faith Kierkegaard considers essential to faith conviction.

If we are to understand the significance of our student's religious faith, we must examine the stakes of their utterances about religion: speech itself can be a religious performance.
Chapter 3: Methods, Methodology, and My Participants

Setting out to conduct research on religious students is full of particular difficulties that require rigorous and careful research methods. As a result, special attention must be paid to my methodology as well as my methods. I will begin by discussing my methodology then methods. After this I will elaborate on who my participants are. This section will end with an overview of what my participants told me in our interviews.

Methodology

Pavia (2015) examines how the field of Rhetoric and Composition has studied religious students and their writing. Her conclusion is that while there has been robust research done so far, research has been largely centered on the experience of the instructor and has been heavily influenced by the instructor’s position. Rather than examining how students themselves conceive of their religion, or consider religious tension in the classroom, most research focuses on how instructors feel and believe their classroom is operating. While a few have attempted to listen to students (I mention a few in the previous section) in general, the focus is on the instructor, not the student, in our research.

Further, Pavia points out that while many scholars disclose their standing and beliefs toward religion, scholarly methodological responses to these standings and beliefs need to meet more intense and robust standards to help further our knowledge of this field of rhetoric. It is not quite enough to simply disclose your position, your methods need to account for your position. Pavia is not saying that contemporary research is deficient, or follows unethical methodologies, but rather is showing the next methodological step for this sub-field. We must make our methods relevant to our subject.
Part of this awareness of methodology is a focus on how “researchers can avoid many
issues surrounding representation of participants’ beliefs by worrying more about how
participants themselves might respond to representations of their beliefs than about how an
academic audience might respond” (Pavia 2015). A robust and ethical researcher will focus first
on portraying the participants in a way that is resonant with how they would like to be
portrayed. The conviction of the student is, according to Pavia, to be viewed as if we were
playing Elbow’s Believing game, as true and to be represented as serious, and potentially
helpful. If my research participants cannot recognize themselves in how I describe them, they
are not actually being represented by what I am writing.

*Feminist Methodology*

As I will elaborate in my methods section, my qualitative research relies heavily on
feminist methodology, which offers considerable insight into how to navigate fraught power
relationships. As discussed earlier, there can be a difficult and complicated power-relationship
between religious students and instructors. An academic interviewing a religious student,
particularly one talking specifically about other instructors, is likely to seem to the student to be
a representative of the same top-down power-force of the instructors we are discussing.

Further, as discussed earlier there often is some measure of perceived conflict between
the student and instructor on religious issues. The stories of atheist professors and obstinate
religious students have created strong and unyielding perceptions of how religious difference
will operate in the classroom. Any researcher dealing with religion must be attentive to this
perceived conflict, perhaps even acknowledging that sometimes this perceived conflict can be
truly present in the classroom.
All of this is compounded by the reality that the very act of researching, of interviewing, is an act of interpretation. Feminist methodologies help researchers avoid what Donna Haraway terms “The God Trick,” where researchers use the interpretive and meaning-making power of research to make concrete, certain claims about reality, claims that run the risk of “romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful.” (Haraway 1988, p. 584).

While some scholars can look to research as a means of helping empower or liberate the less-powerful research subject, the very act of interpretation, of speaking for someone, is an act of power, an act of wresting control of a narrative away from the researched and giving it to the researcher. This kind of power-wrestling, coming from a dominant certainty in the researcher’s objectivity, has a long history of dangerous patriarchal abuses, and “allow[s] the production of patriarchal knowledge and work[s] against knowledge of the realities of gender relations.” (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 49). This domineering impact on gender relations is no different in other power dynamics, including the instructor to the student, and religious majority groups speaking to religious minority groups. As I produce narratives and knowledges about faith conviction, I need to be vigilant to ensure that the stories I am telling and the convictions I am detailing are being described in terms that my research participants would find valuable and true, not just ways that I, as someone who studies religious rhetoric, find interesting.

Linda Alcoff, in her work “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” explores this tension between the desire to use research to liberate, but the danger of essentializing or forcing narratives upon less-powered people. As she puts it:

“not only is location epistemically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking for or
on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 7).

While this risk is certainly present in performing research, to then say that the powered cannot speak for the unempowered seems similarly dangerous. As Alcoff says,

retreat from speaking-for will not result in an increase in receptive listening in all cases; it may result merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppie lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility for her society whatsoever. She may even feel justified in exploiting her privileged capacity for personal happiness at the expense of others on the grounds that she has no alternative. (Alcoff, 1991, p. 17)

We cannot rely on retreat or on reckless speaking-for-others in order to do justice in research. By looking with certainty and command over the research subject’s reality/narrative, the researcher is assuming power over the story of the research participant and is treating themselves as a “God” as Haraway (1988) describes it. If we are not careful to situate the research we produce and the thoughts we have within their particular contexts and reality creations (as Burke would put it, Terministic Screens) we tempt the God Trick, and will produce research that not only appropriates the vision of our research subjects into whatever our vision is, but also distorts the reality of the situation by denying those who read the text the situational and contextual reality of the researched moment. Haraway calls for us to abandon our attempts to get at a “full and total position”, which she sees as the “search for the fetishized perfect subject,” (586) and instead attempt to create Situated Knowledges, knowledges that are revealed in the context of their situation and speaker. By paying a keen attention to whom we are speaking, we can hope to provide a better understanding of the pragmatic truth of our research
subjects. As Devault and Gross (2012) argue, “Instead of telling what happened, researchers should examine the discourses at play and the subject ‘positions’ constructed by those discourses” (p. 212). Feminist research, then, is looking to the position of the research participant and how those positions impact their understanding and response to a phenomenon. This requires me to listen carefully to my students’ religious experience and to avoid editorializing their experiences or sorting them through my own experiences as an academic, as an instructor, and as a person who also holds deep faith convictions. I must listen carefully to my participants, but also give them agency and power over the story I am telling about them.

Being cautious of reckless empiricism is a practice that is not only established as a helpful way to avoid essentializing and misrepresenting our research participants, but is a productive way to go about discovering and understanding truth. By seeing individuals (and ourselves) as operating with these constructed screens, we can help prevent ourselves from engaging in “the God Trick” but also these tools can help provide a kind of empathetic relationship between the reader, the researcher, and the research subject. As Alcoff puts it, describing a form of situated knowledge,

“We are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tension in many strands of a web in which others find themselves moving also. When I speak for myself, I am constructing a possible self, a way to be in the world, and am offering that to others, whether I intend to or not, as one possible way to be. (Alcoff, 1991, p. 21)"

If we view our research as the presentation of a possible self, as the presentation of a way to be in the world, we can perhaps work to both avoid the God Trick and establish a form
of situated truth in our research. To understand how to establish this situated truth, we must understand the fraught relationship between religious students and their instructors.

*Power Dynamic of Religious Students and their Instructors*

Central to understanding the conflict between religious students and their instructors is understanding the difficult power relationship between the teacher and the student. Teachers have the ability to fail or pass students, but also assess student’s writing, a position that is inherently “judgmental.” If a student writes something that the instructor sees as untrue, often the instructor not only corrects the student, but is obligated to amend the misstep through a grade. Much of education seems to enact this power relationship. This relationship is one where the instructor has a great deal of power over both the actions and expressed convictions of the student. While there have been substantial attempts to distribute this power to students, it is still a reality that teachers have power over their students. However, this power relationship can make things difficult when it comes to religious students in the classroom.

This is why feminist methodology is so important for this research. As Pavia (2017) stresses, it is feminist methodology that can allow a researcher to approach religion, a notoriously difficult and misunderstood topic, with appropriate care for the situational knowledge that this kind of research can create. This approach to research, and to the interview as a research tool, is discussed by Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher in “Exceeding the Bounds of the Interview,” where they argue for a dialogic and multi-vocal approach to writing up interviews, saying that “these untidy, discursive, and dialogic exchanges highlight individual conversations and make us increasingly aware of the collaborative role that we play with participants in making meaning of their narratives” (Selfe and Hawisher 2012, 42). This
collaborative, multi-vocal approach to research applied to religious rhetoric research would prioritize the perspectives and cultures of the students being studied, looking at them not as problems for a teacher to overcome through wit and guile, but rather members of a culture with a complex rhetorical history that are adapting that language to the new language of the university.

**Techniques for Conducting Feminist Research**

Feminist researchers can employ various methods of research, but the methodological concerns of listening, understanding knowledge positionally, and disclosure will necessarily impact methods. In order to produce a feminist research of religious students' writing practices, I employ a qualitative, listening-focused research study, paying attention to feminist methodology to examine the power relationships between me, my research participants, and their instructors.

As Alcoff (1991) points out, speaking for others is a difficult thing, but is more easily mitigated the closer the interviewer is to the others they are speaking for. The closer a researcher gets to self-advocacy, the less danger there is of the researcher imposing concepts on their subjects. However, this does not mean that there are no risks involved for someone who is close to the position of their participants. Thwaites (2017) discusses how interview “matching” has advantages to the interview process but also holds certain risks. Thwaites’ argument centers on the idea that rapport, an essential part of good feminist research, requires some level of deception or obscuring of the researcher’s convictions. If I, as a researcher, am researching someone with substantive differences than me, it is very likely that there will be a point where the conviction of my research participant contradicts my conviction in a significant way that forces me, as a researcher,
to underemphasize (or directly obscure) my own convictions to keep up rapport. We should be honest about the fact that our rapport is built in some way on us obscuring what we believe, but each element of dishonesty will lead us to a less genuine and more deceptive state of research. We’re on the knife’s edge of either abandoning rapport and gaining honesty, or abandoning honesty and gaining rapport. The closer I can get to my research subjects, the less I have to abandon this. Because I am concerned about how religion is often excluded or misunderstood in the classroom, because I am a religious person who has seen his religion excluded in academic spaces, I can access this rapport in a unique way, in a more honest way, than if I did not hold those concerns, convictions, and experiences.

However, there is another danger in relying too heavily on this similarity. While it’s true that similarity between researcher and research participant is helpful, if I relate to my research participant based on my religion, I risk how “feminist research can actually essentialize based on particular identity characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, or class” (Thwaites 2017, p. 9). My research participants are more than just “religious”, and should be taken as complicated, intersectional individuals. Additionally, as Thwaites (2017) argues, “[w]ithout a level of dis-ease created by lack of matching a participant may not give a full account of their understanding of the world based on the assumption that explanations and definitions are not required because the interviewer already understands and experiences the world in the same way as they themselves do” (p. 8). It is for these reasons that, as a researcher, I cannot lean on my “matching” with my student’s religious positioning, but instead should use that matching to help me understand the aspects of my student’s religious utterances and position that are different than mine.
Methods

In order to best understand and listen to my research participants, I decided to employ feminist research methods in my study. This process, as mentioned above, required in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students, as well as disclosure, attentive listening, and multiple opportunities for the student to review and potentially amend the transcripts of what was said.

