

**Toward ‘faith-adjacent’ pedagogies:
Reconfiguring the roles, spaces, and practices of religious education**

Social and religious change are posing significant challenges for religious institutions and giving rise to novel forms of religious and spiritual community. How learning happens in such communities, and how religious educators can help shape it, is sometimes difficult to understand and describe via traditional framings of the work of religious education. In this conceptual analysis, I draw on religious, social, and anthropological literature and ethnographic field data from several recent studies to theorize “faith-adjacent” spaces, and to illustrate the analytic benefits and pedagogical possibilities raised by this reframing.

Social and religious change in the U.S. are challenging our long-held understandings of *who* are the teachers and learners engaged in religious education, *where* these changing constituencies convene for such learning and formation, *how* they are growing together through shared practices, and *why* they choose to do so.

Consider the case of Tapestry¹, a foster youth mentoring organization run by two Protestant ministers in a Western U.S. metropolitan area. The founders of Tapestry originally set out to found a new, denominationally affiliated congregation. Tapestry, the church, would engage the primary mission work of growing healing and developmentally supportive community around young people in the foster care system. Over the course of several foundational years spent connecting a network of (1) adult mentor teams, (2) the individual youth those teams support, and (3) facilitators who coordinate and troubleshoot weekly mentor team outings, Tapestry’s co-directors decided this network *was* the community they had set out to build—albeit one with a very different group identity from what they expected or were familiar with.

Tapestry is not a church, but it is an explicitly spiritual community convened by ordained religious leaders. It’s not a religious educational endeavor per se, but it does engage practices of learning, healing, caring, growth, and inclusion that have much in common with at least some of the formational objectives and trajectories found in congregations and certain schools, camps, and other explicitly religious settings and programs. As such, it has stimulated my thinking about

¹ People, place, and organization names from the ethnographic studies discussed in this paper are pseudonyms.

the limits of our traditional theorizing about the broad purposes of religious education in the U.S. and beyond.

Without finding new ways to complement more familiar framings of religious educational purposes, tasks, and challenges, I believe it will be increasingly difficult to communicate about our sites and modes of teaching and research—with each other as practitioners and scholars, and with publics much less likely to organize their understandings and practices of religion and spirituality with respect to traditional categories (Drescher 2016; McGuire 2008; Smith and Snell 2009; Wuthnow 2007). Moreover, exposure and/or commitment to spiritual and religious diversity must continue to register not just in how religious educators talk about our work, *but also how we conduct it*. As we shall see, the challenge for educators who are in various ways representatives of particular faiths is especially ambiguous and especially acute in these times of rapid change and high institutional anxiety.

This paper will draw on religious, social, and anthropological literature and on ethnographic field data from my research partnership with Tapestry and from other projects. Following colleagues in literacy studies and other fields, I draw on spatial theory to conceptually analyze how we position the roles and practices of religious education in a complex religious landscape like the U.S.—where religious belief is quite widespread but traditional religious affiliation is rapidly declining (Gallup 2019; Pew Research Center 2015; Putnam 2000), and where interest in spiritual practices is high but so is ambivalence about the roles of authority figures and institution-based community (Drescher 2016; Gallup 2018; Pew Research Center 2016). I develop and illustrate an empirically responsive framing that theorizes what I call *faith-adjacent spaces* and that discusses some of the benefits of taking a faith-adjacent stance in our religious education.

Literature review: Framing the orientation(s) of religious education

In this first section, I review several authors' high-level understandings of the purposes and priorities of religious education. While obviously not comprehensive, this summary of approaches provides a foundation and trajectory for further theorizing religious education in light of the shifting landscape described above.

Working in the UK primarily during the final third of the twentieth century, **Michael Grimmitt** carves out a role between “confessional” religious nurture on one hand and purely a phenomenological religious studies orientation on the other. His advocacy for going beyond *learning about* religion to *learning from* religion provides an important precedent for thinking about how educators can not only inform but also stimulate a religiously diverse community of students: “[Religious education]’s prime responsibility [is] to help pupils to come to terms with questions about their own identity, their own values and life-styles, their own priorities and commitments, and their own frame of reference for viewing life and giving it meaning” (Grimmitt 1981, 49). His pedagogy uses religion “as a tool” for “reflection, judgement, thought

processes, [and the] search for meaning and identity of the students” (Engebretson 2006, 677). I believe Grimmitt’s hybrid approach (see table 1) and those like it—previously relevant mostly to settings where religious education takes place in committedly pluralistic settings—is becoming increasingly important for representatives of *particular* traditions providing even confessional formation or nurture.

Philosophers of education **Hanan Alexander** and **Terence McLaughlin** (2003) draw on a number of categories and metaphors to organize their civically minded philosophical discussion. They delineate education in religion and spirituality² “*from the outside* ... in which no one religious or spiritual tradition is given normative status” against education “*from the inside* ... in separate religious schools” and “other educative contexts” that “attempt to form and nourish a commitment to the particular beliefs, values, and practices of a specific religious and spiritual tradition” (361, italics mine). The authors associate the ability of the former approach to form *openness*, both to knowledge of and acceptance of diverse religious communities and to the spiritual dimensions³ of all human life. The latter they associate with an ability to form *rootedness* in particular traditions.

