

5-2017

# Living off a Prayer: Explanations of Spiritual and Religious Transformation at Hamilton College

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**Living off a Prayer: Explanations of Spiritual and Religious Transformation at**

**Hamilton College**

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**Submitted on May 1, 2017, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a concentration in Sociology and the Bachelor of Arts Degree at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY.**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the connection between the role of stigma in how students conceptualize their religious or spiritual identities when they enter Hamilton. During semi-structured interviews, students described a decision: to continue to affiliate with their faith, to convert, to become spiritually untethered, or to abandon religion altogether. While many factors played into their decision, stigma had a major role. Students who chose to embrace stigma and continue to practice their faith negotiated Hamilton's majority secular campus by highlighting various aspects of their identity in order to both maintain their faith and exist peacefully at the College. Students who became spiritually untethered were often less directly affected by stigma, but awareness of intolerance led them to be cautious about openly identifying as spiritual. With some exceptions, students that dropped out of religion often did so unintentionally and filled their time with other activities. Two students defied this standard and rejected formal religious groups because they did not align with their values and identities. This paper hopes to highlight religious intolerance at Hamilton and provoke further mitigating action to change this paradigm.

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## **Introduction**

Religious students may feel the need to adapt to Hamilton College's distinctly secular environment. Religion and spirituality at the College are frequently at odds with an active hook-up culture, a heavy drinking and partying scene, a declared inclusive community for LGBTQI+ individuals, a focus on rational intelligence, and an institutional validation of individualism. For orthodox religious students, Hamilton is practically hostile to their faith: the majority of students are religiously illiterate and the dominant campus culture disregards strict religious life through social culture, food practices, classes, and a lack of acknowledgement of religious time obligations. Some religious and spiritual students struggled to find kindred spiritual souls, and encountered general disrespect towards spiritual inclinations and language. In order to assimilate, many spiritual and religious students re-conceptualized their spirituality to this culture.

Many students reimagine their religious and spiritual identity at Hamilton by either practicing their previous religious affiliation, changing to a new religious affiliation, becoming religiously untethered, or dropping out of religion altogether. Involvement in religious and spiritual life ranged from substantial participation like joining established religious on-campus groups like Muslim Student Association, Hillel, or the Hamilton Christian Fellowship to infrequent participation in Chapel-run Spirituality Dinners with topics like "The Spirituality of Nature" to opting out of all religious and spiritual life. The spectrum of religious involvement correlated both to the time investment and the personal intensity. Many students saw an opportunity to decide how much effort and interest they gave to religious and spiritual life once they got to Hamilton.

Within this paper I argue that many students who continue to practice the same religion at Hamilton as they did at home underwent their own personal, intellectual exploration of their

faith. I will demonstrate how others within this group emphasized their liberal identities alongside their religiosity in order to fit into the dominant culture. I also noticed that some established faith groups like Hamilton Christian Fellowship provided a space for these students to express their spiritual selves and practice a piece of their home identity in a new place. These students represented one polar end on the spectrum of religious involvement at Hamilton.

In the middle of the spectrum I noticed that the students who were inclined to convert religious affiliations and practices because of a desire for mentorship from both adult figures and upperclassman students and an urge to have a new social community in a different religious affiliation and practice. While some of these students were irreligious before they converted, the students that converted from one faith to another cited community as the main driver in his decision. I found that any combination of these factors pushed students towards to convert to a different religion.

Moving farther towards the other end of the spectrum were students who were still interested in religion and spirituality, but who decided not to affiliate with or practice a particular religion. I will argue that many of these students adjusted their spiritual beliefs and religious practices to serve their individual desires and interests. Smith (2009) coins this exercise Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD typically disregards strict religious dogma by “tinkering” with religious and spiritual beliefs. My results show that this “tinkering” approach allowed students to pick and choose which aspects of religion best fit their lifestyles, decisions around sex, academic priorities, and substance habits. Beyond this, many students highlighted that their spiritual practice was solitary and only shared with a few trusted others. I will demonstrate how this introverted practice allowed them to maintain personal, individualistic boundaries with what they

believe. In many cases, this exercise of MTD allowed students to shift their religious and spiritual values to accommodate Hamilton's secular environment.

At the farthest end of the spectrum were the religious students who do not feel like they belong and who drop out of religion. Unlike the spiritual students, they dropped out of religion completely. I will show how many students abandoned religion because they lost interest and filled their time with other activities while others dropped out because religion was seen as too politically conservative.

This project explored how students at Hamilton College negotiated the changes (or lack thereof) in their religious and spiritual identities since their initial arrival on campus. In order to contextualize my project, I investigated the larger generational and U.S. sentiments around religion and spirituality in young adults and then examined how they have play out in the lives of Hamilton's students in previous studies. My overarching question was: **What happens to students' religious and/or spiritual lives as they enter and live in a secular space like Hamilton College?** Within this question, I looked specifically at: (1) why students continue to practice with the same institutional religious group upon assimilating to Hamilton culture, (2) why students convert to another institutional religion, (3) why students choose to be religiously untethered, and (4) why students might drop out of religion and spiritual pursuits altogether.

In order to feasibly answer my questions and make real headway with the above sociological issues, I conducted semi-structured interviews focused on narratives of religious and spiritual change and asked my interviewees to describe their religious and spiritual journeys since arriving at Hamilton.

Overall, my results aligned best with Freitas' work in *Sex and the Soul* because students from all groups felt overwhelming pressure from Hamilton's culture of political liberalism to be

liberal and politically correct. Beyond this, I found that students in all groups re-negotiated their spiritual and religious identities when they first arrived at Hamilton.

## **Literature Review**

I divided my literature review into four sections identifying how scholars have explained how young people make religious and spiritual decisions. The first section focuses on overarching themes of dominant cultural norms, politics, social networks, and family. Within this section, I aim to provide context for how students in all of my four outcome groups are inclined to view religion and spirituality before they arrive on campus. In addition, my literature contextualized why students might have been inclined to continue to affiliate with their religion, convert to a new religion, become spiritually untethered, or drop out of religion altogether.

### Factors that Influence All Four Groups

Hout and Fischer (2002) determine that the U.S. is an increasingly secular society and that young adults are more likely than older adults to be religiously indifferent or unaffiliated. The group of Americans who identify as having no religious affiliation increased from 7 percent in 1991 to a record 14 percent in 1998. This decline in religious life in the US suggests that young adults born during this period are more likely to be raised without religion at home. Indeed, Anon (2015) of the Pew Research Center, found that as of 2015, 35% of young adults are religiously unaffiliated. Current Hamilton students born around 1998 likely grew up in a more religiously secular environment. This leads me to hypothesize that most incoming students will not be affiliated with a religion; this puts religious students in the minority. However, 35% does not account for the other 65% of young adults who continue to hold some religious belief or



affiliation. A diversity of religious experience exists within Hamilton's secular environment: there are at least seven major faith organizations on campus. With this in mind, we can investigate other factors that influence students' religious and/or spiritual lives when they enter into a secular space like the College.

Dominant cultural norms, politics, social networks, and family influence all Hamilton students regardless of their decisions to stay with their religion, convert to a new religion, become religiously untethered, or drop out of religion altogether. This section will explore how scholars have explained these forces and how those explanations relate to Hamilton students' decisions about religion and spirituality.

### ***Dominant Cultural Norms***

Dominant cultural norms may impact how students fall on the spectrum of religiosity when they begin at Hamilton. Baker and Smith (2009) argue that cultural background plays an important role in how young people choose to religiously identify. People in cultures that encourage religious attendance, conform to religious teachings through dress, and publicly speak about religious values are more likely to bring religion into everyday life. For example, students who were raised in highly religious cultures are more likely to be religious themselves because religion is a part of their daily lives in everything from the religious language they use in interactions with peers to the traditions they practice with their family. On the other hand, students who were raised in secular cultures are less likely to be religious. These students are also likely to come from politically liberal environments that emphasize equal rights for women and LGBTQI+ people. Their families are less likely to engage with conservative forms of religion. If Baker and Smith's work is relevant to Hamilton, then I expect some Hamilton

students who grew up in politically conservative and highly religious communities to continue to practice while at Hamilton. Baker and Smith's work elucidates a connection between liberalism and secularism: while this might suggest that Hamilton students who grew up in more liberal and secular communities are more likely to become religiously untethered or to lapse in their religious practices, this is not the case for all liberal students. Baker and Smith's work makes the assumption that students agree with their culture's dominant religious norms, for students who decide to convert or abandon religion, I expect them to express a dislike for their home's dominant cultural norms. Additionally, Baker and Smith assume that all politically left-leaning people are irreligious and all politically right-leaning people are religious. I hypothesize that there will be left-leaning religious students and right-leaning irreligious students.

### ***The Influence of Politics***

Hamilton students are politicized before they arrive on campus. Political inclinations may be associated with a student's religious affiliation. Hout and Fischer (2002) links this cultural shift away from religion to increased secularization to a majority shift in the US towards liberal political beliefs. They argue that socialization from previous generations alone is not enough to explain this dramatic shift away from religion: cohorts typically experience slow changes within ideologies. Secularization seems to affect white Protestants but does not have the same grip on other religious groups. Hout and Fischer suggest that politics accounts for a shift away from organized religion for all religious groups. Between 1972 and 2002, groups who identified as "liberal," "leaning towards liberal," "moderate," and "leaning towards conservative" abandoned religion with an increase of 10% between 1992 and 2002. Wuthnow (2010) describes how political issues like abortion and gay rights began to pull people out of organized religion during

this period of declined interest. If Hout, Fischer, and Wuthnow's work is suitable for Hamilton students, then conservative political inclination will directly affect decisions to retain their religion. Similarly, if Hout, Fischer, and Wuthnow's are applicable to Hamilton students, then students who come from politically liberal environments are more likely to become untethered, or drop out of religious affiliation.

### ***The Influence of Social Networks***

Individual social networks are often echo chambers for similar religious affiliations. In order to take a closer look at the effects of politics in social networks, I will examine the role of friend groups in understanding how young people choose to practice religion. Baker and Smith (2009) claim that friend groups and social circles influence religious inclinations. Young people are pressured to conform to the religious values of their close friends in order to avoid shame or isolation. They are also drawn to people who share similar religious values. Young people may use their friend groups to discuss and debate their religiosity or spirituality. As the US moves away from religion (Hout, Fischer 2002), more social circles are likely to be irreligious and share values in atheism or untethered spirituality. If Baker, Smith, Hout, and Fischer's work is germane to Hamilton students, then I will expect that incoming students will share similar religious affiliations as their close friends from home; these friends will directly impact their religious decisions. For students with dense religious social networks at home and at Hamilton, they will be more likely to continue to affiliate. Students that encounter a new network of religious friends at Hamilton are more likely to convert to or tinker with that new religion. Students who do not find religious social networks at the College are likely to abandon religious practice.

### ***The Influence of Family***

Baker and Smith (2009) find that children are influenced by their parents' religious affiliation. For example, Baker and Smith hypothesize that parents with high levels of education are more likely to see the world through an atheistic or nonreligious worldview. As they raise their children, they will pass this worldview on through their religious service attendance (or lack thereof), conversations about religion, and opinions about other religions. Baker and Smith found that if only one parent has a higher education degree and is non-religious, then their children are more likely to be non-religious as well. Baker and Smith also remark that young adults who come from highly religious families are more likely to hold onto religion. If Baker and Smith's work is pertinent to Hamilton, then I expect students' religious affiliations will be highly correlated to their parents' religious affiliations: their relationships with their parents will affect their decisions to continue to practice the same affiliation, convert religions, become religiously untethered, or drop out of religion.

As the literature shows, students' religious decisions are all uniquely influenced by cultural factors including politics, social networks, and family. The next four sections will investigate what factors drive students to fall into one of these groups. They will draw from a variety of scholarship and general theory that fits each group as well as evidence from studies conducted at Hamilton College to analyze the role of the College in students' religious or spiritual decision-making processes.

### **Students Who Maintain Their Previous Religious Affiliation and Practice**

The first group of Hamilton students may remain religious because of a genuine belief in a higher power, safety with a higher power, shame and authenticity, and belonging in social networks.

### ***Genuine Belief in a Higher Power***

Religious students may carry their faith over to Hamilton because they genuinely believe in a higher power. Freitas (2015) offers many examples of men and women who come from very religious families and continue to practice once they arrive on college campuses. Women talk animatedly about their personal relationships with a higher power, calling it things like “the man with a plan” (Freitas, 17). Many religious students that Freitas interviewed were strong believers who considered religion a staple of their lives. I hypothesize that at Hamilton College, students who struggle with mental health may rely on a higher power to provide guidance in their lives. Smith and Snell (2009) coin these true believers “committed traditionalists” (Smith, Snell 166) who are typically rooted in an institutional faith tradition and can easily identify their beliefs and religious practices. Commitment to their faith is essential to their identity. If Smith, Snell, and Freitas’ work applies to Hamilton’s student body, then I expect some students to identify as religious because they truly believe in religious teachings and discover that it helps them find meaning in their lives.