For this study, I conducted four qualitative interviews with four students at the University of Memphis. To select participants, I contacted the heads of several religious and multicultural organizations associated with the university, asking them to send an opening survey to their members, asking the members to fill out a series of questions to help select research participants. (Appendix I). I chose to approach religious and multicultural organizations on campus in order to best select for students who considered themselves religious in a semi-public way. While membership in these organizations does not always require a statement of faith, there is a public element to these organizations that I considered relevant enough to help direct my research participant selection. Not all relevant religious traditions had a representative religious groups on campus, so I decided to include a variety of cultural organizations in an attempt to find a more diverse group of religious students.

After compiling my list of relevant organizations, I sent an opening survey to these organizations, asking that they disseminate them to their students. I chose to ask the leaders of these organizations to help me send out the survey. This not only was efficient for the process of sending out surveys but helped establish an trust with the institutions and students by first strengthening my relationship with the organizations. I was able to correspond with a few of the
leaders of these institutions so that they better understood what I was researching before sending out my survey, establishing some sense of trust and legitimacy with the religious groups.

All survey data was collected through Qualtrics. I contacted 15 student organizations and received very few responses initially. Whether my message was lost to spam folders or ignored in the typical flood of requests placed on these organizations I am not sure, however, whenever possible I attempted to contact specific leaders within the organizations, which yielded stronger results. I ended up receiving around 10 responses from students. After reading and completing the survey, around 6 indicated they would be interested in meeting with me for a qualitative interview. 4 were selected from these 6 by prioritizing a diversity of faiths, those who expressed specific interest in faith and writing, and finally those who expressed feeling a tension between their faith convictions and the university, or who have felt the need to keep those convictions hidden.

I met with these four students in a comfortable, public location (a local coffee shop for all but one of the interviews) and met with them outdoors, out of a concern for the then ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

We then engaged in a semistructured interview following a loose set of questions (Appendix 1) surrounding the topic of faith conviction, classroom religious expression, and the ways that writing impacts faith conviction. These conversations were held over the course of an hour or so, and in all of them I attempted to allow the subject to create and form the knowledge of the interview as much as I did, asking them open-ended questions that let them define and create the terms of the conversation within their own conviction. I disclosed my own conviction to all of them at some point and to some degree within the conversation, and even provided
short anecdotes and experiences of my own at a few, critical points. I attempted to signal that I was speaking to them as a fellow religious individual, not exclusively as an instructor and researcher. These feminist methodological research techniques of disclosure, listening, and allowing the participants space to guide the conversation helped prompt more honest and direct conversations with the students.

I recorded these interviews with an audio recorder. Later I transcribed and de-identified them, and sent them to each subject to make sure they felt represented by what I transcribed, giving them the opportunity to add or remove anything they wanted.

I then coded the data for emergent themes, looking at what tended to come up in the data, as well as what particular uses of language were repeated among subjects. After coding this data, I analyzed it using the theoretical frameworks above.

Before I begin discussing this data and talking about my research subjects and conversations, however, I want to be extremely clear: all this research can tell us is related to faith conviction in writing in the university classroom. It is tempting, because there is a diversity of faiths represented in this data, to draw conclusions about how different religions treat faith conviction. While there are very likely differences in how these religions treat these subjects, those differences are not what I set out to measure, and therefore any conclusions we could glean from this dataset would be misleading.

A Short Description of my Participants

Before discussing the results of this study, let me introduce you to my participants:

Jake:
Jake is a senior at the university majoring in a business program. He is a Christian Baptist. He is a member of a local church. He converted to Christianity his junior year of High School. His church is involved with a large Baptist denominational convention that is known for its global presence, extensive missionary efforts, and theological conservatism. He is a white man.

Ali:

Ali is a freshman at the university majoring in a business program. She is a Christian Baptist, and a member of a Baptist student association at the university. She is new to the faith, having converted her senior year. Her church is involved with a large Baptist denominational convention that is known for its global presence, extensive missionary efforts, and theological conservatism. She is an Asian American woman.

Ahman:

Ahman is a doctoral student in a STEM field. He is a Shia Muslim, a branch of Islam mainly centered in Iran, his home country. He grew up in a Muslim family in Iran and participates in the university Muslim student organization. He is an Iranian man.

Maria:

Maria is a senior double majoring in two humanities fields. She is a self-described “cradle Catholic,” which is to say that she was raised in the Catholic church, but also professes that faith as true and relevant to her life and convictions. Her K-12 education was in a Catholic school. She is a white woman.
Summary and Overview of my Interviews and Encounters with my Participants

Meeting my students at the local coffee shop proved to be productive, though not in the way I initially intended. While I intended the coffee shop to be a neutral space, away from the academic world, I had forgotten that coffee shops (particularly in high-churched areas like Memphis) are often filled with Bible studies. Unwittingly, I chose a site that was already rich with religious discourse. At one point, I had difficulty finding one of my participants (Jake) because he was enmeshed in a rigorous conversation with a Bible study next to where he was waiting for me. It wasn’t until I emailed him to tell him where I was that we found each other, as I assumed he was simply part of that study. Ahman, however, chose to not meet in the coffee shop, but rather at a table in the student union. This space was decidedly more academic, but it reflected Ahman’s relatively academic approach to discussing his faith.

As a researcher, I found significantly less resistance to the topic than I initially assumed I would face. While the safeguards I placed to ensure that participants were comfortable were necessary, from my perspective the participants seemed not just open, but eager to discuss this topic. Many of them quickly and robustly answered my questions before I asked them, and all of my participants were very familiar with my series of questions. I had no doubt whatsoever that what I was listening to and writing down ideas that came from serious, considered reflection.

All three of the Christian participants gave what many Christians (including two of my participants) call their “testimony.” A testimony is a common phrase in Christianity to refer to the story of one’s conversion to Christianity, and how their life as a Christian has played out over time. This story is told often, and is a part of the way in which their Christian faith is publicly articulated.
I will now give a brief overview of my encounters with these participants, touching on a variety of themes that I will discuss in depth in later sections.

*Jake:*

The first student I met, Jake, is a white Christian who attends a low-church Protestant, Evangelical church. As soon as I started asking questions about his faith and academics, he interrupted the questions and asked if he could share his testimony with me. His testimony emphasized a strong faith that only developed after his conversion late in High School. Jake named his faith in the following way:

“I prayed in my room for God to save me and that I needed a savior, and like, ever since then, like, my life has been changed.”

While he considered himself to be a part of a culture adjacent to Christianity growing up, he didn’t consider his faith to be real until that conversion moment. I noticed that the testimony was a genre that rapidly answered many of my questions about faith. The story of how Jake came to faith and how that changes his life was closely linked to how that faith is expressed in writing.

Jake feels a strong desire to evangelize to others, and engages in leadership positions at his local church group and the student religious organization he is a part of. This evangelism isn’t only an act of persuasion, but is present in every sentence he utters. His conversation was laced with specific references to the Bible. Often he would cite the chapter/verse, but other times he would recite several verses, weaving his conversation with his memorized portions of text.

His faith is so omnipresent in his speech, it is no wonder he feels a strong burden to tell others about his faith. He referred to frequently seeking after other students who shared his faith,
finding comfort in their presence in the classroom. However he also saw every student as on the road to potential conversion. He has “shared the Gospel with the majority of my classmates... the ones that I know” and sees those moments of evangelism as an opportunity provided by God for him to make use of his educational situation. This evangelism is not exclusively viewed by Jake as an act of rhetorical, immediate persuasion. To Jake, the act of Evangelism is supplemented by others seeing how important his faith is to his life. He wants others to “see that I want to put that first.” As a result, every moment that he can enact his faith or demonstrate it as significant is a moment that could help him achieve his goal of evangelism.

Evangelism (the conversion of others) and discipleship (the development of the faith of those who believe) were foremost in his aspirations not just for his faith or his academic career, but for his life. This omnipresence extended to his position toward his education. As he put it:

And of course like, everything we do needs to be for God's glory, so like when I write other stuff, like, I need to constantly remind myself because we are, our best is dirty rags, filthy rags, I constantly remind myself this needs to be for God's glory, not for anyone else's approval, it needs to be done well in order for him to get the glory. Basically doing my best. In writing, period, like, for example, for the research paper we had in 1020, in 1020, like, I would plan ahead of time “alright I'm gonna write this many pages this day and this section that day” and what not, plan it out, it's easier for us, but also like, I always want to do my work in a way that glorifies God.

This demonstrates a particularly significant theme in Jake’s interview with me. He here borrows language from Isaiah 64:6 “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” This reference is typically used to refer to the necessity of faith (your own
“righteous deeds” cannot alone warrant salvation) but here Jake uses it to recontextualize his work within the context of his faith. His work is not seen as significant or valuable in any way, apart from how it is done “for God’s Glory.” The work itself is only considered important if it can be offered in a way that is oriented toward God.

It's sort of what Matthew 6:33 says, seek first the kingdom of heaven and His righteousness and these things will be added to you as well. It's that concept of like, we need to be putting him first in everything, and as hard as that can be, you know, because I will admit that there have been times where I put schoolwork, or work, over Him, and time in His word, to be transparent here.

To Jake, there is no purpose to his education if it is not working to further his faith. He must “seek first the kingdom of Heaven.”

Ali

Ali is an Asian-American Christian, who attends a low-church Protestant Evangelical church. She belongs to a student Baptist organization, and attends a variety of Christianity-related events in the area. Ali named her faith in the following way:

“I'm a Christian, so I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sin, and then he rose again from the dead, and then he erased all the sin in my life. And anybody else's who believes in him.”

Ali opened up our conversation by giving me her testimony, telling me about her upbringing, and how she came to convert to Christianity. She was converted in late High School, “but I lived sort of like a Christian up until then, and I portrayed that towards the people around
me in High School.” She said that, because of her largely Christian upbringing and culture, her conversion did not create a dramatic outward change, “but inward, there was a lot of change in my heart and my motive for things and why I did things.”

At the time I interviewed her, Ali was relatively new to her faith, having converted only a couple of years before the interview. She described this position as a relatively precarious one, as she saw herself as still in a position of learning about her faith, a faith commitment that she held to strongly. This is of particular note to this study because Ali did not describe her lack of knowledge about her faith as lessening her commitment to her faith, rather she spoke as if her commitment to Christianity has already happened fully, and her process of learning is simply learning more about what she has already committed to.