Nevertheless, the pair conversely nod to the fact that true openness “from the outside” requires an empathetic appreciation for the ways particular communities are rooted, and that education “from the inside” demands careful preservation of the autonomy of especially those who find themselves in such an educational setting despite outsider status with respect to the majority identity. Thus, while I do not detect in their account a desire to construct a distinctly hybrid approach, as Grimmitt does, it is clear the pair wishes for both approaches to take account of the central insights of the other and to apply those insights when appropriate.

A teacher, teacher educator, and researcher in Singapore, **Charlene Tan** (2009) engages with Alexander, McLaughlin, Grimmitt and others and organizes her treatment around the question of commitment. She critiques *teaching about commitment* in part for reasons similar to Grimmitt’s advocacy for moving beyond the purely phenomenological approach. However, she also finds the liberal ideology at the heart of a supposedly neutral stance to, in practice, bias educational systems against religion entirely. On the other hand, Tan views *teaching for commitment* to be inappropriate even in religiously monolithic contexts⁴ because of its close

² The pair treat religion and spirituality separately and include a helpful distinction between spiritualities that are tethered to and untethered from various religious traditions. Nevertheless, in the question of whether to treat the two separately, I concur with Drescher (2016) “that the ongoing debate about what counts as ‘spiritual’ and what is more properly ‘religious’ reveals more about who is using these words than about the terms themselves or, perhaps more significantly, than it does about the spiritual and/or religious experiences and commitments of ordinary Americans in the midst of everyday lives” (7).

³ The pair define spirituality through a discussion of five distinct strands: searching for meaning, “cultivat[ing] ‘inner space,’” manifesting virtues in everyday life, responding to the human and natural worlds (“awe, wonder, and reverence”), and sharing in community (359–360).

⁴ Tan intentionally does not differentiate between religious education, i.e., in schools, and other forms of religious nurture or upbringing, i.e., at home or in faith communities (210).

association with indoctrination and its inconsistency with the desire to preserve learners' rational autonomy.

Consequently, Tan also advocates for a hybrid approach, one that she calls *teaching from commitment*. This two-step process involves first introducing a single religious framework and then, over time and in age-appropriate ways, subjecting it to critical reflection. From Tan I take the importance of even religiously affiliated instructors learning to bracket their own wishes about their students' religious formation. Her implied strategy of doing so by stressing perspective-sharing (*from* commitment) rather than case-making (*for* commitment) seems to me a realistic compromise⁵ between teachers' desire to pass on faith to a new generation (Foster 2012; Westerhoff 2012) and students' awareness of the many "fully-formed alternatives ... before us" (Taylor 2007, 28).

A Catholic religious educator teaching in a U.S. Lutheran seminary, **Mary Hess** calls religious educators who represent particular faiths to locate and emphasize the parts of their traditions that look *beyond* those traditions (a "from the inside" approach that focuses its attention "*to* the outside"). She calls this approach "respect[ing] a community of communities" (2017, 38), and she notes that it often receives only lip service: "a curriculum that explicitly names religious pluralism as a contemporary issue, but then marginalizes it to study in only a few courses, or only in electives, implicitly teaches that religious pluralism is actually not all that relevant or important to practices of faith" (2017, 38). Rather, she asks elsewhere,

Can we embody religious education that educates *within* and *for* specific religious communities, but also and concurrently *with* and *for* people who are not part of religious communities? Can we reach people who might have very little interest in, or perhaps even hostility towards, religious institutions? I fear that until and unless religious communities can communicate ... our integral and inextricable commitments to relationship across, among, within, between and amidst various kinds of difference, we will lose even more ground with a generation of people growing to consciousness within the rich and varied landscapes of the US. (2016, 1, italics hers)

Thus, Hess remixes multiple approaches defined above, nodding to Alexander and McLaughlin's inside/outside framing, trusting with Grimmitt that it is possible simultaneously to nurture the belief and practice of religiously *diverse* learners, and seeking like Tan to uphold the autonomy

⁵ Of course, she is far from alone in making this point. See, for example, Westerhoff (2012) writing from his tradition: "To be Christian is to ask: What can I bring to another? Not: What do I want that person to know or be?" (Kindle location 424). Even Alexander and McLaughlin (2003) hold up such a standard, calling it "a kind of 'openness with roots'": "Students are exposed to, and involved in, a form of education articulated by a particular conception of the good, but they are encouraged to put their formation into critical perspective and to make any acceptance of it on their part authentic" (369). In fact, I debated whether to put "openness with roots" in the hybrid column of table 1, but doing so seemed to confuse a discussion that despite acknowledging some mild and partial hybridity, nevertheless is intentionally organized around the inside/outside dichotomy.

of students exploring or committed to identities that may go against the grain in a particular setting.