### ***Safe With a Higher Power***

Some Hamilton students may use religion to safeguard themselves against the active campus hook-up culture where students engage in non-committal relationships that de-emphasize emotional connection. Freitas (2015) interviewed many students (especially women) who held

tight to beliefs in abstinence as a form of safety and security. In the hookup cultures that Freitas studied, women claimed that a higher power gave them what young men refused: consistency, reliability, and a secure source of love. I will use Freitas' work as a framework to interview students who maintain their religious affiliation about how the hook-up culture has affected their beliefs. If her work is appropriate for Hamilton students, then I suspect that orthodox female students will echo her findings and cling to a higher power for emotional security. Additionally, Wilkins (2008) found that religious women often used abstinence as a means of maintaining their freedom of choice. In other words, these women were able to control how their bodies were treated by avoiding sex. If Wilkins is relevant to Hamilton, then I expect students to claim that abstinence appears to be the safest option on campuses where anecdotal stories of commitment-phobia and sexual assault run rampant.

### ***Shame and Authenticity***

While some Hamilton students may genuinely believe in a higher power, others may feel pressure or shame to believe in order to belong in religious groups. Wilkins (2008) interviewed many students who confessed that their membership in a religious group was contingent upon continued belief and strict practices. Some of the students that she interviewed expressed profound shame for breaking religious tenets. Subsequently, they struggled to identify as 'authentic' believers. Students who have broken religious rules express profound shame and have a hard time considering themselves truly religious. Over the summer months when school is out, students pressure each other to stay abstinent and continue to hold their faith tight. It is obvious that if students in this group slipped religiously, they would lose a major support system and friend group. In highly religious groups, faith is the connective tissue; students do not want to

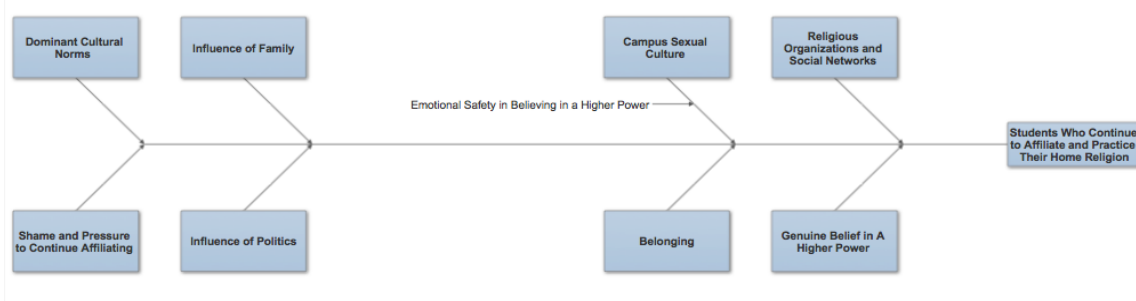
risk breaking religious rules because they would also risk losing one of their primary support systems. Wilkins finds that religious students are deeply concerned with authenticity, thus, any deviance would be indicative of ‘fake’ or ‘fabricated’ religious identity. If Wilkins’ work applies to life at Hamilton, then I expect that some religious students may continue to practice because they are aware of the group practices to keep them believing and the consequences for abandonment.

### ***Belonging in Social Networks***

Belonging acts as a hidden force in students’ interest in religiosity. Hamilton’s small community places a large emphasis on belonging; social success is often predicated on the degree of felt belonging. In an in-depth study of life at Hamilton, Chambliss and Takacs (2014) concluded that the composite elements of belonging were exclusivity, ritualized common activities, shared focus of attention, and physical co-presence. They used this framework to evaluate how well individual organizations at Hamilton promote belonging on campus. They discovered that belonging in larger groups motivated commitment: there were more opportunities to make friends and to be integrated into the community. If Chambliss and Takacs’ findings are still related to Hamilton culture today, then I expect that if the religious groups that aligns with their faith promotes belonging, students will be more likely to engage with those groups.

Chambliss and Takacs (2014) concluded that highly-involved mentors were imperative for successful belonging at Hamilton. They found that mentors filled an important niche by providing guidance, perspective, and support. At Hamilton, staff, faculty, and religious leaders often act as mentors. Based on Chambliss and Takacs’ conclusions, religious students are likely

to turn to the chaplains and other Hamilton-affiliated religious leaders for guidance and religious support.



**Figure 1: Factors that Influence Students Who Continue to Affiliate and Practice Their Home Religion. The labels for these figures correlate to the subsections described within above section.**

### Students Who Convert From One Religious Affiliation to Another

The second group of students may have chosen to convert from one religious affiliation to another because (1) they learned about other religions while at Hamilton, (2) religion helped them during a crisis time in life, (3) religion makes them feel special, and/or (4) religion allows them to belong to a specific group.

### ***Multicultural Forms of Inspiration***

Students at Hamilton may convert to a new religion because they encounter one while at Hamilton that fits them better. As Hout and Fischer (2002) found, students likely existed in homogenous communities that shared similar religious values before coming to college. While Hamilton is a primarily white institution, it may be more culturally, religiously, and racially diverse than the towns or cities in which many students grew up. Exposure to new religions may



prompt students to convert to a religion that might be more appealing. Smith and Snell (2009) discuss how diversity exposes young people to new forms of religious inspiration. Spiritual seekers explore many different religions until they find one that aligns with their pre-existing worldview. Freitas (2015) adds that spiritual seekers are dissatisfied with their previous affiliation and begin seeking one that provokes a greater sense of fulfillment. However, exposure is likely not an adequate reason for why a student might be inspired by a religion. Smith and Snell (2009) note that students often seek to validate their pre-existing world-views. If Smith, Snell, and Freitas' research is relevant for Hamilton students, then I expect that religious converts will attribute the multicultural aspect of Hamilton in their conversion decision. If Wuthnow's work is accurate to Hamilton students, I suspect they will be drawn towards religions that align with values they already held close.

### *Life Crises*

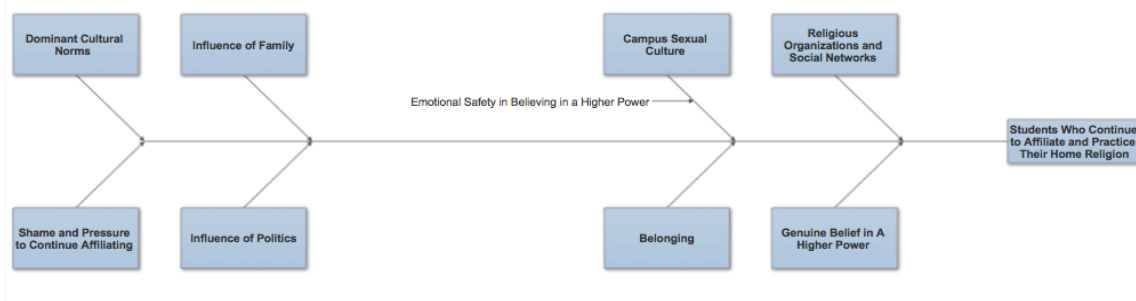
Some Hamilton students may have converted to a new religion in order to seek guidance during the 2017 campus suicides. Snow (1984) found that many religious converts began looking for a new religious group when they were experiencing crisis in their personal lives. While this tension may have taken a variety of forms, such as divorce, mental health problems, or grief, people found religious organizations to be a space of comfort and security. Snow discovered that it is difficult to name a crisis as the sole cause for people to convert: many people experience crisis and do not convert to a new religion. However, converts typically reached out to a new religious group when they felt vulnerable in some aspect of their lives. Snow's work suggests that while many students may point to life crisis as a reason for their religious conversion, it is not the sole cause of their conversion.

### ***Belonging in Social Networks***

Hamilton students may choose a new religious affiliation because it heightens their sense of belonging. As Chambliss and Takacs (2014) described, belonging in a group is important for wellbeing at the College. Freitas (2015) interviewed students who converted to evangelical Christianity once they arrived at their college. They identified themselves as very happy and found that their new denomination allowed them to participate in a community that they would not have otherwise accessed. Snow (1984) found that membership directly correlated to conversion: if a student was already a member of a religious group, they were more likely to convert. In other words, if they had friends within the groups, they might have felt more comfortable joining it. Strong social network ties directly correlated with a desire to convert. If Snow, Freitas, Chambliss and Takacs' studies apply to Hamilton students, then I expect those who converted to a new religion to discuss their new network of friends from that religion.

While some students may convert from one religion to another, others may have been religiously unaffiliated before their conversion. Snow (1984) found that in order to belong in a new religious group, people interested in converted often assimilated to new roles. Within these roles, they learned new ways of speaking, specific religious terminology (like citing God or Quranic verses), and mannerisms to emulate. Adopting these roles allowed converts to see themselves in the new religion and to feel agency to take ownership of the religion and personalize it. Finally, these roles allowed converts to feel 'needed' by others in the religion, and they are thus more likely to officially convert. If Snow's work is pertinent to Hamilton students, then I expect those who have converted to describe a period of time where they learned how to be a member in the new religious group.

In addition to a new role, Hamilton students may convert to religious life because it sets them apart in a culturally secular institution. In a religiously secular college like Hamilton, religious convert students may experience this distinctiveness because they have a ‘special’ story to tell. Wuthnow (2010) discusses how religious practice makes some young people feel ‘special’ or ‘unique.’ Based off of Wuthnow’s findings, I posit that newly religious students will express feeling special for holding an uncommon identity.



**Figure 2: Factors that Influence Students Who Convert Religious Affiliations and Practices. These labels correlate to the subsections described in the above section.**

### Students Who Are Religiously Untethered

The third group, “tinkerers,” approach religion like students often address a liberal arts education: they use a variety of means to understanding religion and spirituality. By defining tinkerers (also known as the “spiritual but not religious”), this section will explain that students are motivated to be religiously untethered because of a desire for religious agency, the campus sexual culture, and inspiration from other religions.

Wuthnow (2010) finds that 68% of young adults between ages 21 and 29 choose to engage in spirituality over religion. Wuthnow subsequently coined religious “tinkering,” which loosely translates to when young adults creatively choose which ideas, practices, and ways of being that suit their spiritual lives best. It is another mode of expressing individuality. Wuthnow

concludes that a religious or spiritual “tinkerer” engages in the practice of constructing a spiritual doctrine; spirituality becomes portable.

### ***Religious Agency***

Hamilton students may be inclined to become religiously untethered because they want to have full control around their spiritual and religious beliefs. Smith and Snell (2009) discuss this in relation to Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD): the belief that a higher power solely exists to add to happiness to one’s life. As the US becomes more secular, young people may use spirituality as a means to attaining happiness. Tinkerers prefer to have agency over their spirituality: they want to be in control of their happiness. By religiously “shopping” (Wuthnow, 2010, 115), young adults are able to have control over their beliefs by selectively choosing which to follow and which to discard. Wilkins (2008) corroborates Wuthnow by observing that students prioritize choice in spirituality. For example, by openly tinkering, young adults potentially exempt themselves from any religious political incorrectness or poor religious reputations. Tinkerers have full control over their beliefs and can select certain beliefs for instrumental reasons like wanting to be happy. If Smith, Snell, Wuthnow, and Wilkins’ work is applicable to Hamilton students, then I expect religiously untethered students to note how intentionally spiritual practice can serve their individual needs and desires.

### ***Campus Sexual Culture***

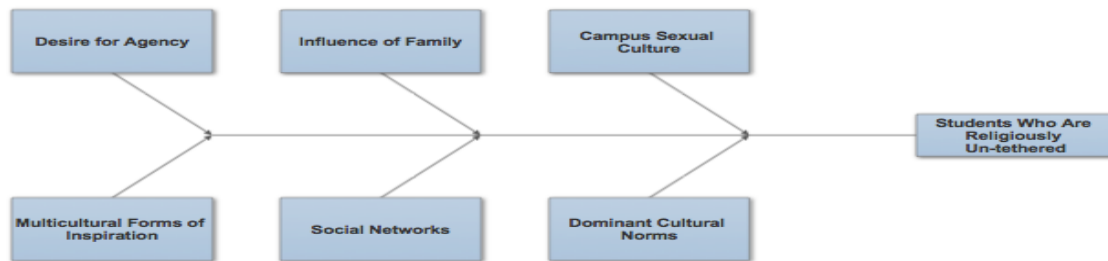
The tension between a desire to engage in the campus sexual culture and religious teachings may provoke students to tinker. Freitas (2015) found that religiously untethered students often also engage in sex and the hook-up culture. She writes that many young people

alleviate religious tensions by mentally separating spirituality and sex. Additionally, Freitas found that interest(s) in hook-up culture and sex on campus have not actually affected interests in spirituality. For religiously untethered students, sex is a personal choice. Smith and Snell (2009) add that many young adults cognitively disregard religious teachings about sex and socially distance themselves from the sources of those no-sex-before-marriage teachings. If Freitas, Smith, and Snell are apposite to Hamilton students, then I expect religiously untethered students to discuss their sexual lives as compatible with their spiritual lives.