Ali placed particular emphasis on her apprehension toward cultural forces that she believed could harm her “walk with the Lord.” She expressed concern about social media, the teaching of evolution, abortion, and liberal/secular mindsets in the classroom. While she was careful to disentangle these issues from directly representing her faith (she clarified that her positions on these issues, while informed by her faith, are not exclusive to her faith) she still saw these cultural forces as representing a broad coalition of ideas poised against her faith position, and she saw her professors as often holding to these positions. This orientation caused her to be cautious about faith expression in the classroom, mentioning how she worries about receiving a poor grade in classes where she might express her faith.

I do not want to give the impression that Ali was unreasonably suspicious of her instructors. She spoke with admiration of some instructors who radically disagreed with her. Her concern toward them was couched in a great deal of respect, but stemmed from a fear of being
persuaded away from her faith, receiving lower grades, and being mocked within the classroom. This fear was expressed by her to be primarily about her faith, though she also felt more comfortable in racially and gender diverse spaces, as spaces dominated by “white boys” seemed to her to be less comfortable or welcoming of her convictions.

Perhaps because of her relative newness to her faith, Ali seemed less immediately concerned with evangelism (though she did mention it as important) and more concerned with her own faith’s health (and survival) in response to the sometimes hostile environment of the college campus.

Ahman:

Ahman is a Shia Muslim from Iran. His position as a Shia Muslim places him as a minority among Muslims, most of whom are Sunni. Additionally, Ahman’s position as a graduate student from Iran at a university in Tennessee places him at a variety of racial, social, ethnic and cultural minority positions. Ahman named his faith in the following way:

“Most of our population are Muslim, and the branch of Muslim, we call it Shia, so it's a bit strict, somehow, strict religious that have some rules and some beliefs. This is all most my religious background. . . I believe that there is something further than the power of nature. Someone more vigorous than all of the powers in the world. And manning the world. There is someone that manages the world.”

Ahman presents his religion within the context of his home-country. Ahman’s religion is also often seen by others as a part of his ethnic, national, and social identities. He sees disentangling these things as an important task, as well as disentangling his own religious position from other proponents of Islam with whom he has ethical and moral differences.
“I know some parts of our religion is wrong. Some parts and some sections and some roads of our religion is wrong. And I don't like it, and I can't accept that road. So you know, when some student asks me why, for example, if one of the students asked me a religious question that I can't answer . . . And if you ask me a question about Islam or Muslim people that I don't know the answer, in my opinion, I think, I'm not the good person to answer the question, you know? I just have my belief for myself, not to convince people that “oh, this religion is good, our religion is good” or something like that. I don't want to be that kind of person that is encouraging people to go to that religion or to come to our religion.”

His religious position as a Muslim is so wrapped up in his cultural and national identity as an Iranian, that, as he expressed, he often has difficulty explaining to those around him how these things are different. He described several attempts to help others around him hold this difference, to mixed effect.

Ahman frequently deferred to other religious authorities when it came to making direct claims about his religion, clarifying that he is no religious expert. Rather, Ahman focused his answers on how he navigates his faith alongside his academic pursuits. He frequently mentioned direct collisions between his scientific belief and his religion, a tension that he navigates by relying on scientific knowledge first, and allowing faith conviction to dwell more in the realm of the unknown. He expressed that because of this tension, he found the work of this study of particular interest to him. He sees the navigation of religious and scientific belief as a crucial area for study, and expressed some urgency at the need to reconcile these things together in a consistent way.
Maria:

Maria also began the interview with a testimony (though she did not use that word). She named her faith in the following way:

“I am a cradle Catholic, Roman catholic, born and raised here in Memphis, . . . . went to Mass every Sunday, was part of the choir, I was pretty involved. But I think it wasn't until my senior year of High school where I was like “no, I actually want to pursue this,” wanting to kind of make it my own and go deeper. It's been a really beautiful story, just having this desire to be loved very deeply and then, looking for that in the world and not finding it, and the Lord really pursuing me and being like “No, I actually, this is how you are going to be satisfied in this world” and so it's a really beautiful story.”

She was quick to establish that her faith in God is the underlying reason for her existence, calling it “the fabric of why I am even here.” She described how when she began college she saw her faith as important, but largely separate from her education, describing herself as “still learning about my faith and learning how to live that in daily life.” As she grew in her studies and faith, she grew more eager to close that perceived separation. At the time of our interview, she was in the process of becoming a missionary for a Catholic organization that specifically ministers to college students.

She frequently used the phrase “life-giving” to refer to her education and her Catholic faith. She expressed an eager interest in her education, but frequently described the most life-giving moments of her education to be when it intersected with her faith. She described this as “implement[ing] a couple more spiritual realities instead of just the historical realities,” a union that she described as both “bold” and life giving. Her education was, to her, a real
exploration into significant issues that related both to her faith and her world, and she saw her faith as a way to make that exploration more real and alive.

Because she studied History and French, her coursework intersects frequently with Catholicism, producing what she calls a pattern of disrespect for her faith. During the interview she regularly referenced Christian leaders, artists, and historical figures, lacing her anecdotes with religious figures she looked up to. She, like Jake, frequently referenced texts from the Bible as well as other Christian writers. Despite this personal integration of her faith and her academic study, she mentioned that Catholicism has been intentionally avoided by her instructors in her classrooms, despite its obvious relevance to course material, and she believes that when it is mentioned, it often comes with disrespectful language and misconceptions.

She mentioned how her Catholicism can cause her to have reverence for people and stories discussed in class:

“we looked at some paintings from some French artists, and it was the scene of Christ being taken down from the cross. It's really heavy material. And some of them were poking fun at it, so it was like, it hurts my heart a little bit. We should be getting into that mindset. That meaning is for the sake of prayer and contemplation about the death of Christ, and so seeing people misuse those kinds of images or those meaningful things has been [difficult]”

While she does not expect her classmates to share her faith, she finds the disrespect applied toward her faith to “hurt [her] heart.”

She mentioned several times how she wished her classrooms and instructors allowed her to express her faith more freely. She described herself as being very judicious with when and to
whom she told that she was Catholic. She said that her classmates and instructors expressed hostile enough beliefs about her faith to make her hesitant to openly identify herself with her Catholicism, though she wished that that were not the case. She mentioned how many things she studied, when examined under the framework of her faith, would be “life giving,” but she found more value in her own private contemplations of the material than what she felt able to express in her coursework, which often barred discussion of faith conviction. At times during the interview, Maria would speak about what she wished she could have been allowed to do in her classes, looking at her impressive cultural and historical knowledge as unable to be fully expressed or found in completion in a classroom that she perceived as being hostile or unfriendly to her religious, Catholic conviction.

These participants all spoke to me bravely and with enthusiasm. As mentioned earlier, I was surprised at how little I had to prompt these conversations. Doubtless some of the ease of these conversations came from my selection process: members of local religious groups will probably be more eager to share their conviction than those less publicly affiliated with their religious group. Though perhaps this success can also be attributed to the Feminist research methods mentioned earlier. Regardless of the origin of the enthusiasm of my participants, the results helped me to establish some clear themes related to faith conviction and student writing.
Chapter 4: Analyzing Participant Responses

These four interviews all touched on a variety of consistent themes. All of my participants mentioned experiencing some kind of conflict or tension between their faith and the academic classroom, instructors, and students. All of them seemed to see this tension as resulting in negative consequences in the classroom, whether potential or realized. However, they seemed to believe their faith conviction to be worth this risk, some even seeing the risk as a necessary part of their faith conviction. Finally, they all seemed to see significant value in the moments when they believed they could write through their faith convictions within the classroom environment. I will examine these themes in the next few sections, looking at how examining them may help us become better instructors. Each section will be organized around a particular theme, drawing connections between this theme and the theoretical claims I have put forward in chapter 2.

faith conviction is Separate from Cultural Identity

All four participants drew a sharp distinction between their faith conviction and their religious cultural identity. Religion is complex, and covers a lot of personal ground, but conviction: what you believe and what governs your life, is a radically different thing for my participants than identity: something you can’t really change when it comes to religion. While one participant saw themselves mainly as a culturally religious person, the other three seemed to identify as religious from a conviction sense first, viewing religion-as-identity-only with suspicion at times and sometimes outright hostility.

This distinction seems to rest almost entirely along the line of conviction: what convictions they stridently hold, and which they do not. Three participants saw their conviction
as more central to their understanding of their faith than their cultural connection. Of the three who saw their conviction as centrally significant, they saw this conviction as coming upon them later in life and described this conviction as distinct from their cultural identity. Ali described this as the difference between “living like a Christian” and “[becoming] a Christian.” She sees this shift as not just the maturation of her faith but as the beginning of her faith. As she puts it:

“I became a Christian toward the end of High School, and I just, I'm a Christian, so I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sin, and then he rose again from the dead, and then he erased all the sin in my life. And anybody else’s who believes in him. So that changed the way I lived, a little bit, not like a dramatic change, in what was outwardly seen in me, but inward, there was a lot of change in my heart and like, my motive for things and why I did things. So that's pretty much how I became a Christian,”

While she was immersed in a Christian culture, it isn’t the cultural identity that defines her Christianity, but rather her conviction. She considers there to be an ontological difference in her self before and after conversion, a difference that only exists as a result of conviction. She would not describe cultural difference as causing this significant of an ontological shift. A Christian culture is not the same as a conviction.

Similarly, Jake described this difference. He terms cultural-identity-Christianity as “claiming to know the Lord” or being “in the church” as contrasted with the conviction of a “personal relationship with Him.” For Jake, the difference between cultural identity and conviction is as different as claiming to know someone and actually knowing them. He describes attending a youth worship service and coming to the realization that he never believed
his faith until then. The transformation from someone within a Christian culture to someone within a Christian conviction is, to him, the ontological transformation of conversion. The heart of his faith is his relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship shaped by conviction, not cultural identity. Here, the relationship between the Christian and Christ is the proof or demonstration of the faith. This is a willful commitment to the conviction of the faith, rather than identifying within the culture of the faith.

While Maria doesn’t explicitly describe her faith as beginning later with her conviction, she describes the process of taking ownership of her conviction as her wanting “to pursue this” and “make it my own and go deeper.” In fact, despite being a “cradle Catholic” and having a childhood immersed in Catholicism, Maria still sees her senior year of High School as an important year for her faith, as it was when she decided to fully embrace and pursue her faith conviction.