Table 1 Summary of various authors' framings of religious education

Author(s)	Purely secular approach	notes on relationships ⁶	Hybrid approach	notes on relationships	Purely religious approach
Grimmit (1981), see also Engebretson (2006)	<u>Learning about religion</u> via phenomenological process for the purposes of descriptive, comparative knowledge	← <i>provides foundation for</i> →	<u>Learning from religion</u> via educational process for the purposes of personal development	← <i>must avoid engaging in</i> →	<u>Learning through⁷ religion</u> via nurturing process for the purposes of strengthened religious commitment
Alexander & McLaughlin (2003)	Education in religion and spirituality <u>from the outside</u> to form openness (understanding, tolerance, civic virtue)	← <i>must still be grounded in empathy that is particular to</i> →		→ <i>must still avoid uncritical indoctrination against</i> ←	Education in religion and spirituality <u>from the inside</u> to form rootedness (beliefs, practices of distinct traditions)
Tan (2009)	<u>Teaching about commitment</u> to expound “a wide range of religious views in a neutral and objective fashion ” (210)	→ <i>protects against the reductionist and secularist impulses of</i> ←	<u>Teaching from commitment</u> by introducing primary framework then nurturing autonomy	← <i>protects against the indoctrinatory impulses of</i> →	<u>Teaching for commitment</u> to “ catechize believers into the faith ” (210)
Hess (2016; 2017)	“[E]mbrac[ing] relationality across difference ... without perceiving such practices as being in any way connected to religion ” (2016, 1)	→ <i>authorizes and challenges participants to examine own and others' beliefs and practices in context, in contrast to</i> ←	Educating for <u>community of communities</u> “within and for” particular traditions, and “with and for” traditions' non-members	← <i>ensures alignment between explicit and implicit curriculum's claims to value difference, in contrast to</i> →	“[R]equir[ing] identity to be constructed through only one community ” (2017, 38)

⁶ The arrows should be interpreted as follows: ← = “the approach to the left”; → = “the approach to the right.” E.g., “Learning about religion provides foundation for learning from religion.”

⁷ An extrapolation representing my best guess at how Grimmitt would extend the “learning ____” formula.

Conceptual analysis: A spatial turn for religious education

There are a number of appeals to spatial reasoning in the understandings of religious education surveyed in the previous section and summarized in table 1. The most explicit is Alexander and McLaughlin's (2003) discussion of religious and spiritual education *from the outside* versus *from the inside*. In this case, and in others that replicate its logic, what determines the boundaries of "inside" and "outside"? While it may be true that there are characteristic "inside" and "outside" pedagogies and learning activities, it seems to me unavoidable in this way of framing things that participants and observers will be led to ask, by extension, who are the "insiders" and who are the "outsiders"?

I see such a framing as significantly problematic. First, even if we view insider/outsider labels themselves as somehow neutral⁸, this framing fails to account for the tension that Tan registers in her proposal of a two-step process of first learning the tradition and then questioning it (but see also footnote 5). For example, if I'm a youth or adult seeker or inquirer in a Christian baptism or confirmation class, am I likely to experience my positionality as "on the inside"? Likely not, I'd venture, and certainly not fully. Indeed, many of the traditions of the catechumenate seem especially and appropriately designed to mark a hybrid or liminal status: periodic public liturgies of intention setting, particular ways of conducting oneself inside and outside the worship space, etc.

Moreover, empirical research suggests that an inside/outside framing is overly simplistic even for a significant number of—to use a Christian term with a certain spatial sensibility—"people in the pews." Drescher (2016) provocatively emphasizes this point in her choice to compare and contrast religious Nones with those she calls "Somes"—who, despite their positive affiliation, turn out to have much in common spiritually and sometimes even religiously with Nones⁹. As I mentioned in the introduction, Drescher and others (McGuire 2008; Smith and Snell 2009; Wuthnow 2007) are helping us come to a clearer understanding of a phenomenon that was probably always true and is certainly becoming more numerically significant: the people "inside" our traditions and our individual faith communities aren't as religiously or spiritually similar as we might be tempted to believe, nor are the people "outside" as dissimilar. If our categories for understanding are getting messier, so should the ways that we teach and learn with them. For example, my pedagogy *from the inside* as an Episcopal priest serving on Sunday mornings is likely at best to fall flat with and at worst to erase the experiences of many

⁸ Or even as fraught but inevitable—no group identity without a group boundary, etc.

⁹ Perhaps most strikingly, *both the religiously affiliated (78%) and unaffiliated (22%)* in her Spiritual Practices Survey (N=1,166) ranked what she calls "'The Four Fs of Contemporary American Spirituality': Fido, Family, Friends, and Food" as the most meaningful spiritual practices (e.g., "enjoying time with family," "preparing or sharing food"); even the Somes ranked "attending worship" and "studying sacred scriptures" near the bottom of the list, with prayer coming in below the Four Fs but above other practices for both groups.

participants who are not *insiders* with respect to all¹⁰ or even many of the various dimensions of Christian belief and practice.