### ***Finding Inspiration From Other Religions***

While Hamilton is a primarily white institution, it still hosts seven different religious or spiritual organizations. Wuthnow (2010) posits that when young adults are in contact with multicultural atmospheres, they are more likely to embrace diversity. He argues that globalization has expanded US perspectives on inclusivity and that when (mostly white) Americans were more isolated from other cultures, they believed that they had a special relationship with God because they did not know about how people from other cultures viewed a higher power. However, as more Americans ventured to foreign countries through work, study abroad, relationships with immigrants from non-Western cultures, and/or being an immigrant/refugee from a non-Western culture, this opinion of ‘a special relationship with God’ weakened. Wuthnow concludes that many people realize that God might take on forms beyond those with which they grew up. If Wuthnow’s work is correct, then Hamilton’s overt messaging around accepting and engaging with international cultures would provide inspiration for tinkerers at Hamilton to add to their religious and spiritual toolbox.

Spiritually untethered students at Hamilton may specifically reference Karma, the belief that certain good and bad actions are either rewarded or punished, in their spiritual toolbox. Wuthnow (2010) notes that the “tinkerer” adds more sources of spiritual and religious inspiration to their toolbox through increased levels of multiculturalism. He also adds that a cultural awareness of Buddhism and Hinduism has influenced the trendiness of meditation and Karma. Smith and Snell (2009) corroborate Wuthnow, arguing that young people today have embraced Karma in everything from daily talk to labels for café tip jars. If Wuthnow, Hout, Fischer, Snell and Smith are relevant to Hamilton students, then student tinkerers might include non-Western forms of spiritual thought, like Karma, as a means of accepting diversity on campus and adding to their toolbox.



**Figure 3: Factors that Influence Students Who Are Religiously Untethered. The above labels correspond to the subsections in the above section.**

### Students Who Abandon Religion Altogether

The fourth group of students may choose to abandon religion for a variety of reasons including: a desire to differentiate from their parental figures, a widespread culture of political correctness, Hamilton’s validation of intellectual culture, a desire to engage in campus sexual culture, and a lack of accessibility to religious life at Hamilton. However, while these reasons all

provide 'rational' or cognitive explanations for why students may abandon religion, Hoge et. al (1998), Smith and Snell (2009), noted that many students unintentionally drop out of religious participation because it is less relevant in their new lives. This section examines both the intentional and unintentional reasons students may abandon religion- through students who drop out because of serious contemplation and students who simply spend their time doing other things.

### ***Irrelevance of Religion***

While many Hamilton students deliberately choose to abandon religion, Smith and Snell (2009) found that the majority of young adults stop participating or affiliating in religion because they organically fill their time with non-religious activities. Upon moving away from their parents, many young people experience newfound freedom with their time. This time is quickly consumed by daily living concerns like finding a job, completing coursework, managing new friends, engaging in sexual relationships, and making food. Religious and spiritual practice is time-consuming and irrelevant to young people's lives. Lee (2006) noted that people are more likely to be religious when they have families because they want to raise their children with religious morals. Thus, for the child-less young person, religion and spiritual practice are of low priority.

### ***Differentiation from Parental Figures***

Hamilton students may differentiate religiously from their parents because college life provides them with newfound agency to become independent. Upon arriving at Hamilton, most students are away from their parents for the first time. As they break off into their own social

circles and occupy their time with non-religious activities, students may organically shift away from their parents' religion. Smith and Snell (2009) found that the quest to differentiate begins around adolescence; they argue that shifting religious preference is a low-stakes way for adolescents to subconsciously distinguish themselves from parental figures and that moderately religious parents are likely to be more willing to give young adults freedom around religious preference as they grow up. They go on to describe how transitioning out of the home pushes young adults to think of themselves as separate from their parents, encouraging them to be more self-sufficient, which creates implicit tension with religious implications. The organic process described above shows that the decision to differentiate is often not a highly conscious one but rather a subtle undertaking.

### ***Culture of Political Correctness***

Similar to how Hamilton students want to differentiate from their parents upon entering Hamilton, they may also begin their college careers wary of the tension between religion and political correctness. Trenton (1994) outlined that young adults responded to political correctness pressures to respect gay marriage and women by becoming more secular.

Values related to diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism may complicate students' religious inclinations. Smith and Snell (2009) acknowledge that religion has a bad reputation for being dogmatic and close-minded towards groups like women and LGBTQI+ people. They argue that this often pushes people to be more critical of religion and, in some cases, to abandon it altogether. If Smith and Snell's findings are relevant to Hamilton students and the 2018 political climate in the U.S. of overt nationalism, racism, and sexism, then I hypothesize that students may abandon religion as they learn more that certain sects and religions are associated with



homophobia, racism, and cultural nationalism. Hout and Fischer (2002) corroborate this claim by noting that politics is important in shaping religious beliefs for liberal young people who are hyper-aware of the importance of political correctness and respectfulness. Hout and Fischer's findings may imply that when Hamilton students are not politically conscientious, they may be shamed by their peers and confront a loss of status and peer respect; if this is the case, then previously religious Hamilton students may also encounter hostility towards religion and choose to abandon it in order to save their social status. Boucher and Kucinkas (2016) report that while Hamilton aims to accept diverse identities, religion is often excluded from this goal. If Boucher and Kucinkas' work is still relevant at Hamilton, then previously religious students may be inclined to disassociate because of cultural pressure from within the student body to be politically correct.

### ***Validation of Intellectualism Over Spirituality***

Hamilton students may be inclined to abandon religious affiliation or identity because it is not considered intellectual or 'rational.' Hadaway and Roof (1988) found that higher education tends to erode aspects of religion's plausibility. Freitas (2015) indicates that students interested in religion are cornered into pursuing it through more socially acceptable and "rational" means like intellectual exploration in academic classes. In other words, cerebral practices of understanding religion or spirituality are validated more than soulful, emotional practices. Freitas notes that students accommodate their spiritual inclinations by redefining God as 'connection' in an effort to maintain intellectual and private boundaries (Freitas, 2015. 39). Smith and Snell (2009) add nuance to Freitas' points: "college makes the study of religion as an intellectual endeavor as the only legitimate way to be religious" (Smith, Snell, 2009. 248). Smith and Snell's

(2009) work suggests that students' decision to abandon religion may have been frustrated with the pressure to 'intellectualize' their religion in order to make it acceptable. The buildup of frustration may have eventually lead to a decision to drop out of religion. If these studies pertain to Hamilton students, then I expect some will emphasize their cerebral practice of religion over their soulful or emotional connections to it in an effort to appear more rational and scientific.

### ***Lack of Social and Physical Accessibility to Religious Life at Hamilton***

Hamilton students who abandon religion may feel that aspects of the College's culture do not openly encourage religious exploration or protect students from religious discrimination. Kucinkas and Boucher (2016) suggest that religious inaccessibility can act as a reason for previously religious students to abandon religion. In a study of Hamilton College, they concluded that students lacked dialogue about spiritual life, they felt they needed to be reticent about their religious exploration, they encountered discreteness in religious exploration, and they felt a campus stigma towards religion. These factors were reinforced by an emphasis on culture that privileges academics. If Kucinkas and Boucher's work is still relevant, then I expect students who have dropped out of religion to express frustration with the cultural and administrative implicit disregard and ignominy towards religion at Hamilton.

Hamilton students may also choose to abandon their religion because the isolated campus and multipurpose chapel act as significant barriers towards practicing their faiths. According to Chambliss and Takacs (2014), colleges make some pathways to connection more accessible than others. In other words, some clubs, activities, and religious holidays are embedded in the college calendar and in harmony with other student obligations where other activities run in opposition to culture and work obligations. If Chambliss and Takacs' work is still relevant, than I expect

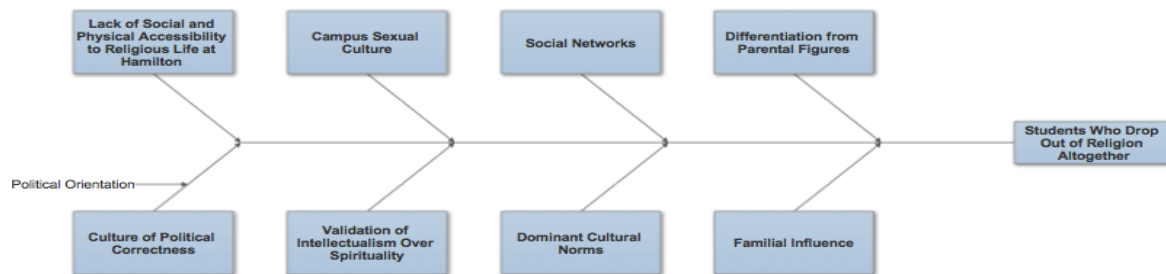
that students who affiliate with time-intensive religions will be more likely to abandon their religion. Pendergrast (2006) validated this conclusion in her study of religiosity at Hamilton. She found that some students encountered a lack of transportation a large barrier to entering religious communities in Utica. However, this may not be true for religious students who are supported by an on-campus group. Additionally, Pendergrast found that students were uncomfortable with a multipurpose chapel because it diluted the differences between faiths. If Pendergrast's work is still relevant, then I expect students who have dropped out of religion to explicitly mention the lack of accessibility to religious life at Hamilton.

### ***Influence of the Campus Sexual Culture***

The tension between the campus sexual and party culture and religion may prompt students to drop out of religion. Hoge et. al (1993) found that many students simply became busy with other non-religious activities like the sexual or party culture. Similarly, Smith and Snell (2009) notice that by disassociating from dogmatic or orthodox teachings, young people avoid conflict with personal urges or desires. Freitas (2015) observes that many students abandon drop-out of religion because they want to partake in sexual culture. Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) corroborate Freitas by noticing that some students prioritized sexual and party culture over religious involvement. Hamilton's dominant hook-up culture implicitly encourages open sexual exploration through constant conversations and validation in the Womyn's Center and organic conversation.

Within the sexual culture, students may abandon religion because they come out as homosexual or need to have an abortion. Gibbs (2016) found that students who affiliated under religions that emphasized abstinence and heteronormativity as essential for belonging, engaging

in the hook-up culture pushed them to drop their affiliation and practice altogether. Similarly, Gibbs noticed that many students who chose to engage sexually with people of the same sex and/or gender felt explicitly alienated by their religion and chose/were forced to drop out of their religion.



**Figure 4: Factors that Influence Students Who Drop Out of Religion**

### Literature Review Conclusion

While I have examined four specific subgroups within this literature review, I want to acknowledge that religious categorizations often bleed into one another. Students can be religiously affiliated while simultaneously engaging in “tinkering.” Some students may have been religiously untethered before they arrived at Hamilton and then continue to tinker while at the College. Students may drop out of spiritual and religious practices but still like to explore and learn about new forms of faith. Faith is a complicated topic because beliefs do not exist within a vacuum - they are constantly changing depending on the context and individual community values. Similarly, issues like sex or pressure to “be rational” may cause students to tinker or drop out of religious practice. Many of these relationships are not dichotomous. My methods section will outline how I will confront these nuances.

Based on my review of the literature, I will ask students about home experiences with religion and how their parents identify to examine how the strength (or lack thereof) of their home faith community impacts their religious inclinations on campus. I will use Hout and Wuthnow's research as a framework to investigate how political inclinations impact the strength of Hamilton's intellectual culture and emphasis on social diversity. Smith's work will act as a framework to explore spiritual tinkering and Moral Therapeutic Deism. I will draw from Freitas by exploring the power of the hook-up culture on student religious and spiritual identities. Finally, I will use Chambliss, Takacs, Boucher, Kucinkas, and Pendergrast as a framework to analyze how belonging and religion at Hamilton's might have shifted or stayed the same over time.

Hamilton students may be affected by family values, US understandings of individuality, and an isolation of religious life on campus. While the hook-up culture, emphasis intellectualism, and diversity affect many young adult cultures in America, they may specifically hold true at Hamilton. This may also be true for historical patterns and other current sentiments towards religion today. Each of these studies will help me formulate conclusions about what happens to students' religiosity and spirituality in the transition from home to Hamilton.

## **Methods**

In order to answer my research question, **“What happens to students’ religious and/or spiritual lives as they enter and live in a secular space like Hamilton College?”** I have draw on the subjective semi-structured interview research methods used in *Sex in the Soul* (Freitas 2015) and *Souls in Transition* (Smith and Snell 2009). I chose to interview students because it allowed them to provide more information than could be collected through a traditional survey.

By interviewing them in person, they were able to elaborate more on the nuances of their religious and spiritual decisions. Additionally, by prompting students to answer questions in the moment, their answers were less calculated. Instead of observing them passively through ethnography, semi-structured interviews allowed the students to self-identify their religious and spiritual inclinations while simultaneously giving them control to describe their religious and spiritual trajectories at Hamilton.