Some of the differences in expression here between Ali/Jake and Maria probably relate to the different soteriological convictions of Baptists and Catholics. A Baptist (along with many low-church Protestants) tends to emphasize later points of conversion (and creedal baptism) as important to understanding salvation and conviction, where a Catholic tends to emphasize the slow process of coming into a greater knowledge of the faith they entered into as a child at baptism. This soteriological difference should not obscure the very real distinction all three clearly hold between conviction and cultural identity. All three seem to see conviction as the true, full expression of faith, and cultural identity as the trappings of faith. Jake even presents the cultural identity as sometimes dangerous, describing it as possibly lulling someone into a false sense of faith that exists without conviction.
Ahman holds to his convictions, but the cultural and social identity he holds seems to be far more significant to his understanding of his faith as a Muslim. The distinction between his Muslim identity and his Muslim convictions is important to him, As he puts it,

“I have some religion, but for myself, not for convincing people. . . I don't want to act and be known as this kind of person that is convincing people to join that religion. I prefer not to talk with my friend about religion, but we talk. We usually talk about our country, their country, because we have different students from different countries for example, India, and they have their religion and we have our religion, but, usually I won't talk much about our religion because I predict that things will be ‘oh Ahman is a religious person and will prefer to convince me his religion is better than us’ you know?

To Ahman, his faith conviction is more about his country, his identity, and his position as an Iranian. This is a vastly different view of his religious position than the other three participants, but he still often draws a clear distinction between faith conviction and cultural religious identity. While he would see cultural religious identity as perhaps more descriptive of his relationship with Islam, he still sees the distinction as significant.

If these four students all see their faith conviction as distinct from their cultural religious identity, I believe this alone warrants this study. Religious students, at least these religious students, draw sharp distinctions between their conviction and identity that we, as researchers, don’t often draw. This leads me to the first claim I believe we can draw from this research:

*Religious student conviction must be treated differently than religious student identity.*

This claim is especially relevant for the three participants for whom the conviction, not the identity, seemed to define their faith. The previously mentioned frameworks for cultural
identity will not work the same when dealing with faith conviction, and faith conviction is central to religious student understanding of faith.

**Exclusion and a Fear of Retaliation**

Ali, while taking a test, substituted the word “evolved” for “created” when describing an aspect of human nature, despite the definition the instructor was looking for *clearly* demanding the word “evolved.” When she told me this anecdote, she stated that “creationism isn't just like inherently Christianity, so I don't think he's going to count off for that or anything.” This communicates, significantly, that Ali does believe there would be some sort of retaliation from her professor at the inclusion of religious frameworks into written answers on tests. She considers herself safe from critique because she believes that her answer was not uniquely Christian. Jake mentions that he knows of professors who attempt to persuade students away from their faith and penalize the expression of conviction in some capacity in the classroom. This exclusion ranges from outright penalty to what he himself has experienced, professors avoiding the topic altogether. Maria mentions feeling the need to not “out” herself as a Catholic to other students in some classes based on how conversations in class have seemed to exclude or deride Catholics. She mentions, of particular interest, a history class focusing on early Medieval Europe in which religion is explicitly declared to be out of bounds of conversation in the class.

The fear of retaliation from instructors is not enough to say that retaliation would happen. None of these concerns particularly demonstrate a kind of direct or active persecution of religious students, but rather demonstrate a general culture of religious avoidance, both on the part of instructors and my research participants. While teachers seem to avoid faith convictions for the sake of avoiding controversy or avoiding concepts that make teaching concepts more
difficult, the participants seem to also have a concern about “outing” themselves of their faith to their classmates and teachers through their rhetorical performance in class.

This may seem like a workable arrangement. We could keep faith convictions entirely out of the secular classroom, and not risk offense or any of the other issues this thorny subject could bring. However, my participants consider this arrangement frustrating and difficult. Every participant said that they wanted to be able to express their faith in a clear way within their academic world, but felt stifled, as if they could not.

It is important to recognize that these participants see their faith convictions and the academic classroom as often existing at odds with each other. They are also afraid of retaliation. Regardless of how difficult or annoying the conflict narratives can be, this warrants significant attention from instructors.

But to understand this concept, we must also understand why a student would feel compelled to speak about their faith convictions in the classroom. My participants mentioned feeling a religious duty to speak. This is not simply a matter of a need to express religion, but is connected intimately to religious observance. There are religious demands, which will be explored by my participants, that can be placed on utterances. The act of speaking itself has religious implications, and there are times that the religiously convicted can be bound by their faith to speak. This leads into another theme mentioned by my participants: the religious duty to speak, or the significance of divine prompting of speech.

**Divine Prompting**

The urgings of the divine are part of many religious student’s understanding of what they are obligated to say/not say within the classroom. Maria, in discussing this concept,
describes her attentiveness to the Holy Spirit as a skill that helps her understand how to engage and when to engage about her faith:

“"I don't know when to not speak and when to speak. There have been a couple moments where I really want to, but something, usually either when I was a freshman it was probably shyness, and then, moving on, moving further from that, being a little more in tuned with the Holy Spirit. ‘OK Lord, are you calling me to say something now?’ Because if you are, I will say it. But if it's just me who wants to say something, I shouldn't say it.’""

While she saw her shyness as originally motivating her inability to speak about her faith in the classroom, with time, she developed an attentiveness to the voice of God through the Holy Spirit that has helped her exercise prudence. However, there is another side to this duty, in that were she to discern that the Holy Spirit was calling her to speak, she would be obligated then to speak in support of her faith.

This is similar to what Jake articulates on this issue. He decides to speak to his professors about his faith because “I felt the Lord leading me to talk to” them. This is a phenomenon he wants to continue to experience, describing it as being “spirit led.” Later, when describing a particularly impactful moment of religious writing in class, Jake described himself moved to tears “because I don't have to try and please people. Our goal is to please Christ. Paul talks about that in Galatians.” This reference is to Galatians 1:10, which says “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:10, ESV). Jake’s writing is, to him, first accountable to God and subject to divine prompting. Were he asked to write something that ran
contrary to this accountability, he would be faith-bound to please God, not the human instructor. This, of course, makes sense not just with the significance of his conviction, but also the nature of his conviction. When describing his faith, Jake uses the language of a relationship: “I claimed to know the Lord, I said I believed in God, but I did not have a personal relationship with him.” Furthering this relationship, holding onto this relationship, and living through this relationship is the sole reason Jake gives for his existence, including going to college. As he put it, “our relationship with God needs to be a priority over everything, so while I am here to get a degree, that is not my ultimate goal here.” Therefore there can be no doubt that Divine Prompting will, for Jake, be prioritized over anything, including his academic standing.

The implication here is that when a religious student decides to take the rhetorical action to begin articulating their faith within the classroom, whether that is through writing or oral communication, that action is very often connected to an act of spiritual obedience and spiritual expression. This is not simply a matter of communicating a conviction, as I would communicate a political position I hold, but rather is a matter of obedience to God, the highest Good. This also applies to things students are compelled to say. To speak an utterance, or to write a sentence, that runs contrary to their faith conviction is not just to entertain an alternate idea, it is to betray the voice of God, to strike out against Goodness itself. We cannot easily rely on the “truce of silence” we saw articulated earlier. There are times when faith conviction will produce and restrict what utterances students perform in the classroom. This does not mean these utterances are immune to rhetorical choices—both Maria and Jake mentioned tact as being a part of their desire to listen to Divine prompting. They still have an obligation to be a savvy and careful rhetor, but whether or not they say what is being prompted becomes a matter of obedience, and thus a matter of faith.
The severity of this situation is not restricted to what the student says or doesn’t say, but also extends to how faith convictions are discussed in the classroom by other students.

Collision between Rhetorical Expression and faith conviction

My participants described how they often experienced dissonance and collision between rhetorical expression and their faith conviction. While the significance of these events varied, all of them recalled moments in their classroom or academic experience where they either experienced or anticipated experiencing this conflict. They often saw this conflict not as one where the instructor was explicitly expecting them to articulate blasphemy, or argue against their faith, but rather they often found moments where they believed that their conviction would demand them to behave in unexpected or perhaps accidentally disruptive ways. I've included a few direct examples:

Ali: “one of my exam questions, was two days ago, it was talked about socialism and something about our emotions, and mass murder, so I talked about, like, I just mentioned one word, I changed, from his definition, and said instead of “evolved” I said “created” and I wasn't uncomfortable saying that.”

Maria: It has definitely been a learning experience. I don't know when to not speak and when to speak. There have been a couple moments where I really want to, but something, usually either when I was a freshman it was probably shyness, and then, moving on, moving further from that, being a little more in tuned with the Holy Spirit. “OK Lord, are you calling me to say something now?” Because if you are, I will say it. But if it's just me who wants to say something, I shouldn't say it. When it pertains to Truth, I do have an obligation to speak the truth.
Jake: I've thought about that before though, like, what would I do in that instance? If someone told me to write something, I'm going to, as hard as it would be, I have to say no, for my faith. Because if God is for us, who can be against us? You know, that mindset.

Ahman: I have never liked to explain my belief. I never am interested in that. But, and for writing or articles or something, no, I don't think so. I won't do that, anyway. Because, you know, I said that the first reason is, I don't want to be judged by my religious background and the second one is I'm not an expert.

All four of these testimonies demonstrate a collision between faith conviction and rhetorical expression. This collision, predictably, produces a crisis of conviction that is sometimes resolved through rhetoric (like Ali’s language shift from evolution to creation) and other times it is ignored, through silence. However, the presence of the conflict was acknowledged by all four of my participants. Some of them saw this conflict as extending beyond just their own internal conflict, but into a fear of retaliation or exclusion from their instructors or classmates.

These circumstances will, as a result, reveal how my participants consider their faith, whether it is what we previously termed a primary or secondary conviction.

For the Secondary conviction, there is no need to attempt to find a reconciliation between the faith conviction and the contradictory piece of information, as one subordinates to the other. Ahman described this process by telling me about a time his relative declared that God would regenerate energy inside of the earth, striking back against entropy through divine action, a position Ahman rejects, not from a theological difference, but because of an epistemological hierarchical heuristic.
“It's completely a religious perspective, but science told us something happened within the core of the earth that created the energy. It's scientific, and it's proven, and I definitely prefer the proven concept. And now I understand “oh yeah, something happened within the earth that created the energy for us” but, when I was talking to my family, and he said that concept, on that time, I shifted. “Maybe, maybe it's right” but now I understand “No, it is not right.” God is beyond all of us. God, you know, God doesn't do this for people, he doesn’t, for example, create energy for us.”