Most importantly, though, I argue *any* framing that accepts religious education settings as empty or neutral space—or even as straightforwardly delineated, enfused¹¹, filled¹², or set aside, e.g., a house of worship as “sacred space,” a classroom as “learning space,” etc.—fails to adequately account for the insights of postmodern geographers and other social thinkers who attend to the perceived, imagined, and lived¹³ complexities of space. Writing in the introduction to an important volume in literacy studies, Sheehy and Leander (2004) call for a spatial turn in their field of educational research and beyond:

Whereas space was once thought of as empty, available, and waiting to be filled up, recent theorizing about space has brought to light that space is a product and process of socially dynamic relations. Space is not static—as in metaphorical images of borders, centers, and margins—it is dynamically relational. Space, as a noun, must be reconceived as an active, relational verb, which is our intent in invoking “spatializing.” (1)

To spatialize our understandings of religious education, we have to see and imagine our spaces more complexly—as simultaneously serving many purposes for diverse constituencies, groups and subgroups whose members are connected to and beyond each other in ways that need to be traced out rather than taken as a sociological given (Latour 2005). According to Knott (2005), the value of understanding religious spaces in these theorists’ terms is

realised through an awareness of the *interconnectedness* of events and *relational nature* of the persons, objects, and places that constitute space. The spaces of religion ... are overlapping, co-existent, in parallel with other spaces, and because they are internally in tension, being made up of multiple, contested, real, and imagined sites and relations. (23, italics hers)

In the remainder of this section, I will discuss three characteristics of social space described by these theorists¹⁴ and ask what difference these characteristics might make to our understanding of our spaces of religious education. As we will see, a spatial framing according to these rich

¹⁰ Beaudoin (2008) points out that “[t]he very opposition between ‘picking and choosing’ and ‘accepting the whole’ is itself a recent way of imagining, often for the sake of intended control, what the ‘options’ for belief are today” (Kindle location 1955).

¹¹ As with an ethos, spirit, or pedagogical approach.

¹² As with religious insiders, and possibly also outsiders.

¹³ See Oliver (2018) for a brief discussion of these three principal categories from Henri Lefebvre and their relevance to one of the ethnographic studies discussed later in this paper.

¹⁴ Leander and Vasudevan (2009), following Massey (2005).

characteristics will inevitably call us to ask the big questions of people, purpose, and process with which I began this essay.

The first thing we need to know about social space is that it is **relational**: “constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global¹⁵ to the intimately tiny” (Massey 2005, 9). You instantiate (or re-instantiate) the space around us when you shout at or whisper to me from across the street, or the Twitterverse, or the classroom, and the choice to shout or whisper is as formative of the space as your choice of venue, as is how or even whether I choose to respond. *If space is relational, then the cohesion of our spaces of religious education is constituted not only by each teacher’s and student’s relationship to the content, but by their relationships with each other.* Intentional pedagogical design can attempt to influence the latter as well as the former, but the latter is even more resistant to any attempts at control.

Next, and consequently, we note that social space is **hybrid**, “the sphere ... of coexisting heterogeneity” (Massey 2005, 9). The central column of table 1 explores one way in which religious educational spaces can take on a hybrid character, i.e., approaches shaped by two different broad orientations to particular religious experience. But spatial theory helps us recognize hybridity of quite another order of magnitude: “Wherever two or three are gathered”¹⁶—how much more so eight or ten or thirty or hundreds—we will find “the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality” (Massey 2005, 9). Here again, a certain wild unpredictability comes to the fore, especially as we take stock of the (potentially) growing presence and impact of learners committed to a religious and spiritual identity characterized by the mantra “No Labels Except No Labels” (Drescher 2016, 21). *If space is complexly hybrid, then the composition of our spaces of religious education will always make them stubbornly resistant to generalized, homogenous characterization.* Here I particularly appreciate the way Hess’s “community of communities” framing for religious education foregrounds acknowledgement of, wrestling with, and rejoicing in forms of difference—religious difference, and also ways other kinds of relationships and life commitments complexly intersect with our religious identities.¹⁷

Finally, social space is **dynamic**, “always under construction,” borne forth in each moment by “material practices which have to be *carried out*” (Massey 2005, 9, italics mine). Such a way of understanding the practices in progress in our spaces of religious education seems especially important during a time when “traditional modes of *believing, belonging, and behaving*” mean less to most Nones and Somes than “narratives ... of *being and becoming*”

¹⁵ This explicit mention of global interactions reminds us, for example, of the role *digital* interactions may play in convening social and religious space. I have discussed these dynamics in depth elsewhere (Oliver 2019; following Campbell 2012; Vasudevan 2010).

¹⁶ Matthew 18:20a.

¹⁷ See also Beaudoin (2008): “the particular beliefs that are ‘sanctioned’ by religious leadership at any particular time and place are *deeply implicated in ‘nontheological’ or ‘nonreligious’ political, social, cultural, and economic factors*” (Kindle location 1953, italics mine).