My independent variables exist under the umbrella of “Hamilton cultural life.” While some of my independent variables apply to all four groups, others can be specifically targeted towards one group. I measured whether these variables correlated to the specific interview while coding the interviews. All four groups are affected by: (1) culture; (2) politics; (3) social networks (including membership in clubs, teams, and organizations); (4) and family. Students who continue to practice their previous religion (group one) may also be specifically affected by: (1) religious organizations and social networks; (2) campus sexual culture; (3) shame; and (4) a genuine belief in a higher power. Students who converted from one organized religious affiliation to another (group two) were specifically affected by: (1) religious organizations and social networks; (2) crisis; (3) belonging; and (4) multiculturalism. Students who become religiously and spiritually untethered during their time at Hamilton (group three) were uniquely affected by: (1) campus sexual culture; (2) a desire for agency; and (2) multicultural forms of inspiration. Students who drop out of religious involvement (group four) were affected by: (1) a desire to differentiate from their parents; (2) lack of accessibility to religious life at Hamilton; (3) community emphasis on political correctness; (4) intellectualism; and (5) campus sexual culture.

My dependent variable focused on how students choose to negotiate spirituality and religion while they are at Hamilton. While the boundaries between each category of this

dependent variable are messy and overlapped, students chose between four options: (1) continue to participate in and are affiliated with the same formally-organized religion at Hamilton as they did before college, (2) officially convert their affiliation from their prior formally-organized religion to another formally-organized religion, (3) become spiritually or institutionally untethered from one religion and may choose to mix various religious practices and/or identify as “spiritual but not religious,” and (4) abandon religion altogether.

I aimed to interview up to seven students from each of my four groups by sending out separate all-campus emails describing each of the groups: the wording of the all-campus email varied slightly for each group in order to target specific populations (see appendix). For example, my email to students who have officially converted their affiliation (group two) asked: “Did you convert to a new religious affiliation while you have been a Hamilton student?” In contrast, my email to students who have dropped out of religion at Hamilton asked: “Do you consider yourself spiritual but not religious?” By sending out all-campus emails, students from all parts of campus self-identified religiously and spiritually.

All of my interview questions aimed to understand how the literature connected to students’ lived experiences. Similar to the emails, my interview questions (see appendix) were tailored for each individual group. In the interview, I asked some questions to all four groups like, “How does your family align politically?” I also asked some questions to only one or two groups - like this question for students who convert religious affiliations and practices (group two): “Why did you convert?” For more information on my questions, please see my interview guide. Within all interviews, I focused on students’ attitudes or beliefs about personal change in religious identifications while at Hamilton and narratives about their religious involvement in their home before Hamilton and their religious involvement at Hamilton. I interviewed students

by asking life history questions like: “Before you came to Hamilton, how did you practice religion or spirituality?” I coded the interview transcriptions and analyzed them for key variables and trends such as noting that their familial religious practices influenced their decision to stop practicing.

As stigma became a major variable, I organized my results into three groups including: (1) students who embrace religious stigma and continue to affiliate, (2) students who minimize stigma via adoption of spirituality and/or privatization, and (3) students who abandon religion for other reasons. Students who continued to participate in and are still affiliated with the same formally-organized religion at Hamilton as they were before college (group one) and students who converted to a new faith (group 2) are represented in ‘students who embrace religious stigma and continue to affiliate. Students who became spiritually or institutionally untethered from one religion and may have chosen to mix various religious practices and/or identify as “spiritual but not religious,” (group 3) are depicted within ‘those who minimize stigma via adoption of spirituality and/or privatization. Students who abandoned religion altogether (group 4) are portrayed in ‘students who abandon religion for other reasons.’ While my literature often focused on highly evangelical students, I was unable to find and interview these students. This gap in data curtails the accuracy of some of my analysis around why students decide to stay religious at a secular college like Hamilton.

I was aware of my own biases/transparent about my own religious affiliation throughout the qualitative interview process: I am spiritual but not religious, and this identification plays into my worldview through my beliefs on morals like sex, the role of a higher power, and social ethics. I made this clear at the beginning of each interview. To clarify, demographic information like race, class, and gender did not fit within the scope of my study. Finally, I gave all



participants an informed consent form (see appendix) and did not begin the interview until they signed.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Setting the Scene: Hamilton College**

In 2019, many members of the Hamilton College community were politically and socially liberal.<sup>1</sup> While the actual Hamilton College mission statement fails to specifically describe community values, the mission statement from the Days-Massolo Center mirrors many students' interests and concerns: "The Days-Massolo Center serves as a central resource for exploring intersections between gender, race, culture, religion, sexuality, ability, socioeconomic class and other facets of human difference." Even the existence of such a center indicates the degree to which current students feel it important to discuss these issues. Many students pondered these intersections in their classes, casual conversations with peers, life-changing practices and more. While many of the conversations around these issues were peaceful and graceful, many students, faculty, and administrators also regularly policed each other to be more politically correct within classes and casual social interactions. While this may have looked like a simple reminder, religious students often complained of feeling alienated by the hyper-sensitive environment. Indeed, certain aspects of religion directly contrast with what are considered political correct values within a liberal community.

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<sup>1</sup> While there are often multiple nuances to this definition, **liberal** as it is used here loosely means pro-choice, pro-gay marriage, pro-affirmative action, inclusive, economically liberal, and typically vote as a Democrat.

My literature review focused on what might happen to students' religiosity<sup>2</sup> when they enter a secular environment like Hamilton. I deduced that students could choose four different paths once they began college: (1) to continue to affiliate with their religion, (2) to convert, (3) to become spiritually untethered, or (4) to abandon religion altogether. Many factors--family, a sense of belonging, and shame, to name a few--emerged as reasons for why a student might have taken one of those paths.

After completing my interviews, stigma against religion stood out as a major factor in students' decisions to choose one of the pathways. Therefore, instead of focusing my results on the various factors that might impact a student's choice, I decided to reframe my results around the role of stigma in students' lives. I created three major groups to tease out the nuances: (1) those who embrace religious stigma and continue to affiliate<sup>3</sup>, (2) those who minimize stigma via adoption of spirituality<sup>4</sup> and privatization, and (3) those who abandon religion for other reasons. Of the twenty-one total students interviewed, six embraced religious stigma and continued to affiliate, seven minimized stigma by adopting spirituality or making it private, and five abandoned religion for other reasons. The remaining three students were not included in the

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<sup>2</sup> **Religiosity:** Interest and strong feelings in an established, religious denomination.

<sup>3</sup>Due to a lack of sufficient data, I melded group one (students who continue to affiliate after entering college) and group two (students who converted to a new religion upon entering college) together into the overall category of those who embrace religious stigma and continue to affiliate. By making this change, I focused more on the experience of identifying with a religious label instead of differentiating how certain people achieved said label.

<sup>4</sup> **Spirituality:** Aligning with Stanczak, I define spirituality as the "search for the sacred," something that is "transcendental....active and ongoing....multidimensional.... pragmatic....and emotional" (Stanczak 2006: 3). In other words, spirituality allows people to transcend their typical constraints of space and time and moves them into another place. It is a practice that requires cultivation. Based on an interconnected relationship with the self and world, it bleeds into all spheres of life and can be encountered at any moment. Unlike with religion, time commitments are individually set, and yet, those who practice spirituality still may reap the same emotional catharsis and reward.

results because their experiences were less relevant to the scope of the study. Overall, I argue that the negative attitudes surrounding organized religion in a secular college environment play a major role in religious and spiritual students' lives. For students who continue to affiliate, religious stigma affects them the most and they do various kinds of identity work to avoid it. For students who become spiritual but not religious, stigma also plays a role, though ultimately their lack of a label makes it hard for strangers to stereotype them. Contrastingly, this uncategorized existence often pushes students to be private because they are not sure how to explain it. For students who choose to abandon religion, their values in political liberalism override their spiritual or religious inclinations. In some cases, these students did not experience significant stigma, but they dropped out because Hamilton is overwhelmingly secular; religious affiliation therefore became irrelevant.

### **Those Who Embrace Religious Stigma and Continue to Affiliate with their Faith**

Many Hamilton students continue to affiliate with their faith despite campus sentiments of religious intolerance. With a reputation for dogmatism and conservatism (Smith & Snell 2009), religion and spirituality may be highly condemned on liberal college campuses. In 2016, Boucher and Kucinskis found some religious students at Hamilton experienced hostility from their peers and faculty members. In 2019, many religious students perceive similar hostility. This section will examine how six students maintain their religious devotion despite their experiences and awareness of on-campus religious stigma.

## ALBERT<sup>5</sup>

Albert is a lifelong Catholic who attends mass every Sunday and declares that he “agree[s] with everything done by the Catholic Church indiscriminately.” He was specifically told to hide his faith by his Residential Advisor (RA) in a conversation about contraceptives. This incident may have increased Albert’s awareness of on-campus religious stigma and may have pushed him to present his religiosity with a philosophical lens in order to remain ‘credible’ to a non-religious stranger during his interview.

Despite operating under the guise of mentorship, Albert’s recollection of his conversation with his RA suggests that the Hamilton community is largely intolerant towards pro-life sentiments:

The R.A. and I had a disagreement. It is not related to anything practical but rather a theoretical disagreement we were having about contraceptives. We were just going back and forth and it wound up with the RA saying, ‘I respect your opinion. It was good to have this conversation,’ but [I] think the RA said ‘You should not voice your opinion in public spaces on Hamilton's campus’ very directly. Which was uncomfortable although I stuck to that.

Why did you stick to that?

I guess out of fear of some sort of academic or other retaliation or you know fear of upsetting other people, alienating others.

Typically, RAs are hired to serve as social mentors for students at Hamilton. While the RA claims to respect Albert’s countercultural opinions, the RA ultimately encourages him to suppress an important aspect of his identity, which implies that his religiously-founded pro-life belief is not welcome.

After this incident, it is clear why Albert emphasizes the role of philosophy in shaping his religious beliefs in an interview with a stranger. Philosophy, an institutionally legitimized

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<sup>5</sup> All names have been changed.

academic discipline, grounds Albert's spiritual and religious self safely within the 'rational' world. By extension, he may avoid religious discrimination for 'irrationality.' Albert clearly highlighted how his Catholicism is influenced by established philosophers: "I study philosophy and I think that a lot of my philosophical thought is influenced by Catholic philosophers. I mentioned before that they used teleology to understand a lot about the world. I'm studying some Aristotle right now. Aristotle works well with Catholicism." During high school, Albert "started to read into Catholic social religious opinions. I'd say [these opinions] very much informed my teleological study foundation. And I think that that changed the ways in which I viewed things more than based on anecdotal experience and personal experience." In other words, Albert's "teleological study foundation," or life purpose, is built on philosophical texts rather than on his lived experiences. Instead of justifying his beliefs through personal experiences, which are liable to be deconstructed as irrational by his philosophy professors and peers, Albert relies more on the legitimacy and history of well-established and respected world philosophers like Aristotle. Albert therefore does not conform to Hadaway and Roof's (1988) assertion that higher education erodes religious plausibility and pushes students away from religious practice. He attends mass every Sunday and is in a celibate relationship with another Catholic. Albert wrapped up our interview by stating, "I think that I am more committed to the religion than I ever was before." However, he does not participate in the Newman Council, the on-campus Catholic student group. For Albert, philosophy likely serves as an identity shield for his spiritual self and allows him to engage in a solitary practice. He does not prioritize belonging to a supportive religious community. By citing a secular, institutionally legitimized discipline like philosophy, he absolves himself of labels like 'irrational' or 'silly.'

## JUSTIN

Like Albert, Justin's experiences with on-campus religious stigma may have pressured him to offer more 'rational' explanations for his religiosity because "the moment you say you're Catholic they make assumptions." Justin is a senior who grew up in a Catholic culture and, despite going through a brief period of religious questioning in high school, consistently attends mass. Ever the rational man, Justin confided that he hopes to turn his philosophy major into a law degree after graduating. But he pointed out that at Hamilton, his religiosity is not welcome.

Non-religious and non-spiritual students may immediately rely on cultural stereotypes of religious individuals and discard any potential for nuance. Justin expressed resentment towards students' assumptions surrounding his label: "Coming to Hamilton, the moment that I say that I'm Catholic, people already put the blinders up. They don't want to listen and they don't want to hear you: 'Oh, you're probably only pro-life; you will take away this and then you will do this and that.'" Essentializing students' identities by only focusing on their religiosity can have real consequences; afraid of discrimination, religious and spiritual students may struggle to express their full identities. As Justin explained, "Here at Hamilton sometimes people just shun you. So I really get erased in multiple ways... it is very frustrating. It's very annoying... I feel censored." Many people at Hamilton believe a liberal cosmology and, by extension, are intolerant of any implication of conservative<sup>6</sup> thought.

Despite his obvious frustration with the campus community's intolerance towards his identity, Justin's faith has remained strong. His philosophy major, like Albert's, might help him to present his faith in a 'logical' manner to skeptical others and to himself. Justin's classes have

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<sup>6</sup> In this study, **conservative** most typically means pro-life, economically conservative, two-sex/two-gender paradigm subscriber with the accompanied roles, dogmatic about textual religious decrees, and anti-contraceptives.

taught him to make strong philosophical arguments--a skill he may have transferred to explain his religious practice. This transferable skill may serve as one explanation for why Justin has managed to stay religiously committed throughout his time at Hamilton.