The faith conviction of Ahman pragmatically exists as a way to explain and make sense of the aspects of the world that are not made sense of by his scientific understanding. His identity as a religious person (the cultural identity mattering more than the faith conviction) allows him to sort and understand aspects of reality, but any conflict is resolved through the swift retreat of conviction and the dominance of the other knowledge.

While the secondary conviction does not attempt to reconcile religious and non-religious truth, but rather cedes to the non-religious, the primary conviction of religion does not necessarily require that other truth claims immediately lose out to faith conviction. It is only through the tension felt between truth claims that we can see conviction actually questioned. Maria described how, despite seeing several inaccurate and unfair portrayals of Catholics in her classes, at times, having material in class that speaks unfavorably of the Catholic Church has helped her better understand some of the problems through Catholic history.

“There are some accusations people will give to the Church and they are actually true. They are not the best. The Church has never ever been perfect, and pointing out those imperfections, and still asking questions “is this true” but also accepting the fact that it
could be. And also keeping an open mind while hearing those things, but on the other side, being critical. Which has been a good lesson to learn “ok yeah, I should really be asking questions and not believing everything everyone says.”

Here, Maria calls into doubt aspects of the Catholic Church’s history. Her interaction with material in class helps her better understand the history of her Church. However, her primary conviction, while perhaps “challenged” by this, is not thwarted, but rather adapts to better include reality. She will admit, with certainty, that the Catholic Church is not perfect, and the imperfection of the Catholic Church in some instances in history, as a result, further affirms her theological conviction about the frailty of human actors and the necessity of God’s perfection.

Rather than abandoning her conviction, or outright condemning the information presented to her, Maria accommodates for the information within her theologically robust religious framework. It is not a challenge to her faith that there have been bad times in Catholic history, but it reaffirms her faith convictions about humanity and divine perfection.

Because Maria is able to contextualize the conviction of her faith conviction from the defense of all religious-adjacent realities (like Christian culture, the historical institution of the Church) she is able to take the truth given to her in class and bring it into harmony with the Truth of her faith conviction. Because she has the space to consider her conviction within the classroom and within her contemplation on class material, she is able to produce a more harmonious understanding of reality, a more pragmatic conviction.

**Strategic Disengagement**

However, not all instances operate this smoothly. Ali mentions how her science classes had chapters on evolution that made her uncomfortable. Her response, rather than stand up and
challenge the professor, was to simply skim the chapter, guess on the test, and hope to make a better grade on future assignments. As she put it:

“I believe that God created the world. And most scientists in school settings believe in Evolution. And that was one of the main topics that was hard for me, because even in my High Schools, they skirted it. They didn't really talk about either Creation or Evolution. So then having to actually learn it and take a test on this chapter, about Evolution, and I was like “I really don't want to learn this because I don't believe it” and it was hard for me. At the end of the day, I didn't really. I just skipped over that chapter and I went about the rest of the chapters, which, I mean, they're science, and that's truth. But that chapter I did skip over, pretty much, I skimmed it.”

Unlike Maria’s situation, Ali saw no way to reconcile her faith conviction to the scientific knowledge being presented to her in the classroom. Even though she refers to this knowledge as “truth,” she finds it insignificant or dangerous enough to render it unhelpful for herself, and worth skipping.

The reasoning Ali gives for this decision, however, is centered in her relatively new Christian faith. Having converted her senior year of High School, her freshman year exposure to university instruction is seen by her as a real threat to the faith that she wants to hold onto.

“I'm a young Christian, a young believer, I think since I'm not as experienced in dealing with what other people believe, especially since I grew up in that culture, it is hard to like, see other people's point of view, and like, I want to be more open minded, but at the same time I don't want to waver in my faith.”
While it would be easy to see Ali’s hesitancy to accept the chapter in her textbook on Evolution as a lack of curiosity, or as evidence of a closed mind, in her own words, she wants to be able to explore, examine, and open mindedly consider opposing viewpoints, but she does not trust that she will be able to maintain the faith convictions she holds. This is not because she believes her faith to be ultimately incorrect in the light of scientific knowledge (she believes it to be Truth) nor does she consider Creationism to be uniquely and necessarily Christian—she even says this explicitly, that “creationism isn't just like inherently Christianity.” But while she does not see Evolution as necessarily a threat to her faith, she does not trust in her own ability to persevere in believing the Truth in response to the rhetorical persuasion of contemporary scientific instruction. She is afraid of being deceived. Because of her relative inexperience with her faith, she does not trust her instructors to be understanding, helpful, or considerate of what she believes to be true. She is afraid of what Perkins (2001) describes as an attempt by an instructor to “change them against their wills.”

Stephen Yarborough describes this as rhetorical power, which is distinct from rhetorical force. Yarborough, working off of a Nietzschean understanding of truth, sees rhetoric and persuasion as best seen in terms of power and force. Rhetorical force is the ability to employ strategies to persuade someone. This is the exertion of force over another person, whether that’s through evidence, moral arguments, or deception, rhetorical force is the ability of one person to persuade. Rhetorical power, however, is the perception of another person’s rhetorical force, that is, their ability to use rhetoric to get what they want.

Ali seems mostly concerned with the rhetorical power of her textbooks and professors. While Yarborough conceptualizes rhetorical power primarily in how someone would view a rhetor’s ability to convince other people, Ali seems concerned about their rhetorical power to
convince herself. In this area, the truth of the claim related to the primary conviction is not relevant, because Ali believes her conviction to be fully true. What matters is the power of the rhetorical situation, the power relationship between her and the sources of knowledge she is interacting with.

She is hesitant to engage with something she thinks could deceive her away from her primary conviction. This is not because she is incurious or disrespectful of the truth, but rather because she has an acute awareness of her own frailty in the face of the rhetorical force of “the World.” This awareness of her frailty in the face of rhetorical power demonstrates humility (while still dismissing a counter belief) in that it recognizes her own potential to be deceived. This stubborn humility is, I believe, an intellectual survival technique for those who live in environments that espouse ideologies and beliefs that they find not just untrue, but dangerous. Consider the caution with which we would want a young person to act when operating within fascist spaces. The arguments for fascism, while I believe them to be fundamentally wrong and immoral, are arguments that are persuasive to many people. To exercise caution at hearing or entertaining these dangerous beliefs is not a sign of a lack of intellectual courage as much as it is a sign of humility and the recognition of human frailty. Similarly, Ali, by avoiding this chapter about Evolution, is viewing the rhetorical climate in which she exists through Yarborough’s view of power and deciding to not engage. It can be easy to sneer at this; the academic world often considers hesitancy toward Evolution to be a hallmark of an incurious mind. But when we consider what many students have been told they will have to give up to learn about Evolution: their understanding of goodness, their love, their life, their relationship with Christ, then the imperative that we help students reconcile their convictions with class material becomes clear.
The power of faith, or primary conviction, is that it exists at such an essential, foundational level of conviction that it undergirds reason, love, and goodness themselves. While my examples have all centered around Christianity, I do not intend to single Christianity out as the only thing that can grant such a faith. In fact, I would hold it as certain that all people, in one way or another, have some sort of faith undergirding their reasoning, love, and goodness. We all hold a priori assumptions, deep within who we are, but those assumptions are not, like secondary convictions, assumptions that can be easily troubled by a classroom, rather they are as crucial and central as the assumption that life is preferable to death, or that we should seek after things that are good. While those things can be troubled, and perhaps should be troubled (a core, central conviction of many religions is that the religion should be spread to others, a fundamental troubling of faith) I would argue that the classroom, with its fraught power structures and limited reach, is a place where troubling faith is not only inappropriate, but counterproductive. We must work and listen so that we can better understand how to help students realize that their rhetorical pronouncements within the classroom, and the ideas presented in the classroom, need not trigger the fundamental fear that Ali feels at the prospect of losing the Truth that is so dear to her that she would rather fail a test than jeopardize it. The stakes of presenting these convictions, however, are sometimes high, or at the very least are perceived by my participants to be high.

Disrespect and Silence

Maria, in particular, commented on this issue related to her Catholic faith. She described how constant comments by teachers and other students disrespecting her faith or taking her faith less seriously made her less likely to mention her faith in class. She described how these comments often were based in class material, but served to disrespect or demean items, concepts, or convictions central to her faith. She directly credited recognizing
these patterns of disrespect and hostile rhetoric within the classroom as contributing to her decision to remain silent about her faith.

“And I think it's more smaller comments from teachers or students, where they're laughing off something. I remember this week we looked at some paintings from some French artists, and it was the scene of Christ being taken down from the cross. It's really heavy material. And some of them were poking fun at it, so it was like, it hurts my heart a little bit. We should be getting into that mindset. That meaning is for the sake of prayer and contemplation about the death of Christ, and so seeing people misuse those kinds of images or those meaningful things has been [difficult]”

While she felt a desire to defend these aspects of her faith, she had no confidence that her words would be taken seriously by that class: “When it pertains to Truth, I do have an obligation to speak the truth. But it also, I think, in my mind I would go to: Are the people I'm speaking with going to listen? And so ‘Am I wasting my breath?’” Her conclusion is that in her classes, she would be wasting her breath, that her peers are not interested in listening, and that her professors are likely uninterested or hostile to her faith.

**Misunderstanding**

Perhaps the most unifying theme throughout all of these interviews was that my participants believed that their religion and faith convictions were misunderstood by the majority of instructors and classmates. All participants expressed fear at the idea of being identified under a title they believed was not respected or properly understood. This concept of misunderstanding is not the same as offense, but rather a belief that their instructors and peers would treat them poorly based on misconceptions. The fear of being misunderstood is founded on a variety of
experiences and expectations. All four participants indicated that they expected some level of misunderstanding before attending the university, and all four participants indicated that they were misunderstood at one point.

This fear seems to have been (perhaps rightly) instilled in participants by their families and faith communities. All of them referenced having heard stories about misunderstanding or prejudice that happens in universities.

Ahman described a cultural Iranian event to which he invited his colleagues and professors from the university. Here, he described himself as experiencing fear that his colleagues would interpret the event through a religious lens. He is worried about appearing too religious, for fear that he will be connected to religious extremists that he wishes to disassociate himself from. He mentions, in particular, being afraid that “People will judge me about my religion or if I’m a religious person. I don’t want to be a “religious person” but I have some religion, but for myself, not for convincing people.” He describes how stereotypical associations of Islam with violence have made him cautious, a caution that he also extends to members of his own faith, deliberately distancing himself from more extreme elements of Islam. Ahman’s view of proselytization is profoundly different from my other candidates: he doesn’t seem to have much if any desire to help convert others to his faith, which as we have discussed he sees primarily as a cultural identity. But even within that different frame, he expresses similar concerns about misconception. He will not abandon his faith convictions: he holds them as significant. But he also fears misconception.