(Drescher 2016, 13, italics hers). In other words, we have the opportunity to align, on the one hand, the lived reality that learning (and/as relating) is always unfinished business with, on the other hand, the lived reality that religious identities are no less a work in progress. I have chosen to align my own research with those seeking to shape religious educational spaces by convening diverse communities of identity-rich narrativity—in which story “tellers” (Hess 2012; 2014), story “linkers” (Wimberly 2005), or story “sharers” (Mallette Stephens 2018) join their voices in what Massey (2005) might call the resonant and/or dissonant “simultaneity of stories-so-far” (9). *If space is dynamic, then the (inevitably multifaceted) learning objectives operating in our spaces of religious education mock our attempts to prescribe¹⁸ or proscribe particular outcomes of identity and disposition.*

We are now in a position, I hope, to appreciate the full utility of framing the spaces (and hence diverse participants and purposes) of religious education as increasingly *faith-adjacent*. I began using this term merely to distinguish my work at my first research site from what I take to be the popular understanding of *most* religious education activities in the U.S. context, where Grimmitt-esque religious education isn’t prominent¹⁹. “Faith-adjacent” seemed to capture my orientation as an Episcopal priest conducting participatory storytelling research in a church-run but decidedly non-religious summer camp, a camp that nevertheless met in a church and that included both members and nonmembers²⁰ of the congregation as counselors and staff (see Oliver 2018). When I later met the leaders of Tapestry and started attending the organization’s events, the label began to feel durable for a kind of space and kind of learning taking place in novel not-quite-religious communities.

But as I hope the foregoing spatialized analysis has suggested, an appropriately nuanced understanding of “adjacency” to faith may be quite appropriate for understanding a growing

¹⁸ While I appreciate certain religious leader colleagues’ adoption of the term “faith formation” to distinguish their work from descriptive/phenomenological *learning about religion*, I am nevertheless increasingly of the opinion that seeking to broaden the sense of “education” beyond mere schooling or “book learning” in the narrow sense is a more advisable rhetorical move than telling participants in *any* of our religious education spaces that the forming of faith is a learning community’s ultimate and shared objective.

¹⁹ In other words, I hoped to maximize the potential of my mentors and classmates in a secular doctoral program to nevertheless be engaged with and supportive of my research beyond what might have been possible were I working in the mode(s) of table 1’s right-hand column approaches.

²⁰ And notice that these nonmembers might be quite comfortable describing their relationship to this church and its faith as “adjacent” in any number of senses: “I live in the neighborhood,” “I hang out there sometimes,” “I volunteer in their outreach programs but don’t go to services,” or “I go to services there but don’t really believe all the dogma.” I’m thinking especially of the complex relationship one “Lutheran-None” among Drescher’s (2016) research subjects has with the church where she sings in the choir: “I’ve been *around* church for long enough to know that most of it is a lot of crap. I don’t believe very much of it. But I like to sing, and I couldn’t do that if I told everyone I’m probably a None” (13, italics mine).

number of religious education spaces in a religiously pluralistic world—including many we wouldn't have thought to label as such, and some we might have been overeager to:

- Since learning spaces are convened through all kinds of interaction and relationship, then a conversation doesn't have to take place in a teaching space adjoining a house of worship or at a formally organized interreligious dialog to "count" as religious education. Any interaction in which one or more participants' faith is named, noticed²¹, called upon, or otherwise implicated is faith-adjacent²², i.e., *connected to or bound up with* faith, when considered through the lens of spatial theory. If disaffiliation trends continue in the U.S. context, such interactions ("pop-up spaces"?) may come to be the most influential sites of religious education.
- Since learning spaces are inevitably marked by the multiplicity of their diverse participants, understanding them as "inside" or "outside" a religious tradition through appeals to a singular identity categories of those present, or to an abstract set of practices and beliefs appropriate (or not) to a particular faith, may not be especially useful. This is not to say that a religiously diverse community holding space to together at a particular moment convenes religious education in some momentary "composite faith"; rather, their learning space is in that moment complexly adjacent to any number of faiths implicated by the participants' various networks of commitments and relations.²³
- Since learning spaces are dynamically open-ended, and growing numbers of Americans and others feel comfortable following these learning trajectories in diverse, "contradictory," or non-normative²⁴ directions, educators with a faith-adjacent framing for their work prepare for, and support as they are able, the journeys their students choose to undertake. In my view, wishing that the nature of learning spaces were different or that None-style orientations to faith were less popular is not an excuse for choosing pedagogies that work against rather than with these realities, even if we work in contexts still better described as straightforwardly religious rather than faith-adjacent.

²¹ See especially Knott's (2005) discussion of de Certeau's "walking rhetorics" in the special case of religious people's spatial practices, such as wearing religious clothing in public or making (even unconscious) routine religious gestures (39–42).

²² Or "religion- and/or spirituality-adjacent" if you prefer. As for me and my household, losing a little precision seems a small price to pay for dropping so many syllables. See footnote 2.

²³ Such a view makes me sympathetic to, or has perhaps been partially formed by, Latour's (2005) methodological skepticism about the sociological givenness of various groups or categories—his mantra is "No Group, Only Group Formation" (27). I am intrigued by the connections (pun intended) between these spatial theorists' work and Latour's actor-network theory and working to articulate this fusion in my dissertation work on faith-adjacent communities.

²⁴ To religious leaders or to the wider social practices of the surrounding cultural milieu.

Illustrations & discussion: Two moments of faith-adjacent religious education

Having sketched this orientation to religious education and discussed some of the ways it both differs from and builds on well-known understandings from the literature, I now seek to illustrate some of the characteristics of a spatialized understanding in action. I will describe two significant ethnographic turning points or narrative moments (see Oliver 2018²⁵; following Bruner 1994; Lambert 2012; Ricœur 1991; Taylor 2016) in learning spaces that I believe are appropriately, and productively, understood as faith-adjacent.