This commitment to a “rational” analysis of his faith was evident throughout our interview: “But the fact that I know that [people can betray you] tells me that there must be something bigger, because like if I can't fall on anybody who else can I fall on? So it's very pragmatic. I think it's actually kind of useful to go to church and to believe in God.” Justin’s application of the words ‘pragmatic’ and ‘useful’ to his religious practice harkens back to Freitas’ (2015) finding that students who are interested in religion may feel pressure to discuss their religiosity within intellectually acceptable terms. Justin further confirmed Freitas’ research while responding to my question of “Why do you believe in your religion?”: “I’m trying to have you understand my way and I think it's more pragmatic for you to listen than the long run. And I can give you like economic reasons why and I can give you psychological reasons why and I can give you mental health issues why.” Justin’s use of words like ‘economic’ and ‘psychological’ may be a reflection of his own internal assumption that I am suspicious of religion. While it is difficult to say whether he would speak this way with any other interviewer, his diction suggests that he has been pressured to adjust his religious lexicon to a secular environment.

Despite existing at Hamilton’s heavily secular campus, these two students are unwavering in their religious beliefs. This can be partially explained by examining their preoccupations with philosophy and ‘rational’ understanding of religious experiences and church attendance. For Albert and Justin, academically legitimized disciplines and regular church attendance likely serve as identity shields for their spiritual selves. This religious identity defense

mechanism serves as one explanation for how some students are able to continue to believe in their faith despite living in Hamilton's religiously intolerant environment.

While Justin and Albert feel direct stigma from the Hamilton community for their conservative religious beliefs, liberal students Mary and Grace maintain their religiosity by setting themselves apart from the Christian groups on campus who hold conservative beliefs. For Mary and Grace, their faith is the basis for their politics; beliefs in justice and love work symbiotically with their liberal ideologies.

## **GRACE**

Grace's religious beliefs act as the foundation for her politically liberal beliefs; however, public perceptions of Christianity as conservative have prompted her to distance herself from on-campus Christian groups. In an exasperated declaration, Grace disassociated herself with such groups: "It can be really frustrating when a lot of people associate Christianity and evangelical Protestant Christianity with conservatism even though there's really no foundation. If you're looking at the actual Bible then the actual religious beliefs don't line up." Similar to Justin, Grace is frustrated when peers make incorrect assumptions about her beliefs based on stereotyping. Within her "Christianity in America" course, Grace further separated herself from these negative stereotypes by saying that "Christian practices of the past that were kind of troubling are still wrong [even though they happened in the past]."

Within her own cosmology, Grace's decision to affiliate politically with the Democratic party happily coexists with her religious belief: "Oh man, OK we can be Democrats and love Jesus." While Grace placed herself as a seven on a one-to-ten scale of political liberalism, it is likely that she holds her faith above her political beliefs; she is a Christian first and a Democrat



second. Grace followed her parents' footsteps by attending a Northeast school but struggled to find the same religious community. Both of her parents were very religiously active while they attended Amherst, and her father eventually served as a Protestant Minister while she was growing up in the Midwest. When Grace arrived at Hamilton, she "tried really hard" to join the Hamilton Christian Fellowship but ultimately decided not to associate so closely with that group. Now, most of Grace's closest friends are "not religious," suggesting that by distancing herself from the stereotypes typically associated with religious groups, she has managed to stay religious in Hamilton's dominant secular culture. Grace's experience further affirms Pew Data that religion has negative cultural perceptions (Anon 2015) which may then bleed into anti-religion college sentiments and push students like Grace to further distance themselves from conservative stereotypes.

## **MARY**

Grace and Mary have similar experiences: Mary's liberal beliefs and practices--such as sex before marriage--are also fueled by her religious identity and she is so concerned about potential stigma that she preemptively distances herself from any sign of conservatism associated with Christianity. At home, religious participation is normal; when Mary made the transition to Hamilton, she was taken aback by a dominantly secular student body. Despite being raised in a Dutch Reformed Church and attending an interfaith conference over the summer, she avoids wearing t-shirts with any sort of religious messaging and dropped a class because she worried her religiosity would be unwelcome: "I took a philosophy class and it was about truth. The first week we were talking and I wanted to justify something I was saying with something that I believed in because of my faith. I was like, 'No, I'm just gonna drop this class.'" Mary's worries

never came to fruition because she dropped the class. This begs the question of whether hyper-sensitive religious students perpetuate assumptions of religious intolerance as related to their personal fears of humiliation and discrimination.

In order to maintain her “pretty liberal” identity on a campus with implicit messaging around religious intolerance, Mary realized that she needed to distance herself from the Hamilton Christian Fellowship on campus and instead embed herself in the interfaith community:

I did a Bible study in [Dark side dorm] where I lived, and so it was just freshmen. There was one kid who did it who wasn't a Christian- he was ethnically Jewish but not religiously Jewish... they let him come but he would say things and they would say ‘shut up.’ I kind of understand that because it was their time of worship but also he was just looking for community as a freshman. I realized, ‘Whoa, I'm not the same brand of Christian as you guys. I'm out.’

Hamilton Christian Fellowship’s exclusive attitude pushed Mary away from becoming a member:

They were really nice people and I didn't disagree with them, like I was like ‘You're definitely Christian. We believe the same story,’ but I didn't really find community with them just because I felt like it was kind of a situation where it was like, ‘Oh, we're having this Bible study and what a relief that we're all just like Christians here and there's no non-Christians here.’ I felt really uncomfortable with that. That's also why I don't like my high school friends anymore because they are definitely of that same camp: ‘Like you can have your friends who aren't Christians but like you should ultimately fall back on people who share your faith.’

A regular attendee of interfaith events, Mary’s commitment to multi-faith environments may explain her resistance towards single faith environments like the Hamilton Christian Fellowship. These multi-faith environments may also be more politically liberal. Her desire to investigate the interfaith world through a conference and multifaith communities does not dilute the strength she feels by subscribing to only one faith. Instead, she creates a symbiotic relationship between religion and political leftism by avoiding monotheistic and potentially conservative religious communities.

While many students assume that religion is always dogmatic, Mary's lived experience negates this stereotype both in her home environment and in her current expression of her religiosity at Hamilton. For example, her attitude towards sex aligns with both her church upbringing and the campus community, allowing her to bypass stigma associated with religious people who decide to wait until marriage to have sex. According to Mary, her Dutch Reformed Christian Church would likely be supportive of her year-long sexual and romantic relationship with an atheist; this suggests that she has been both pro-sex-before-marriage and Christian long before arriving at Hamilton:

I have sex... I think there are a lot of rules that Christians follow that probably just exist so people didn't get STDs. We need to stop looking at those rules and realize that we understand medicine now... [No sex before marriage] was never something my church preached. I didn't go to necessarily a marketed progressive church but when people would live with their significant other it was OK.

By interpreting her religion within a pro-sex-before-marriage framework, Mary is able to simultaneously act on her personal sexual desires and also to connect with the sexually active members of the student body. By extension, she may feel alienated by Christians who interpret their faith within a more rigid framework.

For both Grace and Mary, Hamilton's liberal culture is compatible with their own religious beliefs. However, to justify their religiosity to themselves within the dominantly secular student body, they do specific identity work. For both young women, they purposely distance themselves from conservative Christian groups on campus, maintain non-religious friends, and engage in socially and bodily liberal practice like sex before marriage in order to simultaneously distinguish themselves away from conservative religions and towards liberal communities. Liberal and religious students like Mary and Grace help us understand how students who continue to practice their faith perform their identity while at Hamilton.

## **MYRA**

While the majority of Mary and Grace's religious views align with both the Democratic party and their self-identification as "liberal," Myra's decision to become religious subsequently conflicted with her family's liberal values. A sociology student from a cosmopolitan city, Myra is proud of her gay twin and immigrant parents: "My sister is gay and my parents are immigrants and I'm totally liberal." While she consistently references her own political liberalism, she feels most stigmatized by her family for her decision to convert: "I think it's easier to be almost Christian here than back home. When I'm back home my dad's like 'religion is evil'... I have to pretend like I'm not Christian when I'm home just because it's so weird." Smith and Snell (2009) argue that religion is often a low-stakes way for students to differentiate from their parents. On the other hand, Myra's conversion was not a low-stakes decision thus prompting her to maintain her liberal views. In Myra's family, her conversion revealed factions between her and her father; her decision to become religious was radical within her family context. While Myra proved her autonomy by converting, she held onto her liberal political identity, which may have acted as a way to belong to both groups.

Despite retaining some of her liberal beliefs, Myra genuinely believes in many of the teachings of the Catholic faith. However, she also maintains distance from conservative on-campus religious groups in order to uphold her liberal cosmology. At the same time, Myra genuinely believes in God. She described knowing that "God is watching over me" and referenced that "Bread is like the Body of Christ" while describing a story where an old woman gave her bread when she was lonely on her abroad program. In order to retain her faith at Hamilton, she does "an interpretive thing" and picks and chooses what is relevant to her current social context. By extension, she is able to defy stereotypes of converts as conservative and to fit in with the liberal campus community. Further upholding Western values of free-thinking and

autonomy, Myra left the Christian Fellowship because it was “this big organization trying to tell us what to believe” and “propaganda.” Now, she goes to Mass every Sunday but does not attend the Fellowship. Free-thinking is a major tenant of Myra’s religiosity: she disregards some aspects of the faith that she disagrees with. She noted that “How devoted I am fluctuates a lot. It can happen for any reason but often it’s based on whom I am surrounded with and my mood and what’s going on in my life.” She confided that her ex-boyfriend used to chastise her explicitly for “cherry-picking” from the Bible, but she herself did not see this as problematic. By distancing herself from the conservative Fellowship, Myra happily maintains membership in liberal communities and minimizes opportunities to be stigmatized.

## **JOSH**

Previous students felt threatened by stigma and adjusted explicit demonstrations of faith. However, in Josh’s case, perceived religious intolerance may have actually pushed him *towards* his religion. Due to his experience with on-campus religious stigma, Josh speaks positively about his sense of belonging in the Jewish community.

While most stigma against religion on campus is perpetuated by students, Josh’s experience with a professor sent him a strong message:

Fall of sophomore year I was taking a sociology course and we had a test that was scheduled on Yom Kippur. We e-mailed the professor beforehand saying that ‘we’re not going to the test because we’re going to be at services.’ The professor really pushed back against that and made us take the test. She said we could take the test the night before or Saturday morning because it’s a Thursday through Friday holiday. I found this very annoying. It was kind of hypocritical given the stereotype of the accepting sociology professor with signs hanging all over her door... We took the test Saturday.

The message was: your religious needs do not conform to the academic culture.’ Josh’s frustration with the perceived hypocritical nature of the sociology professor aligns perfectly with

Boucher and Kucinskas' (2016) finding that while the Hamilton community markets itself as accepting of all diverse identities, community members often fail to respect religious identities.

However, Josh only cited these experience as "fairly annoying"; suggesting that one could hypothesize that Josh actually bonded with his Jewish community over this experience. He was with another Jewish friend throughout and may have felt more defensive of his religious community and identity when an authority figure challenged it. Indeed, Josh cites community as his driving motivation to join the Jewish faith.

Josh consistently emphasized community over spirituality: this may suggest that he wants to bypass labels of 'irrational' within the politically secular Hamilton campus. He found himself engaged in Judaism on campus after a recommendation from a friend. During Josh's first year at Hamilton, he was planless for Passover:

I felt weird not doing anything. And my friend is the one who told me to come to this [Jewish passover dinner].

What was your first time there like?

I had no idea what to expect. It was a lot of fun. As a freshman you're making new friends. Towards the end of freshman year I definitely knew a lot of people but wasn't necessarily close with people. So it was a nice way to meet new people and especially also older students. People were super welcoming. I remember the Rabbi talked to me because he knew I was new. I told him my background and he was like, 'Well if you want to come back you are more than welcome but don't feel any pressure.' They're just so welcoming of the students and the people are regular students and in leadership roles which was very nice.

Josh chose to plug into a connected community when he was specifically invited to belong. He may have felt supported and special because of the unique opportunities to connect with older students and adult figures on campus. Like the friend who invited Josh to Passover, many members of Josh's fraternity attend services with him. Additionally, his access to students in leadership roles on campus through his religious community may have put him in touch with

students who were already interested in mentoring underclassmen. Finally, Josh's boss is Jewish and Josh feels that his Jewish identity "gives us something extra to talk about." Chambliss and Takacs (2014) deduced that highly-involved mentors filled an vital niche in students' sense of belonging by providing guidance, perspective, and support. While not all older students are necessarily mentors, Josh may have found that the presence of older students may have contributed greatly to his decision to convert. Josh did not struggle to respond why his conversion had been important to him: "The biggest thing that I think we do is we meet about every week and everybody goes around tells the best part of their week. I think it's the community aspect of it. I like [that] a lot." Josh is able to genuinely connect with fellow classmates through a shared identity and a weekly ritual of eating food and checking in. Josh did not talk about prayers or rituals influencing his conversion, suggesting that he truly values Judaism for the sense of belonging and community he feels.

By highlighting a desire to belong to a community as the main reason for his conversion, Josh carefully constructed his identity to fit in with the politically correct campus culture. His conversion may be more acceptable to Hamilton's left-leaning campus community; an innocent desire for community is typically considered positive within left-leaning political frameworks.