Ali described misconception as an issue she regularly struggles with, describing the problem as coming from how “culture has twisted what Christianity is, and made it kind of a
poor culture or something negative. . . if I say I'm a Christian, they're like immediately turned off, some people.” While this attributes misunderstanding to the actions of a secular culture, Ali also places some blame on professed Christians, saying: “a lot of people have seen Christians who aren't genuine believers or genuine people who actually live for Christ. . . I think a lot of people believe that Christians are hypocrites, because I think in some places Christians are.” She does not see the negative impression as entirely unwarranted, but rather believes that there has been a fundamental corruption of the image of her faith. She believes it is important that she distinguish herself from the cultural impression of her faith, particularly those who self-identify in her faith but do not share her conviction, in order to more directly communicate her conviction.

Maria mentions that she came to college expecting these kinds of difficulties, saying:

“I expected, just because of some experiences that I had in High School and stories that I had heard that people were going to have misconceptions about it. I expected that and, you know, having patience. Even getting into that situation, it was like “I'm preparing” and stuff like that. But I didn't really expect anyone to understand truly what the Catholic faith is.”

She saw her upcoming experience with the university as an event that required preparation so as to minimize the misconceptions that would be held by fellow students and professors about herself. She mentions how her history classes, when mentioning difficult or cruel Catholics, would often contain comments or implications that all Catholics, particularly Clergy, bore those same vices. These comments, among others, were cited by Maria as examples
of misconceptions. They also demonstrate how her faith conviction here is considered, or articulated, by her classmates as a kind of political ideograph.

For Maria, the cultural category of Catholic exists as a different concept than the true faith, or her conviction. She holds a conviction that should be viewed on its own merits, rather than viewed with the cultural framework of what counts as Catholic. Her frustration in our conversation came to a head with a plea:

“you have one experience with someone who claims to be Catholic or claims to be any other kind of religion and you assume that everybody else is like that. I have done that before mistakenly. Everybody does it. And so I just wish that they would have the open mind to see it for what it truly is. If you are going to look at someone, look at someone who is trying to be devout, or striving to live this way. Instead of someone who puts on their little Catholic coat when they want to, saying “oh yeah I'm Catholic” and take it off when they're not there, to do whatever they want.”

It is important to identify the place where Maria draws the line between what could be legitimately considered “Catholic” and what should not be: she draws the line with those who are trying to be devout and those who are not. She sees the conviction of a believer, a conviction that prompts action, as the standard she would like to be held to, rather than whoever assents to the label of Catholic.

While Maria is deeply troubled by the misconceptions she faces, she also uses these misconceptions as moments of self-reflection. This crisis, experiencing misconceptions and misunderstandings, is reminiscent of Pierce’s reference to irritation as the seed of doubt (and thus new belief). The seed of these misconceptions grew into new conviction by prompting Maria to
more closely examine her own faith convictions, a process that she saw as strengthening her faith. It drew her “to ask questions like “oh, OK, what do we actually say about this” or “what actually happened”, “kind of being critical.” The crisis of misunderstanding helped provide her with an occasion for renewing and studying her faith. She was prompted to self-examination, saying “I should really be asking questions and not believing everything everyone says.”

Her faith conviction is enacted through her examination and rearticulation of her conviction in response to misunderstanding. This is reminiscent of Latour’s concept of Profession in his work Rejoicing. Profession is a restatement of conviction that enacts the conviction itself. Her response to the irritation of the doubt of others prompts her to rearticulate with new joy and fervor her commitment to her conviction. This is not an instance of her doubling down, but rather she rearticulates her conviction in light of the challenge and doubt of the misconception. Despite the overall difficulty of enduring misunderstanding, Maria’s conviction encompasses and reforms misunderstanding into the enactment of faith.

Successful Interactions

Not all interactions with academic difference and expression are described as misunderstandings or troubling by the participants of this study. Many of their interactions were not just positive, but directly described as being helpful for their religious faith. The interactions described most positively by participants related to instructors giving them the freedom to explore topics related to their faith. Three of the four participants specifically mentioned writing exercises that allowed them to articulate their conviction as being not just helpful, but important to their faith.
Similar to the example of a misconception, Maria described her moment of the expression of her conviction as helpful because of, not in spite of, how it conflicted with her conviction. She was assigned to write an argumentative essay about something she believed in. She chose to write about her Pro-Life position, a position she holds in part because of her faith conviction. She was then asked by her professor to write the opposite position of this argument, challenging her to reconsider her position, while still making it clear that this was expected to be a position she vehemently disagreed with. The expectation and clear articulation that this was not a speech act recanting her faith conviction allowed Maria to produce this text. She described this assignment as useful, despite its difficulty:

“ I took a philosophy class, intro, really simple, but we were talking about argumentation, and I remember he asked us to take a controversial point so I was like, OK, well, abortion, that's a really controversial point. I tried to explain against it first, and then later I would have to reverse my role, which wasn't terrible it was more seeing what are the points of argumentation that the other side uses, that each side uses.”

Of particular note is that, despite her difficulty in writing this position, she phrases the effect of this assignment in terms of empathy: it allowed her to understand better those who she opposes from a place of strong conviction.

Her faith conviction was not directly challenged by the assignment. The professor carefully designed an assignment that acknowledged that her argument was the opposite of her conviction. As a result, she was able to articulate opposite claims with absolute certainty that she was not uttering religious speech against her conviction. By having her articulate the opposite of her conviction, the assignment made this exercise also function as an affirmation of her
conviction: to say that you are stating the opposite of your conviction is to (negatively) state your conviction. It is additionally important to point out that this topic was chosen by Maria herself, and the instructor did not mandate that she choose this topic that was so central to her conviction.

Ali, too, described a time she wrote about her faith conviction about abortion. She described an English course with an instructor who was “extremely open to hearing every perspective.” This instructor asked that students compose and deliver a protest poem about something the believed in. Ali said that, unlike other classes, she felt “completely free to write that because of how she had acted.” The instructor earned Ali’s confidence through employing frequent discussion-based classroom activities, as well as responding to student comments with positive, interested feedback.

While Ali said she was nervous about sharing this conviction with the whole class, she felt comfortable doing so because of her instructor’s ability to open the classroom up to this conviction. She described this moment as helping her articulate and even enact her faith conviction and desire to share her conviction with others. Her instructor deliberately made a space that allowed her to share her conviction, which she expressed gratitude for, “since I was sharing it in class, that I was supposed to stand up and share it.” By creating a space to articulate this chosen conviction, her instructor was allowing Ali to fulfill a religious obligation that was significant to her.

It is worth pointing out that Ali also describes her willingness to share her faith conviction as easier in this class because it was an African American Literary Heritage class, a class that contained a majority of students from racial minorities. As an Asian-American, the presence of other racial minorities made her feel more “close knit” with her fellow classmates,
and she seemed to describe her faith conviction as being more welcomed in that environment, as opposed to her business classes which are “mostly white boys.” In this white, male space she “has to be more closed off since it’s a bigger class and since the majority is not like me.” While the majority of her African American Literary Heritage class did not share her Asian racial identity, their identity as racial minorities allowed her to feel more comfortable with her faith conviction. Of particular note for this study is that she does not consider her faith conviction to be in line with the positions of privilege within the academic sphere.

Jake’s experience of writing his conviction was centered more on concepts of personal devotion. He also described an English class where the instructor assigned a loose free-write about identity, purpose, and what matters. Jake describes this as coming at a pivotal moment in his life, where he was doubting his “identity in Christ,” which is to say he was experiencing difficulty accepting or having faith in his salvation. (He was clear that his identity in Christ was never in actual jeopardy, but rather his faith was troubled, but ultimately secure). This assignment caused him to reflect on who he was in relation to his faith in Christ, causing him to “tear up a little bit” because “my writing matters because of my identity in Christ.” This religious experience of the renewal of faith conviction was facilitated by and aided by the free writing assignment given to him by his instructor.

This story demonstrates how faith conviction was allowed to flourish in the classroom: Jake was given the space to express his conviction, and his writing suddenly had significant meaning. By giving Jake the apparent freedom to write about his faith, his instructor offered him the profound opportunity to reinvent and renew his faith through writing. Maria, too, describes her relationship in personal terms. For her, remembering that God is “still there” is not only a
source of comfort, but a relational, personal reality. She describes this relationship below in response to learning about particularly troubling chapters in the history of the Catholic church.

"It's also a personal journey. In the middle of class, remembering that the Lord is with me, and remembering those important truths. No, the Lord is here, even if I can't see Him. So yeah. It's been a beautiful journey to learn those things, of “I don't see you Lord, where are you?” Just knowing that he's still there."

The reality of her faith conviction is cast here in relational terms, but also in terms of absolute certainty. The difficult actions of the Catholic church are here contrasted with the goodness of her relationship with God. The “important truths” and the fact that “the Lord is with me” are the anchors for her faith.

Jake and Maria both provide examples of what Latour and Kierkegaard are referring to. Faith conviction, primary conviction, is not the same as a set of cultural beliefs, or even secondary convictions. Faith conviction often undergirds thought, belief, and reality for religious individuals. It can be understood often with the metaphor of a relationship.

The experience of my participants seems to stand as a strong witness to the power of pragmatic approaches to faith convictions. Ali’s positive and powerful experience in her classroom was not the result of an instructor outright agreeing with her faith, but rather it came from an instructor being willing to allow students to write from their faith conviction. That instructor was considering faith convictions pragmatically within the classroom, allowing students to write from their position and therefore access those truths only accessible through these a priori assumptions.
Beauty in Conviction

Students described these moments of writing as strikingly meaningful, more so than other forms of writing in the classroom.

Ali describes it as not just meaningful to her, but important overall, to “give them a little bit of a glimmer of what I believe.” Assignments that involved her conviction made her feel “more connected to it, emotionally and spiritually.” In fact, writing itself is, to her, a practice that, apart from the classroom, is usually religious. She claimed to not “write anything that’s not faith based outside of the classroom.” Writing, then, is to her either full of meaning while being about her faith, or something insignificant, and for the classroom. The “glimmer” of that one piece of writing she was able to compose that related to her faith was also the assignment she articulated as most significant in her educational experience. It merited more time and care from her, as it was seen as the one assignment that mattered.