Moment: Embodying faith-adjacency through flexible, pluralistic pedagogy at Tapestry

On my second formal ethnographic field visit with Tapestry, I observed explicit faith-adjacent pedagogies in action amid the multifaith learning space convened by co-director Hannah. The event was a monthly mentor training, what turned out to be their largest to date. I saw when I arrived that Hannah was wearing her clerical collar, as she often does. Her collar was just one of the symbols of her role as a religious leader, but one she would complexify over the course of the morning. Our introductory activity involved a form of sharing and listening seeded by a reflective step in which we wrote our names in the center of a circle and words that “describe [our] world” in the space outside the circle. After each participant spoke about significant parts of their world and what those elements had to do with their decision to explore becoming a Tapestry mentor, Hannah then introduced a presentation about the “core principles” of Tapestry. She said this presentation would help everyone get clearer about how they would care for their youth “both biologically and spiritually.”

²⁵ I have since significantly expanded this paper’s discussion of the analytic character of narrative turning points in ethnography. I will gladly share as work in progress with interested scholars as I revise this theoretical and methodological essay for publication.



Figure 1 A photograph of the January 12 mentor training, taken by Hannah. Instagram post de-identified via procedure similar to that of Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018).

The core principles presentation²⁶ began with Hannah unloading a blue backpack full of objects that she used to tell a Montessori-style story about Tapestry’s four guiding principles: hope, presence, recreation, and communion. The first object was a 6–8 inch circular yin-yang disc (lower right in figure 2) with a labyrinth pattern printed on it. She said that this training, and each meeting with our youth, would “start at a threshold,” and it would be good for us to “walk slowly with deliberation.” She said this work is about holding space, sacred space, safe space—and that as with walking a labyrinth, we’d need to ask at the end how do we walk back into everyday life. When she later placed the articulated wooden figure near the PRESENCE placard (upper left), she said, “You have what you need to be a mentor. Bring your full self. You don’t need to do or be anything special.” When placing the interlocking gears toy (lower left), she referenced her ministerial and denominational identity and said “[In] our tradition communion is about togetherness. We want you to never feel alone in this work. There are many layers of support.”

This moment was a turning point in my understanding of Tapestry. I later confirmed with Hannah that the core principles presentation reflects her training in Godly Play (Berryman 2009), a popular and well-respected story-based curriculum used for experiential religious education with elementary-aged children in traditional congregations. I had seen a few Godly Play stories told to adults before, but certainly never any that began with a well-known symbol from Chinese

²⁶ Tapestry has since shared a standalone video version of this presentation, which I have deidentified and made available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWxOLJyNNE4>

philosophy and cosmology. Her willingness to adopt, for a multifaith learning community, a common educational practice that would be at home in the right-hand column of table 1 shows an obvious way in which her Christian faith is connected to the space she co-convened with the community of trainees, but in a hybridized way. Indeed, she simultaneously and consistently invited the others present to bring connections from their own religious and spiritual practice to bear²⁷, pointing out that the guiding principles are connected in particular ways to Christianity but can and should take on different meanings for different participants. I don't know if she had Drescher's work in mind, but it seems especially fitting that Hannah began the presentation by discussing the very practice (labyrinth walking) with which Drescher opens *Choosing Our Religion*²⁸. In sum, many faiths were woven into the Tapestry on that January morning, for the primary purpose of helping trainees learn to support their youth and each other in the spiritual art of healing—flexibly and pluralistically understood.



Figure 2 Artifacts Hannah used to tell the “guiding principles” story.

The potency of relationality at St. Sebastian's Camp (and Church)

If the Tapestry example highlights the kind of hybridity we might expect to be at play in a faith-adjacent learning space, a moment from my research at St. Sebastian's can show us the

²⁷ A precedent she set in beginning with the “world sharing” activity, notice.

²⁸ “Labyrinths are in many ways the perfect symbol for the spiritual lives of many Americans today, appearing as they do in traditional religious settings as well as in the ad hoc spiritualities of people affiliated with institutional religions as well as those whose spiritual lives unfold largely outside the doors of churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples” (Drescher 2016, 2)

significance of relationality and what faith-adjacency has to do with it. St. Sebastian's Camp is a summer-long, whole-day camp run by a Protestant congregation in Woodfield, a primarily Latinx immigrant community in a northeastern U.S. metropolitan area. The purpose of the camp is outreach and social support in a community where most parents work more than full-time and options for affordable summer child care are scarce. The camp includes no explicitly religious activities or content. Approximately 25 percent of the campers' and counselors' families attend services or other events at St. Sebastian's.