### **Section Conclusions**

Overall, students who embrace religious stigma and continue to affiliate do so out of either a defiance of the stigma, like Josh, or significant identity work, like Mary, Grace, Justin and Albert. As Myra points out, many students hold onto their faith because of a genuine belief in a higher power. In comparison to other sections, religious stigma plays arguably the biggest

role for students who continue to affiliate because they maintain their label and are thus more likely to be judged or discriminated against.

### **Students Who Minimize Stigma via Adoption of Spirituality and Privatization**

At Hamilton College, biases against religion are not synonymous with biases against spirituality. In fact, generally in the U.S. interest in spirituality has risen progressively over the years. Roof (1994) describes how the Baby Boomer generation's interest in spirituality has progressively grown, leading to the creation of a whole new category: the spiritual but not religious. Bolstering Roof's claim, Stanczak describes spirituality as the modern hybrid: "Religions do social services and spirituality does the soul...whereas religion is primarily collective, public, and shared, spirituality is simultaneously collective *and* individual, public *and* private, shared *and* internally intimate" (Stanczak 2006: 20). Many students interviewed indicated that they turned towards spirituality instead of religion as a means of bypassing stigma towards religion while still engaging with "the search for the sacred" (Stanczak 2006: 3).

Aware of an openly religiously-intolerant campus but not affiliated themselves, some of these students minimized stigma via either adoption of spirituality or privatization. This section examines both spiritually untethered<sup>7</sup> students and spiritual and religious<sup>8</sup> students. The first category bypass almost any stigma from peers but obscure their spiritual cosmologies anyway because they themselves do not know how to concretely express their cosmology to strangers. The second category offers a more nuanced view of how to balance spirituality and religiosity:

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<sup>7</sup> Within the parameters of this study, spiritually untethered is used to show students that are not affiliated with any denomination and create their personal cosmology on their own.

<sup>8</sup> While I will talk about this more later in this section, spiritual and religious students maintain a dual identity. They are religious in their home contexts but shed that identity at Hamilton for a more spiritual one instead.



they maintain one spiritual identity alongside one religious identity in order to mesh with two contrasting communities and minimize stigma from both.

### **Spiritually Untethered Students**

Despite the pressures they feel both internally and externally, spiritually untethered students are still able to entertain their spiritual curiosities by ‘exploring’ different ways of being instead of ‘committing’ to a religious group. I argue that while spiritually untethered students feel pressure to avoid religious labels while at Hamilton, they actually occupy an unnoticed loophole in the potentially intolerant community that allows them to explore their spirituality stigma-free.

### **PEMA AND HOPE**

Pema and Hope experience the benefits of this loophole: they are happily spiritually untethered and see Hamilton as their playground for spiritual exploration. Pema, a first-year student who often attends spirituality dinners in the Chapel, expressed similar desires to understand others’ beliefs: “Once I came here [Hamilton], I saw like a lot of opportunities to explore religion and spirituality.” Pema also attends the Inquiry of Spirituality non-credit class held on Fridays, where she discusses topics like suffering and forgiveness from an interfaith perspective. She signed up for the Muslim Student Association trip to New York City because she was interested in better understanding Islam. She also regularly attends the interfaith dinners in the chapel on topics like the Spirituality of Dreams and the Spirituality of Failure. After engaging with so many different spiritual and faith communities, Hope, another first year interested in spirituality, felt that “Hamilton is a really nice place for me to just believe in

whatever I want to believe.” Both of these students are able to “tinker”<sup>9</sup> (Wuthnow 2010) with various cosmologies in an effort to create a sense of their own unique belief system. Overall, Pema and Hope perceive Hamilton to be a friendly place to explore their spirituality, suggesting that spiritually untethered students do not experience the stigma that religious students appear to combat regularly.

### **CELESTE**

Some spiritually untethered students may see possibilities for exploration as well, but question the degree to which they should explore because of perceived stigma and subsequently obscure their spirituality from the community by tinkering with it quietly.

Celeste, a first-year student who described herself as “spiritually confused,” turned to private spiritual tinkering while at Hamilton because she was genuinely interested in understanding her own cosmology. In order to learn more about herself, she explored other faiths: “We recently had the Quaker Voluntary Service [fellowship] people come through...Some of them weren't strongly spiritual but were just kind of taking the time to explore that. That inspired me to try and explore that myself.” Celeste’s miscategorization of Quakers as weak spiritual people shows that she is likely new to Quaker history and thought. However, her mere interest in the faith represents her own personal desires to become more spiritual. Earlier in the interview, Celeste explained that her personal cosmology focuses explicitly on the power of silence. Her interest in the Quakers directly echoes Smith and Snell’s (2009) claim that students seek faiths that affirm their pre-existing worldviews. It is therefore possible to classify this behavior under the umbrella of “tinkering” (Wuthnow 2010). By casually investigating her

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<sup>9</sup> Wuthnow (2010) defines tinkering as amalgamating spiritual inspiration from a variety of sources in order to build a coherent cosmology.

spirituality, Celeste does not need to claim a serious label and be associated with religiously intolerant comments and can still feed a budding aspect of her identity.

Celeste is caught in a tension between wanting to know more about spirituality and needing to hide new, potentially vulnerable beliefs. She even confided that she had signed up for my interview so that she might be able to talk through her cosmology in a confidential environment. Over the course of the interview, Celeste described feeling insecure about believing in a higher power but hinted that she believed “that there are a lot of the forces and people acting on the Earth.” She prefers intimate conversations in safe spaces: “I think having private conversations is something that I'm more comfortable with than in a group setting. Expressing all of this stems from not knowing exactly how to define it myself.” Students who engage in “tinkering” (Wuthnow 2010) act as their own spiritual guides. Without a specific teaching from an institution, they are left to create a personal cosmology. Students are likely to turn toward spiritual tinkering while at Hamilton because they are genuinely interested in understanding it. The underbelly of tinkering may be a desire to avoid ‘coming out’ as religious and subsequently being associated with conservative thought.

Experiences with family and friends have left Celeste highly aware of religious stigma in the US. When she first entered college, she encountered “communities [where] the people I still surround myself with [are] very openly against organized religion and faith.” She struggled with the ambiguities of making up her own cosmology and subsequently hid her beliefs from even those closest to her:

Most of my friends and peers didn't really have any particular faith and most of them were very proudly and openly atheist. It made me feel out of place. Even my brother and my father are openly atheist, so it made me feel a little out of place in still believing in some sort of spirituality or maybe even supporting the possibility of higher power. So I

never really felt comfortable talking about that. It was a very personal thing, very personal for me. I find that's still true.

While one aspect of Celeste's hesitancy to discuss her spirituality may stem from her lack of a concrete label like 'atheist' or 'religious,' her knowledge of stigma towards faith acts as another component. In order to shield her budding interests from potential judgement for believing in more than atheism, she privatizes her faith.

## **JOY**

Joy emphasizes the solitary nature of her practice, leading me to hypothesize that stigma surrounding religion may have pushed such students toward solitary practices as a means of protecting them from negative outside judgements. Reflecting Wilkins' (2008) observation that students prioritize choice in spirituality, introverted spiritual students express a deep desire for privacy over their religious choices. "The biggest thing for me is being alone. Alone time is huge and going out doing things that I like, for example going on walks with music or podcasts, that's where I get it." Joy, a first-year student who takes art classes to explore her spirituality, describes herself as spiritual but not religious. Her cosmology is complex, but alone time served as an overarching theme throughout our discussion. For Joy, her private imagination is fundamental to her conception of her spirituality. When I pressed her to describe what she believes, she mused that her relationship with the spirit is:

very self internal and it's very magical in the way that there are no limits. Daydreaming is my favorite thing. I just think daydreaming is so important and it's what we're made of and it's what we become. It feels like a prayer... Finding new things to think seems really special to me. I like all that alone time.

While her inner world is essential to her personal spirituality, Joy also explores religion through the Internet. She regularly watches YouTube videos where highly religious people describe their

beliefs because she feels “a fascination with people who have strong beliefs in things that I just never even thought to think about.” From these videos and her daydreaming practices, Joy has come to believe that there is a “law that plays out our lives and connects all humans.” Unlike religious students who often search for community to discuss their spirituality, Joy prefers to experience her spirit on her own through either daydreaming or Internet observations.

## **JUDE**

As the US becomes more secular (Hout & Fischer 2002), any associations with belief may become secluded as well; Joy and Jude’s experiences lead me to hypothesize that it may only be socially acceptable to explore spiritual matters in private or in the company of a few trusted others. While Joy only explores her spirituality alone, Jude disclosed that he and his girlfriend often discuss their spiritual lives. Jude is a bright first-year student with a wonderful smile who grew up attending a Unitarian Universalist (UU) church. However, when he revealed that he was interested in joining the army, his UU church publicly shunned him and repeatedly told him to reconsider his decision. A self-proclaimed “science guy,” Jude underwent a huge life transformation at the end of high school. He abandoned the UU church and began to think seriously about his spirituality. He told me that if he were to write his ‘credo’ (a type of religious confirmation speech within UU faith) now, he would focus on “reincarnation and the belief in a higher power. I think that there could be a god. There could be multiple gods... I believe in the afterlife.” An active meditator, Jude is decidedly private about his spiritual beliefs. Like Joy he worries about sounding “silly.” However, he finds the majority of his spiritual inspiration from his girlfriend: “We meditate or we just are mindful together a lot of the time.” Jude’s emphasis on his girlfriend suggests that he considers his spirituality, something relatively ‘new’ in his life,

to be highly vulnerable. After experiencing stigma from his church community, which explicitly marketed itself as liberal, Jude is cautious to expose his belief system to strangers.

Jude explores his underdeveloped spiritual cosmologies through creative and accepting spaces like art classes and past life regression therapy. Beyond his conversations and meditations with his girlfriend, Jude explores his spirituality through his photography seminars. Like Joy, he “takes the opportunity there to work out some of my stuff,” like his belief in past lives. He may also work out some of this “stuff” in past life regression therapy. He visited a past life regression therapist who hypnotized him ‘into’ his past life, where he learned that he was once a scientist. He believes strongly that each life is influencing the other and has explored this through multimedia photography projects. Art classes may represent spaces where students can express thoughts and feelings that they might be uncomfortable speaking about publicly. Furthermore, they echo Wuthnow’s (2010) assertion that spiritually untethered students may find inspiration from secular art sources instead of religious texts.

### **Spiritual and Religious Students**

Spiritually untethered students do not regularly engage in religious practices and find spiritual inspiration from a variety of sources. By extension, they are most concerned with creating a new personal cosmology. Representing a more nuanced way to be spiritually engaged, spiritual and religious students are more concerned with maintaining their dual identities. Coming from highly religious families, they emphasize their religiosity when they are in contact with their homes. Responding to perceptions of religious stigma at Hamilton, they deemphasize their religiosity completely and only identify as ‘spiritual.’

## **FATIMA**

Motivated by a desire to maintain two religiously contrasting communities and to minimize stigma from both, Fatima coexists simultaneously within the spiritual and religious categorizations. Fatima presents a more nuanced view Smith and Snell's claim that religion is a low-stakes way for students to differentiate from their parents. Faced with a highly religious family, she has decided to maintain two identities: one at Hamilton, where she is decidedly irreligious, and one at home, where she is an active practitioner. Her double life may further elucidate how a desire to make their own decisions about religion and spirituality in college actually plays out for students with highly religious families.

Fatima balances two religious identities because she feels that Hamilton is unwelcoming to her religious self and home is unwelcoming to her irreligious self. She describes her home environment as "a decent level of strict. My mom encourages me to dress conservatively and try to pray regularly." But when she arrived as a first-year student on Hamilton's campus, she realized that maintaining her high level of religious commitment was both physically challenging and socially difficult. Harkening back to Kucinskas and Boucher's (2016) statement that Hamilton's environment was physically inaccessible for religious students, Fatima complained that the communal bathrooms made it difficult for her to wash herself in preparation for prayer. She was also worried that her roommate would think she was weird if she was always praying. But why did Fatima switch from highly religious person into a spiritually interested one?

What really changed for me was not forcing myself to be conservative anymore. For me to try new things and for me to be more open to new experiences that would not be like okay with being Muslim. Obviously, I don't pray as frequently here because it's harder to do. Praying five times a day is just really really challenging. So I still do try to have a connection with God but I've focused more on trying to be a good person rather than getting all the nitty gritty of my religion down.

Now, as a sophomore, Fatima has even stopped wearing tights under her dresses and just “show[s] my legs.” While she continues to eat Halal, she masks her religious identity by telling all of her Hamilton friends that she is pescatarian so that she does not have to do the emotional labor of explaining her Muslim identity. She was surprised when she perceived a community-wide ignorance towards Islam and claimed that she “didn’t realize that I would become more spiritual than religious.” Fatima noted that this shift was a combination of her newfound agency to toggle away from her religion (“no one had expectations for me here”) without her parents’ gaze and maintaining an interest in developing her own spirituality: “spirituality is a means for me to reflect upon my own life.”