Maria described this sense of significance by using the word “beauty.” She described her conviction as coming from a “beautiful story,” that her faith was “beautiful” and that her trust in God had “beautiful” outcomes. Truth is “beautiful” and the ability to express that truth is “life-giving.” She describes occasions where faith conviction has been excluded as missing out on “so much more color and so much more depth.” These descriptors all appeal to a sense of beauty and purpose to her faith conviction.

While this language of beauty certainly differs from the language of significance from Ali, the effect is similar. Opportunities to write about faith convictions explode into rhetorical structures of color and shape, rather than structures of stale, sterile writing.
As Maria put it, “there's a depth that can't be written if you can't include [her faith].” Students would be able to access those depths, that beauty, and their course work could become an exercise in value and life. When I asked Ali what it would look like were she to be able to access these pragmatic truths, she said “I think I would spend a lot more time on it or be more careful about what I say. And like, particular. I would purposefully write things.”

When my participants discussed the value and beauty of expressing their faith convictions in the classroom, they described those rare moments as if suddenly, immediately, their written work had meaning in the classroom. It was as if the inclusion of their faith convictions transformed their coursework into something that mattered. This was true for Ali and Maria, who both wrote about abortion, an issue that to them could easily be considered secular. But when they were allowed to write about this topic in a way that relied on their conviction, it had value and significance. Jake was able to turn an assignment about personal writing into something that made him weep in class at the significance of it, simply by allowing himself to write through his faith convictions. My participants associated these moments with words like beauty, meaning, value, and life.

This, of course, makes sense. People like to write about things they care about. But this description of caring applies in a meta-sense to writing. History, Philosophy, Business, Literature, and Composition all take on new life when students are allowed to approach them with their primary conviction present, with their faith driving their writing. If a student is allowed to reference and rely on the a priori faith-assumptions that form the backdrop of their thought, experience, and reason, those assumptions, particularly when held as beautiful, life giving truths, will enrich and enliven their writing.
Faith Writing as Resistance

Students who face environments that discourage the expression of their faith convictions will likely find ways to still express (and be committed in their faith) those convictions. Rand (2003) describes religious writers in the classroom as belonging to and participating in a community of resistance. Many of my participants described this kind of participation, taking opportunities to write when they could in ways that confirmed their faith conviction or challenged the dominant secular narratives they were faced with in the classroom. These small acts of resistance to the dominant language and ideological positions demonstrate not only that students feel the tension and difficulty between their faith conviction and secular discourse, but also that they believe that writing their faith commitments is a significant ethical and religious practice.

As cited earlier in this chapter, Ali described writing out a definition for a subject in her ethics class. This definition describes human behavior as something that has been achieved through evolution. Ali was uncomfortable with writing (and thus uttering) the claim that human behavior is best explained through evolution, so she changed the definition provided to her by her professor to instead say “created.” She admitted to me that she was a little nervous about this change impacting her grade, but she considered the change so small that it would likely not impact anything significantly, not significantly enough for her to consider compromising her expression of conviction.

This is different from previously discussed methods of expression, as her expression directly went against the wishes of her professor. However, her expression was seen by Ali as a necessary part of her religious practice: a way for her to articulate her conviction within the
framework of her professor’s definition. However, she does not choose to write this because she has scientific backing to her Creationism (though she might!) she does so as an act of profession. She is professing her faith conviction and therefore professing her love.

Similarly, Maria described hearing things in class that prompted religious writing in her, but her finding no place within classwork to express her religious experience, writing instead in the margins of her notes prayers and religious comments. As she puts it:

I think the only things I've written in class that have brought me life are like, you can find in some of my notes, in the middle of class, hearing some injustice, or hearing a beautiful truth, I have a little prayer squibbled on the side of my notepad or something like that. Like when my professor gave a snippet of the dialogues to us to read in class, I have like, five bullet points next to it and I'm just like, one of them is definitely a prayer. I was very lifted up in that moment

The “only things [she wrote] in class that have brought [her] life” are writing she produced against the genres of the classroom. While this is not outwardly, directly a writing of resistance, it is a writing that enacts genres otherwise considered inappropriate for the classroom. She interacts with the texts in academic fashions, but she finds life in interacting with the texts with earnest, direct, faith conviction. While she is willing to enter into the academic world, she believes the academic world is unwilling to hear her religious utterance.

These examples demonstrate both the difficulty and importance of religious utterance: Ali is hindered from repeating the professor’s definition simply because she is unwilling to state something she considers to violate her faith, and Maria is sustained through her long classes by her small, overtly religious notes in response to texts from the course.
Summary of Themes

My participants, then, described the classroom as an environment that can produce conflict between religious and academic positions, and often has produced conflict (mostly interior). Furthermore, this conflict has resulted in disrespect, misrepresentation, and a sense of emptiness around such classwork. Some of this has been self-imposed, or represents a fear of misrepresentation, but the effect remains the same.

However, the classroom has been, and can be, a site of powerful rhetorical invention for religious students. Instructors who have successfully allowed students to express their conviction religiously have yielded enormous benefits for my participants, causing some to break into tears and others to pray. Even acts of written resistance against the secular classroom demonstrate that writing about faith convictions is a means, perhaps the means, of producing writing that feels important or worth anything for some of my participants.

These observations require a response. My participants, and likely many of our students, possess enormous potential for writing through their faith conviction. Our non-religious students, though not the direct subject of this study, possess enormous potential for writing through their other a priori convictions. This potential possesses pragmatic value, and exists because of the enormous significance of faith to the convicted. If we do not let this potential flourish, we are not letting the full mind of the student flourish in the classroom. We must grant to them the power of their own reasoning. Faith stands at the door and knocks, and if we hear its voice, we should open the door to let it in.
Chapter 5: What Should We Do?

The Two Narratives

When it comes to the practical, pragmatic actions of an instructor, two primary narratives emerged from these results: one of distrust and one of significance. While we can never be certain what our actions will produce in the classroom, by examining these two narratives, we can form a better picture as to what we, as instructors, ought to do to produce a classroom of significant student writing. I have illustrated these narratives with two figures.

Narrative 1: Distrust

My participants described a consistent pattern of religious misunderstanding causing disengagement, which causes students to avoid enacting their faith conviction in the classroom.
2: Significance

This is contrasted with the counter-narrative of the good classroom. Here, the shared experience of students is that spaces that allowed them to process, reformulate, and express their convictions became sources of beauty and significance.
We must make deliberate, conscious decisions to create a space that allows for the expression of faith convictions in a classroom that has already proven itself to be open to student faith. This requires both effort on our part in how we teach and assign topics, but also effort in how we cultivate a classroom that is comfortable with faith. But how do we create these spaces? What kind of assignments and course practices shape classrooms that both allow faith conviction to flourish, but also accomplish the goals of the secular, pluralist, public university?

**Actionable Conclusions**

As we have seen, the instructor in a secular classroom must both uphold the pluralism necessary for a secular education as well as understand, honor, and give space to faith conviction. To resolve this difficult task I will turn again to the American pragmatist tradition.
Pragmatism offers us the ability to accept student faith conviction within a pluralist space. As my participants repeated several times, their faith conviction is not an identity (though they certainly held this identity) but is central to how they view their life, the purpose of their education, and the foundation of beauty. Without this presuppositional conviction there is no life, purpose, or beauty. Their conviction is not just a part of their identity but, in the context of the pragmatic truth of the classroom, their conviction is true. This leads us to the first and most obvious actionable conclusion for instructors:

*Actionable Conclusion 1: As best as you can, treat faith conviction as true.*

This is not to say that instructors must pretend to believe every religious or atheist conviction a student articulates. I am not asking you to deceive your students. However, we must be careful to allow students to operate with the presuppositional equipment that they need to pragmatically produce thought for the classroom. This will have consequences for what kind of assignments we assign, what kind of feedback we give, and what evidence and positions we allow in classroom discussion and in writing. Students must be allowed to write about and through their faith conviction when it is at all relevant for the class material. They also must not be discouraged away from religious subjects.

There are plenty of legitimate issues with this position. Often we ask students to produce texts for audiences that might be hostile or suspicious of faith conviction, but rather than working with them to exclude any mention of their faith conviction, we need to help them learn how to articulate that conviction within those rhetorically difficult circumstances. To ask them to downplay their conviction is to ignore the significance of conviction (as well as conviction) in thought.
**Actionable Conclusion 2: Encourage students to write within, about, and through their faith convictions**

My participants often described expressing their faith conviction in the classroom as some of the only times they believed their writing to be meaningful or impactful to them. Some of my participants would write about their faith convictions in their notes during class in response to course concepts, as they were not allowed to write about these convictions in classroom assignments. To them, writing about their faith convictions is a matter of duty, beauty, and interest.

Because of this, we can see clearly that student faith conviction is not simply a thorny issue that must be accommodated for, but is a significant source of student growth and education. If we are to adequately respond to what my participants have said, we will not just treat faith conviction as true, but will encourage students to write using these convictions.

For assignments where students have to rely on their own reason and logic, the best strategy is to allow them to use the pragmatic frame of their faith conviction within that context. This does not mean we do not ask them to use scholarly research, it does not mean that we ask them to always write to a religious audience, but if we can create an environment where a student can, if they are able, articulate their faith conviction through their writing for our classes, we and our students will benefit from this decision.

If my participants were correct, and the moments where they expressed their faith conviction were some of the few lifegiving, beautiful, and meaningful acts of writing they performed in their education, it is nearly our duty as instructors to help them accomplish this. This will require instructors allowing and even encouraging students to reason through their
arguments using their faith conviction and even sacred texts. I do not think this is asking too much of the audience of an academic paper to ask them to be subjected to the presuppositional and sacred convictions of people that are different than they are. We must learn the importance of letting those positions be articulated.

Another way to help students articulate their conviction is to simply ask them to articulate their conviction. However, it is important that when we ask this, we do not force them to disclose faith convictions they may prefer to keep silent about. Ahman was judicious about when he disclosed his faith conviction, and Maria spoke frequently about being concerned about being “outed” in front of a hostile class. Allowing them the opportunity to express their faith conviction is important, but it must be an opportunity, not a requirement.

**Actionable Conclusion 3: Treat faith conviction differently than religious identity**

For every participant, the distinction between religious identity and faith conviction was significant. For three of my participants, this difference was the difference between true and false faith. For the fourth participant, Ahman, the distinction was also crucially important, as it helped distinguish his identity from aspects of faith conviction that he found troubling. To group faith conviction as a matter of cultural difference or another addition in the kaleidoscope of identity is to misunderstand our students. Our effective methods for understanding identity will not serve as well when examining conviction, so we must develop a new method that accepts faith conviction as a genuinely held position about reality, a position that is often as immovable as our certainty in the existence of our parents, the shape of the world, and moral/immoral judgment.