Lauren, Dylan, and Veronica, the participants in the weeklong digital storytelling experience I convened there as a reflection activity for first-year counselors, are part of that 25 percent. My hope for the digital storytelling experience was that each of the participants would create a 2–3 minute autobiographical video (see Lambert, 2012) to explore a personally meaningful experience in their lives. I was eager to attend to if and how the context of the church and/or the camp might inform the stories they chose to tell in that setting. Upholding the trio's autonomy, and zeroing in on their primary locus of excitement and meaning-making, I ended up guiding the group through the creation of a single, shared digital story, which they called "The Summer Camp"²⁹. Table 2 contains a partial reverse storyboard I have constructed, juxtaposing the text of the authors' script with three representative screenshots.

²⁹ I produced a deidentified version from the group's final files and have made it available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oOURnkJHXc>

Table 2 Final script for “The Summer Camp” by Lauren, Veronica, and Dylan

Speaker: Lauren (0:10–0:25)	
<p>we grew up at this camp, we’ve been attending it for 6-7 years. Now that we are counselors it’s a whole different experience we now have more responsibilities. But we still find a way to have fun while doing our job. From being playful campers, to c.i.t’s assisting this camp, to full-grown counselors helping our head counselors the responsibilities have grown along with us.</p>	 <p><i>Juliet reading on Lauren’s lap (see discussion in Oliver [2018])</i></p>
Speaker: Dylan (0:26–0:35)	
<p>At this camp there is something for everyone. You are cared for, respected and you won’t be forgotten. There’s always a way to express yourself.</p>	 <p><i>Counselors watching over sprinkler time (see discussion in Oliver [2018])</i></p>
Speaker: Veronica (0:57–1:05)	
<p>Our experience from campers to c.i.t’s to counselors has been an amazing opportunity, we look forward to assisting this camp more years to come.</p>	 <p><i>Lauren, Dylan, and Veronica</i></p>

At the exact center of the script lies what I take to be the group's collective summary of what makes camp so meaningful to them: "You are cared for, respected and you won't be forgotten." Throughout the week, the group reflected on the joys and occasional frustrations of relationality at camp, including

- the well known experience of nervous campers getting "stuck to" particular counselors who show them kindness (e.g., Juliet in table 2 reading in Lauren's lap);
- their new responsibilities as "full-grown counselors" (script) to both "look after the kids" and "play around with them" (Veronica), to be "a fun type of person" but also "serious" (Lauren);
- the giving and receiving of *respect* (Dylan's quietly insistent contribution to the scripting process); and
- the opportunity to spend time and keep in touch with their "second family," including many friends from other towns who they only see at the camp (see below).

Notice that these reflections hit on but also move beyond familiar themes of camp being "all about fun" or of teenagers just wanting to spend time with their friends. The group was aware of a range of ways their connections to each other helped to constitute the camp community.

These relationally observant members of St. Sebastian's *Church* were also quite clear about the differences between camp modes of interaction and what they experience on Sunday morning. I was quite struck by the ways they characterized the latter:

Kyle: What would you think about doing a project like this in Sunday school?

Dylan: I feel like it would be different. I don't think we'd be talking about camp we'd be talking about like church and how if we like it.

Kyle: Like if you like church? Okay. You think it would make a good video?

Dylan: Depends on the people who make it. If it was kids it'd probably be like "Oh I have to sit in the church listening to people at the altar and just sit there. But if it would be like the parents it would be like "Oh, we're talking about God, that's helping me."

Kyle: What would you think about doing something like this as part of the Sunday school?

Veronica: I feel like it would be different because for Sunday school it's basically all about bible things, church things. Kids come yeah but it's usually because ... the parents don't want their children to be in church crying, bothering them ... [I]nstead of like having fun and learning ... and doing their [summer] homework, they learn about the bible and it's during like school time.

Both Dylan and Veronica can easily see past (through?) the physical place of the St. Sebastian's campus and differentiate between the socially constructed spaces of church and camp. Notice that the difference doesn't just have to do with the individual people with whom they relate. In addition, Veronica and Dylan make explicit appeals to the different character of the social practices at work in these distinct spaces. For Dylan, the experience of Sunday morning is characterized by "listening" and "talking about God." It's a sedentary mode of engagement, and it's centered on "people at the altar." Veronica contrasts camp's fun forms of learning (even working on summer homework!) with church's more school-like modes of learning (but about "bible things"³⁰) with kids attending only reluctantly and mostly because they are deemed disruptive to the worship service's practices of attention.

These characterizations will not surprise religious leaders familiar with movements to more meaningfully include children in worship and to reform religious education pedagogies away from rote instructionism. And in an explicit sense, the young people's fairly hard distinction between church and camp calls into question the notion that the latter is meaningfully "adjacent" to the group's religious faith.

However, what's so analytically interesting about this contrast is how consistently and poignantly the group's description of their camp-based social practices of care and inclusion *conform to the very kinds of faith values I know the leaders of St. Sebastian's Church want to instill in their members*. Indeed, I wrote about their roving screening of the final digital story to each counselor's group at the end of the week as the itinerant preaching of "a contextually appropriate gospel of love and inclusion" (Oliver 2018, 23). In this sense the camp space and its practices were faith-adjacent indeed. And in my view, the failure of the Sunday morning experience to appropriately implicate faith—for these "kids," at least—in a way that encompassed not just religious content *but meaningful relational practices* should make us pause before dismissing the non-religious camp as an important and meaningful space of religious education..