While Fatima’s decision to dilute her faith while at Hamilton has definitely been partially motivated by her perception of a campus-wide stigma and ignorance towards Islam, she also seems satisfied with her decision to be spiritual but not religious:

People don't remember [what religion I identify with] even when I explain it to them and they might ask me again. So that's why I just say I'm a test area. When I saw so many people that weren't even religious but they're happy with their lives, but then I also saw so many people that were religious and they're really happy too and they were very calm too. I saw those like hybrid people who were in the middle who just focus on their own thing and what they believed in.

Fatima’s emotional exhaustion around explaining her Muslim identity to her friends at Hamilton may have pushed her towards identifying as a ‘hybrid’ religious person. While this decision has clearly changed her, she reverts to her religious identity when she returns to her parents’ house:

I mean when I'm back home I do try to be more conservative just because my parents are back home and I don't want to hear anything. I don't want to deal with that. So my friends back home are used to seeing that too. It doesn't surprise them. It's just really funny because at first when I was younger and nobody really understood Islam and ‘it's so hot outside like why are you wearing pants?’ and then I used to say ‘it's my religion’ and people used to not understand. But now it's so funny because after like explaining it to them my whole life, now would be weird if I did show my legs in front of them or if I wasn't conservative.



While religion has become somewhat irrelevant in Fatima's life at Hamilton, pressure to please her religious parents ensures that she maintains her faith at home. Similarly, Fatima clearly does not want to undo all of the identity work she did while growing up by telling her friends that she is spiritual but not religious. In order to fit smoothly into both worlds, she maintains both her religious identity and her irreligious identity depending on her context.

## **MERCY**

Mercy undergoes similar identity work: she does not want to be associated with religion while at Hamilton and also does not want to upset her community while at home. The daughter of a minister, Mercy grew up attending Protestant church services regularly. Her home community is primarily made up of other people in her Protestant denomination. But when Mercy came to Hamilton, she did not mesh well with members of the Hamilton Christian Fellowship: "The size of the community [Hamilton Christian Fellowship] wasn't super big. They weren't people I wanted to really align myself with. I honestly didn't want to be seen as active Christian." Why would Mercy, a previously religious daughter-of-a-minister, not want to be seen as religious at Hamilton? She confided in me that "it's kind of weird to tell people that my dad's a minister. This version [others had] of me [that] I was maybe politically conservative. Which is just the idea that I had my mind [sic] that I want to disassociate." At Hamilton, Mercy abandoned her religious persona in order to both avoid associations with political conservatives and also join the liberal majority: "When I came to Hamilton, I cemented those liberal views as political ideologies." While Mercy fits in with dominant politically liberal communities who may stigmatize religion while she is on campus, she occupies a different identity at home.

Mercy maintains her conservative religious identity in order to please her parents and her home community. Mercy's mother is especially concerned with her daughter's faith and routinely calls her to check in: "My mom calls me every Sunday and she ramps up to it. I'm very aware of it. Like 'how are classes?' Then, 'Did you go to church today?'" Sometimes I'll kind of just lie and say [I went to] God's services. I try to walk around truth and then sometimes I'll just tell her you know I had a lot of homework and a concert." Mercy clearly lies about her campus religious involvement because she is concerned with maintaining a positive relationship with her mother,. While Mercy has completely differentiated from her parents through her religious identity at Hamilton, she fakes that identity whenever she is in contact with them:

How is it when you go home? Do you go back to church? How do you transition your faith or lack of faith here?

I go to church when I will go back home. I think it's parental pleasing. Also partly because there is a huge community of Korean Americans and immigrants and people like second generation teens and 20-year-old young adults that are really a social network...They feel very much like family.

Unlike Fatima, who is tired of explaining her shifting identity and wants to keep her home peaceful, Mercy avoids revealing her updated identity solely because she wants to please her parents. She also revealed that when she took the chaplain's academic course during her freshman year, she would tell her parents that she was bolstering her religious identity by interacting with the chaplain more often. In reality, Mercy disclosed that this course actually made her question her religious beliefs further. However, she used her participation in something with a religious label as an excuse to avoid discussing her religious identity too much with her parents.

## **Section Conclusions**

Students with heavily religious families may maintain a home religious identity in order to ensure a harmonic home existence. By partaking in intense dual identity work, Mercy and Fatima are able to maintain a sense of belonging within their separate environments. While they have completely differentiated from their parents at Hamilton, they retain a harmony within their homes by aligning with religion whenever they are there.

### **Students Who Reject Stigma Intentionally or Unintentionally By Abandoning Religion Altogether**

In almost all of my interviews, students explained a dilemma: how to address the contradictions they face when confronted with religious communities who emphasize specific doctrines that the students do not accept. A community-wide emphasis on political correctness<sup>10</sup> and liberalism provides one explanation for why students abandon religion while at Hamilton. While the previous sections have focused on how students negotiated their religiosity in light of stigma, this section will spotlight the students who abandoned religion because of perceived stigma or community values that exclude religion. This process sometimes happened intentionally or organically<sup>11</sup>. Individuals' definitions of perceived stigma operate on a sliding scale here: it can mean anything from experiencing gender- or racially-based conservatism to struggling with the required time commitment of participating in a campus religious community.

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<sup>10</sup> Political correctness can be defined as a “morally assertive view of American society, revolving around the efforts of previously excluded groups to construct new identities. All of these forms of consciousness—nativism, cosmopolitan liberalism, and multiculturalism—now compete on the American scene in the politics of identity” (Spencer, 1994: 547).

<sup>11</sup> By “organic,” I mean that the student did not intentionally abandon religion but rather that it was an unintentional process made without significant thought or discussion as a response to their entrance and assimilation into the Hamilton community.

## DELTA

Despite coming to Hamilton without a religion, Delta considered converting to Catholicism after arriving at Hamilton but ultimately dropped out because she was uncomfortable with the conservatism within the Catholic church itself. A sophomore who grew up in a Catholic Eastern European country, Delta dressed in vibrant, clashing colors for our interview. With her dyed hair, ear piercings, and pro-LGBTQI+ buttons on her backpack, she seemed like the last person I would have suspected to have almost converted to Catholicism. But within just a few days of arriving at Hamilton, Delta became friends with a Catholic student who immediately pulled her into the religious community. This first friend became the conduit for her interest in the Catholic community. After a year of participating in Catholic community activities, Delta spent the summer leading into her sophomore year looking into a formal conversion.

Unlike the students who perceived stigma from the campus community, Delta did not experience negativity around her interest in formal religion. Her main concern stemmed from the actual Catholic Church teachings themselves:

I started reading more about it and because there are some parts of the Catholic faith that I don't agree with that if I educated myself more then maybe I could understand. I started questioning a lot of what the church was trying to teach me. I realized that I could not agree with a lot of things that they say. If I can't agree with that then I'm undermining the church's authority so I can't be fully in the community. It just spiraled into questioning what I believe and what I don't believe. I just ended up concluding that I was just very desperately seeking for some kind of connection.

The fundamental tenets of the faith were incompatible with her own identity. For example, her intense discomfort with the anti-gay marriage tenants associated with the Catholic faith did not just push her into adopting a 'cafeteria Catholic'<sup>12</sup> approach to the faith, it ultimately pushed her

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<sup>12</sup> A 'Cafeteria Catholic' is a term associated with people who have a strong commitment to some aspects of their faith, but not to others (Hoge et al., 2001: 198).

to reject Catholicism altogether. One reading of her motivation is that Hamilton lacks an on-campus model of how to be a ‘cafeteria Catholic’ and that Delta perceived an ‘all or nothing’ approach to Catholicism which eventually drove her out of it altogether. Another, more likely reading of Delta’s decision, is that these Catholic tenants were anathema to how she identifies as a queer person:

You said that there were some things you couldn't agree with. Would you mind telling me exactly what those were?

So there are a lot of hot issues surrounding the church but like you know I was trying to understand their views on same sex marriage and I was trying to understand their views on abortion and on contraception....You know like we're supposed to be good people, not harm. I tried to read church documents that explained why same sex marriage isn't OK. I could not rationalize it. I could understand to some extent if someone is gay or bisexual and is Catholic that they would choose not to do it. But I could not understand how Catholics could force that onto people who are not religious because we live in a secular country. I could not kind of understand why would they try to change everyone else's views. It didn't sit with me and I could not accept that perspective.

Phrases like “I could not rationalize it” and “It didn’t sit with me and I could not accept that perspective” further confirm that Delta found the Catholic teachings to be fundamentally contradictory to her identity and opinions. Delta identifies as queer and was active in the Queer Student Union at Hamilton throughout her first year at the same time that she was also active in the Catholic community. After she investigated the “hot issues surrounding the Church,” Delta chose to abandon her religious community.

She may have decided to prioritize her politically liberal identity over her desire for a religious community. Instead of finding community in religious networks, Delta ultimately turned towards an irreligious community to support her. After leaving the Catholic community, Delta identifies as “agnostic” because she still thinks about religion but rejects formal participation. This year, her friends are “very liberal. I was very liberal when I came to college. I was the only liberal person from the group [of Christians], which was emotional labor.” Delta’s

experience supports Smith and Snell's (2009) declaration that religion's bad reputation for dogmatism and close-mindedness often causes people to abandon it altogether. When confronted with direct evidence of the Catholic Church's open discrimination against her as a queer person, Delta dropped out of the religion altogether.

## **RUE**

Despite growing up in a heavily religious environment, Rue echoed Delta's decision to abandon religion for political reasons. While Rue's grandparents are Hindu, her mother converted to Catholicism before she was born. She grew up attending Catholic services and was confirmed within the Catholic faith when she was a teenager. Rue joined Hamilton Christian Athletes during her freshman year and immediately liked the on-campus community. However, she felt extremely uncomfortable with the off-campus church environment:

But I found that I didn't really like any of the churches in the local area.... After a while I just didn't agree with a lot of the viewpoints that the people are giving out because they were more conservative than I was used to. I always felt like I didn't belong just because I was the only woman of color in the service.

Rue went on to disclose that the pastor's sexist remarks, support of President Donald Trump, and judgement made her "Feel bad about my life choices when I go somewhere. They're my choices and I made them." Instead of re-interpreting her religion to fit her desires, as one would within an MTD framework, Rue abandoned her faith altogether: "Now I'm changed, I'm a young person and I like to party on the weekends. For him [the pastor] to speak badly about it just also puts things in perspective...Their beliefs just contradicted my beliefs very strongly. I didn't feel comfortable in that environment."

While Rue's marginalized identity as a woman of color partially accounted for her decision to abandon the local Catholic church, she also cited a sociology of religion course as

another reason for her religious departure: “It [the course] literally took me for a spin because like it's something you think about a lot. Then thinking of the universe as socially constructed by people- that really makes you think about it. Especially because I come from a worldview strictly created by religion.” When Rue combined her own beliefs with a course that emphasized deconstructing religious power structures, she finally rejected her faith. Now, Rue identifies as “non-religious and non-spiritual.”

While a multitude of factors likely contributed to Delta and Rue’s departure from religion, pro-LGBTQI+ and race-sensitive politics clearly played a central role in the decision. While both Delta and Rue’s value commitments do not align with the religions they engaged with, they ultimately left for slightly different reasons. Delta left because she was uncomfortable with specific doctrines within the Catholic Church. Rue left because she felt her identity was not welcome at the local Christian Church. Both Delta and Rue negotiated with stigma from religion that originated outside of Hamilton College; they remind us that Hamilton community members interact with and are affected by sentiments off of the Hill as well. Delta and Rue serve as one example of how students navigate tensions between their own liberal political beliefs and diverse identities and religious stigma. In the end, they alleviated these tensions by dropping out altogether.

## **PETER AND MAX**

While many students are intentional in their decisions to abandon their faith, others are less conscious of the decision and simply find their time filled by other activities that relate to other more socially acceptable college identities. Smith and Snell (2009) found that the majority of students who abandon religion unintentionally fill their time with non-faith-based activities.

Upon moving away from their parents, students are free to fill their time however they wish. Religious practice can be time-consuming and potentially irrelevant to a student's new college life. In the midst of building a new 'college' identity, students may organically prioritize some aspects of their non-religious identities over their religious identities. Time and identity management therefore play a major role in whether students eventually abandon their faiths while at Hamilton.

Many students may put religious life at the bottom of their priority lists. Max, a junior who grew up attending a Jewish synagogue, is often too busy to attend services: "I don't go a lot of times just cause I just have too much work to do." Instead of engaging with Jewish life at Hamilton, Max is heavily involved with campus publications and his STEM major. Despite his mother's pestering, religious life became too time-consuming for him to continue while at college.

For Peter, a first-year student interested in Hamilton's party scene, religious life is inconvenient to his weekend sleep schedule. Attending Christian services early in the morning conflicted with his biological needs: "Sunday is a quiet day. It's my time to recover from the weekend and I don't want to wake up early." While Peter is clearly making a choice between sleep and religious life, he was likely not highly intentional about the decision.

For Max and Peter, religion fell to the bottom of their priorities list. Max and Peter's emphasis on spending time doing non-religious activities may connect them with the majority of students on campus.