This difference will require us to see religious commitment both as something essential and necessary to student thought, and therefore owed respect and space, but also as something
that will require careful rhetorical defense and articulation. Unlike identity, we can ask a student to argue for or defend their faith conviction. While these convictions, as we discussed earlier, cannot be expected to be “proven” in the same way that we could prove even a political conviction, they still require careful and willful articulation when presented. The respect that my participants wanted did not require total deference to their conviction, but the space to articulate their conviction.

**Practical Examples**

In order to keep moving these actionable principles into an applicable space, I offer the following examples of potential classroom documents (an assignment and a course policy) in the composition classroom to help students articulate their conviction and to help the classroom become an environment that allows conviction to flourish.

*Example 1: Articulating Conviction Assignment*

**Prompt:** For this assignment, you will examine your last written paper, explaining what primary convictions drive your position on this piece.

**Qualifications:** Two pages

MLA Style

Citations when necessary

**Audience:** You should expect your audience to believe differently than you, but you do not need to hide or obscure your conviction because of this audience. They want to know what you believe and why.
**Other notes**: Your primary convictions are not drawn from evidence, but rather are the building blocks for your own thoughts. This may be philosophical, social, religious, spiritual, etc. Describe what those positions are and why you think it is important that other people know about these convictions. You might speculate where these convictions come from, or why you hold them. Furthermore, you may speculate as to what other convictions this conviction is connected to. This could be considered your own theory or ethical framework by which you came to your conclusion. This framework will likely be different, and perhaps even contradictory to, other student’s frameworks.

*Analysis: Articulating Conviction Assignment*

This assignment directly asks for students to share conviction, but does so in a way that allows students to have agency as to whether they want to articulate their faith conviction or some other a priori assumption. As my participants articulated, it was the freedom of being allowed to express their conviction that they wanted, not to be strictly commanded to.

This allows students to express their conviction in a pluralist framework (it admits that there will be alternate positions in the classroom) but it does not admit that the frameworks are, because of that pluralism, negotiating truth between them. This allows the student to articulate their faith conviction as a conviction, not as an identity marker that must be negotiated against other truths. While this may still be the true reality of the classroom, it allows for student conviction to be expressed in an exclusive, but pluralist, way.

This could function well as a reflective assignment after a significant essay, particularly one that deals with significant issues. This assignment could also be used after an assignment
that requires students engage in a dispassionate or detached genre of writing, allowing them to articulate the convictions that they hold.

*Example 2: Stated Conviction Policy*

In this class you will be asked to write a variety of papers that may involve matters of firm conviction. Rather than shy away from expressing those convictions, I encourage you to articulate them in your writing. This includes ethical, moral, political, and faith convictions. While it shouldn’t be the only way you defend your positions, you are welcome to express your arguments with references to sacred texts or important moral precepts. While the class may not agree as a whole with what you believe, it is important that you are able to speak honestly and directly about your conviction.

*Analysis: Stated Conviction Policy*

While it is by no means universally useful, a stated conviction policy like this would be a significant step forward in classrooms to help provide a clear and unreserved encouragement to students who are unsure if their religious (or otherwise) convictions are appropriate to be expressed in class. A firm, clear articulation welcoming this kind of writing would help provide enough of a space for students to write about their faith if they want to. We, of course, will have to be careful to “make good” on our promises here, and hear students out, regardless of how ridiculous we may consider their faith conviction. We must view these things pragmatically, if we are to create a properly pluralist and pragmatically effective classroom for religious and non-religious students.*
Where do we go next?

What I have demonstrated here requires further study. I understand that the distinction between faith conviction and religious identity will seem fraught to many scholars, and there is certainly room for difficulty here. Even from my perspective I see many potential issues with this framing. What happens when a student’s conviction cannot be honored or allowed to be articulated in the classroom? While this argument I have constructed does not allow for the airing of all positions, perhaps there exists a conviction so wicked that it cannot be given any space at all in writing. Certainly there must be some kind of conviction that, if expressed, will make the classroom an unsafe arena for students. While I clearly do not believe Christian or Islamic doctrine to fall under this category, this will become an increasingly more significant problem. Understanding what this looks like will be enormously difficult and is a necessity for future research.

Limitations and Future Research

Furthermore, there are problems in my research. While faith conviction itself was my focus, much of the scholarship, my own personal examples, and even my research participants were Christians. The intersection of both my religious faith as a Christian and the majority of my religious participants as Christians is a real limitation (and benefit) of this research. Doubtless, I likely understood or sympathized in part more with those who share my faith. Furthermore, while one of my four participants was not a Christian, his approach to conviction seemed to be the most distinct from other participant approaches. This study cannot make any claims about the significance of this, but perhaps there is something distinct about Christian conviction from other religions. Future research should work to determine if
these claims can be made about faith conviction broadly, or if I am simply examining religious Christian conviction. This future research will help our field avoid what Depalma (2020) calls “rhetorical colonization,” where researchers unfairly describe as “religious” what is practically just “Christian.” This, too, is worth studying.

Finally, more direct examination needs to be done of how students write their faith conviction. We have seen here how students conceptualize their writing, but a more direct examination of student artifacts would yield tremendous benefits to this research.

Engaging with Beauty

If we were to take this project and the many other scholars in adjacent projects, seriously, we would see Composition and Rhetoric become a field earnestly, excitedly interested in helping students translate their conviction (religious or not) into effective utterances. Rather than asking students to change and modify their conviction solely for persuasion (rather than because of a change in conviction) we could help students learn to write, with confidence and rhetorical skill, what is true (even if that truth contradicts other people’s conviction). As evidenced by my study, our students want this. We could see tremendous growth in students if we allowed them to articulate their faith conviction within the composition classroom. We could, for some students, re-introduce beauty and purpose into their writing. Perhaps we even could direct this attention to ourselves, allowing ourselves to write more directly and honestly about our conviction. We cannot have an effective pluralism without this pragmatic understanding that conviction is necessary for thought.
Post-Truth Negotiation

This work, taking conviction seriously, can also meaningfully contribute to our conversations surrounding confronting mis-information, post-truth, deception, and “bullshit.” In the wake of many recent assaults on our shared conception of truth, we have worked as a field to better conceptualize what it means to confront falsehood in the public sphere. (Fredal 2011, McComisky 2017, Bowles 2020). As Bowles (2020) laments, regarding what he terms “anti-intellectual bullshit”... “Oftentimes, the audience does not wish to be persuaded, only to affirm belief, and the parameters of the argument are uneven and hypocritical, ever-shifting to suit the needs of the rhetor.” This problem is seen by Bowles to be solved by asking the anti-intellectual to explain themselves, placing the burden for drawing the boundary and rules of the conversation on the “bullshitter,” but also by engaging in vulnerability. However, I believe that this entire framework could benefit and work in-tandem with my work here on conviction. One of the examples Bowles gives of this kind of anti-intellectual discourse is Intelligent Design Creationists. While I find the examples he gives compelling, I do believe this group in particular resonates well with my participants and findings. What would happen if we were to engage with this group not as anti-intellectuals, but by first acknowledging the conviction that they are operating from. We could, perhaps, work to separate what acts of rhetoric demonstrate a true departure in conviction, which can be negotiated with pragmatism, and which acts of rhetoric represent post-truth deception. By engaging with Creationism as a terministic screen, a conviction that allows for thought, we can better understand how such a discussion could happen and perhaps engage in a true form of vulnerability in our conversations.
Cultural Rhetorics and Embodied Practicers

This work can also benefit the field of cultural rhetorics. As we interrogate how the artifacts, practices, and meaning-making processes of our culture form, understanding how faith conviction plays into that formation is essential. I see my work here as working alongside Kannan (2016)’s exploration of sacred/secular tensions in the inclusion of kirtan in secular spaces. She outlines how this tension can be difficult, as the ideological contradictions (and convictions) of kirtan become present in secular participants. “By chanting mantras set to melodies, kirtan participants in yoga studios unwittingly embody, perform, and circulate these ideological contradictions. The messy question—to what end?—remains.” The embodied practice of kirtan demonstrates the significance of understanding and interrogating what faith convictions are present in that space. Similar to my previous section on writing as an act of faith, faith convictions can exist within embodied practices that require careful and attentive study by scholars and teachers. How does the presence of these multiple contrasting faith convictions change or challenge our understandings of conviction? How does the embodied practice of one conviction interact with the intellectualized commitment of another conviction? Hopefully by taking faith conviction seriously, we can continue this conversation in cultural rhetorics that can both honor and more seriously encounter these practices and convictions.

Benediction

I know these changes and discussions will not be easy. There are significant barriers to this shift, and it introduces significant risks to our classrooms. However, I do believe, and pray, that this can be accomplished. I firmly believe that by understanding, honoring, and allowing conviction within the classroom, we will create stronger, better, and more pluralist spaces. I will leave you with a benediction:
“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (English Standard Version Bible, Ephesians 4:29-32)
References and Appendices


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Appendix I:

Initial Survey Questions

How many semesters have you taken/are you currently taking at (university name)

What religion(s) or faith(s) do you consider yourself a part of? (if none, skip this question)

Have you experienced any conflict between a religious or spiritual conviction you hold and what your instructor believes? (y/n)

Do you believe that you can express your faith in the classroom? (y/n)

Do you believe you can express your faith in your writing for your class? (y/n)

Do you write differently about your faith than you would about other topics? (y/n)

In a few sentences, how does your faith impact your writing?
Is there anything you would feel uncomfortable being asked to write because of your faith?
(y/n)

In a few sentences, describe how your faith relates to your academic work:

If you are interested in participating in a follow up interview, enter your email:

**Appendix II:**

General Questions for Initial Interview

Tell me about your religion and your faith-journey.

What did you come to college expecting your professors to think about your faith?

Has this expectation changed now? How do you think your instructors feel about your faith?

Does your faith make any part of your classroom experience difficult? If so, how?

Do you ever try and keep your faith hidden or at least not obvious in the classroom or in your writing?

Have you had to write about anything that made you uncomfortable because of your religion or faith? What was that experience like?

Do you write about your faith differently in the classroom than you do in other places? How so?

How does writing about your faith differ from writing about other subjects?

What is something you wish your instructors knew about your faith?
What is something you wish your classmates knew?

If you could write about your faith however you wanted for your class, what would be different about your writing?