Conclusion: The blessing of faith-adjacent teaching amid disaffiliation

Earlier this year I presented about this work at St. Sebastian's to a group of religious educators from my denomination, advocating that we be more open to participating in educational spaces that might be made "faith-adjacent" perhaps only by our presence as transparently religious people participating in non-religious endeavors. Partway through the presentation, someone finally asked the blunt question I'd been expecting, something like, "I can understand this as a mission project, but not a faith formation project. Why should we do this, as *Christians who are educators*?" I'm sure this is a question many REA members associated with

³⁰ Later: "During the Sunday school they usually just like probably get bored because it's about the Bible, like not to offend churches or anything like that."

particular faith traditions have fielded from co-religionist colleagues over the years, especially in contexts where non-confessional education—and hence this quandary—is more widespread. I appreciated that several participants chimed in with answers, including the lesson/witness that (again paraphrasing) “Your local faith leader cares about you for reasons beyond your potential contribution to their community’s organizational and financial viability.” In light of Drescher’s and others’ data about the high levels of cynicism toward religious institutionalism, this strikes me as a pretty good answer. My less patient (and perhaps equally cynical) answer was that we better get good at doing this kind of work because it may soon be the only kind of work we can get.

However, a better reason for taking a more faith-adjacent stance in our convening (or simply participating) in spaces of religious education combines a sociological realism with probably the single greatest concern all of table 1’s authors are wrestling with: preserving autonomy. My colleague James Nagle has recently published a piece calling Thomas Groome’s shared praxis pedagogy “to the courage of its [open-ended] convictions” regarding how to respond to the process that Nagle, following Tom Beaudoin and Patrick Hornbeck, calls deconversion (Nagle 2019, 536; see also Nagle 2017). He emphasizes in North American and European contexts the need for educators to be open to deconversion and disaffiliation as legitimate outcomes of religious education experiences in Catholic schools and elsewhere:

Despite the narrative of loss implied by descriptors like “lapsed,” “former,” and “fallen away” to describe this growing group, consistent research suggests the religious lives of disaffiliating persons are more complex than pessimistic assessments suggest ... “[L]apsed” Catholics often leave the church for moral and religious reasons—and these “non-practicing” Catholics still practice something. (Nagle 2019, 528)

I agree with Nagle that treating deconversion always as an example of loss or failure is both intellectually dubious—in light of our commitment to student autonomy and critical thinking—and also unlikely to benefit the very institutions whose self-protective instincts give rise to such characterizations. If it’s an accepted sociological reality that there are more choices than ever about how to practice, how much more likely are we to alienate learners if they perceive us to be convincing or coercing rather than sharing or witnessing. Indeed, before I entirely understood Tan’s *teaching from commitment* position, I thought it effectively captured what I especially recognize in my colleagues at Tapestry: a transparency about what brings them to the faith-adjacent table, combined with a curious—rather than controlling—interest in what does (or doesn’t) bring others there.

I did not have room in this article to discuss a third example from my research, one that might illustrate spatial theory’s understanding of social practice as dynamic, as “always under construction,” and what this might mean for faith-adjacent approaches to religious education. But it is the dynamic character of social space that I think of when I read this brief excerpt from Nagle’s (2019) research, which puts Catholic school religion teachers in conversation with their disaffiliating former students:

The thirty-year-old disaffiliating Catholic confidently shared with his teacher that his courses helped guide him through the diverse religious world he encountered after leaving high school. He explained thoughtfully the comfort and capacity he learned to “go outside of religion to find religious answers” or “go outside of being Catholic to find spiritual answers” because his courses included an exchange between religious and non-religious sources, including personal experience ... This disaffiliating young man, who was in the process of planning a wedding that would not be a Mass, shared with this teacher: “I believe my religious education was successful. Absolutely. I don’t think church leaders would say that same thing, but I would. Absolutely.” What made this dialog powerful was that, after their conversation, his teacher agreed. (538–539)

Of course, we don’t need to be committed spatial theorists, fixated on the ongoing becoming implied in all social practice, to admire a Catholic religious educator’s commitment to the integrity of his former student’s journey. And we don’t (necessarily) need to recast this teacher’s classroom as a faith-adjacent space, however fully we might wish to divest ourselves of institutionally centered understandings of religious education.

No, what made me smile when I read this anecdote—in another (2018) of Nagle’s writings that had space for more ethnographic detail—was that the pair repositioned their chairs and continued talking when the researcher concluded the interview and excused himself. In the interview, and I bet especially in what came after, these two learners coconvened/reconvened a dynamic and deeply relational space of religious education. I was tempted to call it a “long-dormant” space, but it’s clear that remembered and imagined connections between the two have continued to shape the younger man’s life and faith. Perhaps it’s been much more influential than other more traditional education spaces in which he has participated since. It may have shaped his once and future teacher’s faith as well.

If we look at this rekindled relationship and see among these two men a faith-adjacent space of religious education, the question of “success” and “failure” falls away. What remains is a beautiful mode of engaging faith, and the world, that is almost surely more ancient and arguably more traditional than what we (think we) see when we visit a classroom like the place where the pair first began their journey together.

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