## **Section Conclusions**



Students who abandon religion may be motivated for a variety of reasons: for Delta and Rue, stigma played a major role in their decision to leave religion. Unlike Myra and Josh, who converted despite stigma, personal values and politics dissuaded Delta and Rue from identifying with religion altogether. Grace and Mary's experiences with religion foil Delta and Rue's experiences. Grace and Mary, the two young women who identified as liberal and Christian, engaged in specific identity work in order to maintain both their religiosity and their liberalism in a secular environment that often conflated religious with conservative. Why were Grace and Mary able to hold on to both their faith and their liberal values while Delta and Rue decided to abandon religion in order to maintain their political values? While it is difficult to make definitive conclusions, one could hypothesize that preexisting experiences with religions as liberal communities convinced Grace and Mary to continue to affiliate despite the stigma they felt on campus for doing so. In other words, Grace and Mary came from home contexts where their liberal values happily coexisted with their religions convictions. Delta and Rue lacked this connection: for them, aspects of religion were inherently antithetical to their political beliefs. Working from an all-or-nothing standpoint, these schisms between their liberal values and conservative religious teachings prompted them to exit altogether.

Not all students interviewed were as intentional about their decisions to leave religion, suggesting that it does not carry as much cultural weight as it may have in the past. Max and Peter's decisions to casually abandon their religious involvement may signal that it was not a major point of conversation in their lives. This laid-back attitude supports Hout and Fischer's (2002) observation that religious involvement in the US has steadily declined over time. By abandoning religion, Max and Peter became part of the majority statistic. They did not *need* to engage in lengthy conversation about this decision because religion may be less culturally

relevant. Instead, they followed the majority of their peers by organically filling their time with new college activities.

## **Study Conclusions**

So what happens to students' religious and/or spiritual lives as they enter and live in a secular space like Hamilton College? The three groups I have identified negotiated religious stigma, warm religious communities, home alliances, multicultural forms of inspiration, confusing internal cosmologies, community values in liberalism, and busy college lives. Each of the nineteen students that I interviewed grappled with bringing their spiritual and/or religious selves into a secular space. Overall, major findings within this study were: (1) Hamilton's secular and politically liberal culture created tensions for religious students and prompted them either to negotiate their identities or abandon religion and (2) spiritually untethered students more positively negotiated Hamilton's secular community than religious students.

On-campus stigma towards religions prompts an interesting discussion: how can the Hamilton campus community condemn discrimination against religiosity while simultaneously deconstructing the dogmatism, anti-gay rights, and pro-life opinions of conservative religious students that may alienate other students with those opinions and identities? Across the board, almost students interviewed struggled with religious stigma in various ways. For both the students who continued to affiliate with their home religion and those who converted into religion, anti-religious sentiments hurt deeply. This study and the majority of the literature suggest that the scales are imbalanced on liberal college campuses: secular students can more easily express their full identities than religious students. One solution to this dilemma is to educate the campus community on religious life in an effort to destigmatize it. By providing the secular students insight into the religious students' lives, we break empathy walls between both

groups. In this ideal world, an atheist and a religious student are bonded (rather than separated) by a shared curiosity for the Other.

Spiritually untethered students already live in this ideal world. For many, the stigma towards religion does not hurt because it does not apply. While they are private about their nebulous and new identities, the world remains their oyster. Many mooch inspiration off of religious students and prompt discussion from irreligious students. In some cases, they are able to connect two seemingly opposing belief systems by the loose thread of 'spirituality.' This loophole in community values in secularism reflects how the literature showed a decline in religion and increased interest in spirituality. As the number of spiritual students increases, secular campuses may continue to negotiate responding to new belief systems and cosmologies.

### **Limitations**

Similarly, many of my independent variables defied their initial categorizations. My literature focused heavily on the role of students' sexual identities in forming their religious and spiritual ones, my interview subjects defied this expectation. For most students, their sex lives, or lack of sex lives, were a minor point within our discussions. They were more interested in discussing politics or their families. While my independent variables led me to theorize that a community emphasis on liberalism only related to students who had abandoned religion, I soon found that it resonated across categorizations. Overall, the line between spiritually untethered students and students who abandoned religion was fuzzy. I relied upon the students' personal categorization to make the distinction; however students who identified strongly with abandoning religion would occasionally tell me that they still believed in God. Despite my attempts to ask questions that specifically targeted my independent variables, students often

nuanced the lines between categories, suggesting that belief systems are constantly evolving and often defy labeling.

Race, class, and gender also deserved more attention than I gave them. While there were many moments for interesting analysis on these fronts, it was unfortunately beyond the parameters of this study.

### **Future Research**

This study may prompt further research regarding the relationships between gender and spirituality. While my study was fairly split between people who identified as male or female, the majority of my spiritually untethered interviewees identified as women. On the flip side, the majority of students who continued to affiliate with their faith despite stigma were men. Overall, gender and spirituality manifest in interesting ways at Hamilton.

Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways from this study should be that unique manifestations of religion and spirituality are quickly evolving to the secularized and politicized times. Hamilton College has a unique opportunity to be intentional about how it culturally wants to evolve with and against these cultural forces.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Professor Ellingson for his overwhelming help on this project. In many ways, it is his project too. While I have grown as a thinker and (amateur) sociologist, Professor Ellingson has taught me unconditional mentorship. Even when I presented a thesis that could have been a dissertation, Professor Ellingson stuck with me and gave me copious and thoughtful feedback. I am deeply grateful for his kindness.

I also owe immense thanks to Jennifer Ambrose at the Writing Center. While I have been a Hamilton student for four years, it was not until this past fall that I truly learned how to write. I credit her compassion and attention to detail with the existence of a readable and logical draft.

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## **APPENDIX:**

### **Appendix 1: Interview Guide**

#### Questions for Group 1 (Students Who Continue to Affiliate and Practice Their Religion):

1. How has your family influenced your religiosity?
  - a. Who in your family has had the biggest influence?
  - b. How does your family align politically?
  - c. How has your political affiliation influenced your religiosity?

2. How do your friends from home influence your religiosity?
  - a. Tell me more?
3. Describe how have your religious beliefs or affiliation changed since you have been at Hamilton?
  - a. Probe: how? Tell me more?
  - b. Tell me more?
4. How have your mentors at Hamilton impacted your religious path?
5. How have any of your classes impacted your religious or spiritual affiliation?
6. How have any of your student organizations impacted your religious affiliation or practice?
7. Do you believe in a higher power?
  - a. Did this impact your religious decisions?
8. How have your friends at Hamilton influenced your religious affiliation and practice?
9. How has the hook-up culture impacted your religious involvement?
  - a. Have stories of sexual assault impacted your religious involvement?
10. Have you ever felt pressured to continue to affiliate with your religion?
  - a. If so, by who?

Group 2: Questions for Students Who Have Converted Religious Affiliations:

1. What was your life like before you converted?
  - a. How has your political affiliation influenced your decision to convert?
  - b. How has your family influenced your decision to convert?
2. How did you hear about the religion you are currently in?
  - a. Can you explain further?
  - b. Tell me more
3. How did you decided to convert?
  - a. How do you feel about your current faith compared to your old one?
    - i. Tell me more?
  - b. Were you given any roles in your new religious organization before you converted?
    - i. Tell me more
  - c. Are you friends with the people inside this new religious group?
    - i. How long have you been friends with them?
    - ii. Why are you all friends?
  - d. How have your mentors at Hamilton influenced your decision to convert?
  - e. How have any of your classes impacted your decision to convert?

Group 3: Questions for Students Who Are Religiously Untethered:

1. Before you came to Hamilton, how did you practice religion or spirituality?
  - a. How does your family practice or believe?
  - b. How did your friends from home practice or believe?



2. How did Hamilton's culture affect your decision to be spiritual but not religious?
  - a. How has the hook-up culture affected your spirituality?
  - b. How have your classes affected your spirituality?
  - c. How have your student organizations or clubs affected your spirituality?
3. Why do you consider yourself spiritual but not religious?
  - a. Tell me more?
  - b. What do you believe in?
  - c. How do you conceptualize your spirituality?
  - d. How do you bring being spiritual but not religious into your everyday life?
  - e. If you believe in a higher power, how do you define it?
4. Where do you find spiritual or religious inspiration?
  - a. Tell me more?
  - b. Do you find any inspiration from other groups?
  - c. If so, how?

Questions for Group 4: Religious Drop-outs:

1. How has your family influenced your decision to stop practicing religion?
  - a. How did your friends from home approach religion?
  - b. How have politics affected your decision to drop out of religion?
2. Why did you stop practicing or believing in religion at Hamilton?
  - a. Have you ever felt pressure to stop believing?
    - i. If so, from who and in what ways?
  - b. How have your academic courses affected your decision to stop practicing and believing in religion?
  - c. How has the hook-up culture affected your decision to stop practicing and believing in religion?
  - d. How have your friends at Hamilton approached religion or religious teachings?
    - i. How has this affected you?

**Appendix 2: Email Transcripts**

All-Student Email 1: Group 1: Students Who Continue to Practice With The Same Religion From Their Home

Subject:Practicing Religion Here at Hamilton? Sociology Student Looking for You!

Do you practice the same religion that you practiced before you came to Hamilton?

Have you been actively involved in a religious organization while you have been at Hamilton?

If you answered YES to these two questions and would like to be interviewed about your religious experience, please email mcarlman@hamilton.edu(do not reply to this email) to set up a time to interview!

Other reasons to say yes:

1. All interviews will be anonymous
2. This is great practice for job interviews and might help you discover more about yourself and Hamilton!
3. I am friendly!
4. This is helpful for me!

All-Student Email 2: Group 2: Students Who Have Converted to Another Religious Affiliation While at Hamilton

Subject:Sociology Student Looking for Religious Converts

Did you convert to a new religious affiliation while you have been a Hamilton student?

If you answered YES to that question and would like to be interviewed about your religious experience, please email [mcarlman@hamilton.edu](mailto:mcarlman@hamilton.edu)(do not reply to this email) to set up a time to interview!

Other reasons to say yes:

1. All interviews will be anonymous
2. This is great practice for job interviews and might help you discover more about yourself and Hamilton!
3. I am friendly!
4. This is helpful for me!

All-Student Email 3: Group 3: Students Who Are Religiously Untethered

Subject:Spiritual But Not Religious? Sociology Thesis Looking for You!

Do you consider yourself spiritual but not religious?

Do you like to think about and explore religious and spiritual ideas?

If you answered YES to any of those questions and would like to be interviewed about your spiritual experience, please email [mcarlman@hamilton.edu](mailto:mcarlman@hamilton.edu)(do not reply to this email) to set up a time to interview!

Other reasons to say yes:

1. All interviews will be anonymous

2. This is great practice for job interviews and might help you discover more about yourself and Hamilton!
3. I am friendly!
4. This is helpful!

All-Student Email 4: Group 4: Religious Drop Outs

Subject:No Longer Religious/Spiritual? Sociology Student Looking for You!

Were you religious before you came to Hamilton?

AFTER being at Hamilton, have you stopped attending and practicing religion?

Do you feel like you have dropped out of religion since being at Hamilton?

If you answered YES to those questions and would like to be interviewed about your religious experience, please email [mcarlman@hamilton.edu](mailto:mcarlman@hamilton.edu)(do not reply to this email) to set up a time to interview!

Other reasons to say yes:

1. All interviews will be anonymous
2. This is great practice for job interviews and might help you discover more about yourself and Hamilton!
3. I am friendly!
4. This is helpful!

**Appendix 3: Consent Form**

***Hamilton College***

***198 College Hill Rd.***

Clinton, NY 13323

# **Sociology Department**

## **Sample Participant Consent Form**

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to examine how students choose to religiously affiliate after they arrive at Hamilton. The study is part of Madeline Carlman's senior thesis in sociology, which is under the supervision of Professor Ellingson.

**Procedure:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Participate in an interview for one hour
2. Agree to be recorded on a recording device
3. Answer questions about your spiritual life and journey

The total time required to complete the study should be approximately 1 hour.

**Benefits/Risks to Participant:**

Participants will help contribute to the body of knowledge in sociology. Risks include any discomfort you may feel while responding to personal questions about your spiritual information.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study/Confidentiality:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to complete the study at any point during the interview, or refuse to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable. You may also stop at any time and ask the interviewer any questions you may have. Your name will never be connected to your answers; instead, a number will be used for identification purposes. Information that would make it possible to identify you or any other participant will never be included in any sort of report. The data will be accessible only to those working on the project.

**Contacts and Questions:**

At this time you may ask any questions you may have regarding this study. If you have questions later, you may contact Madeline Carlman at 3074133337 or [mcarlman@hamilton.edu](mailto:mcarlman@hamilton.edu), or her faculty supervisor, Professor Ellingson at 315-859-4876 or [sellings@hamilton.edu](mailto:sellings@hamilton.edu). Questions or concerns about institutional approval should be directed to Jeffrey Ritchie, Interim Chair of the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects, 315-859-4678 or [iboard@hamilton.edu](mailto:iboard@hamilton.edu).

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked any questions I had regarding the experimental procedure and they have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in this study.

Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
(please print)

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ **(Note: You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study. Let the experimenter know if you are under 18 years old.)**

*Thanks for your participation!*