Mary Elizabeth Moore
Joseph Kyser
Boston University
memoore@bu.edu
jkyser@bu.edu
2013 REA Annual Meeting, Nov 8–10

Youth Finding and Hiding Religious Voice:
Coming Out Religiously in an Interreligious Multivalent World

Abstract:
Voice is critical to youth; yet young religious voices encounter diverse public values, often communicating inclusion or exclusion based on personality, ethnicity, gender, ability, religion, or sexual orientation. Drawing from youth interviews and focus groups, we analyze influences on youth to speak or hide their religious voices in public spaces, and to claim religious motivations for their public personas and actions. We conclude with educational proposals for faith communities, schools, and other public spaces.

The question of voice is critical to youth and young adults, as attested in a growing body

of literature. Yet the religious voices of young people are complicated by the diverse values they

encounter in schools and other public venues, alongside a mix of religious values that

communicate their inclusion or exclusion based on their diverse personalities, ethnicities,

genders, religious affiliations, abilities, and sexual orientations. Drawing from the data of 35

youth interviews (with mostly Christian youth), we analyze the factors that influence youth to

speak their religious voices in public spaces, and those that influence them to hide their voices.

We analyze the intricate relationship between religious voices and the formative, constructive,

and disruptive dynamics of young lives. We also analyze the relationship of inner religious

voices, or motivations, and the public personas and actions of young people. These conclusions

have implications for religious education in faith communities, schools, and other public spaces.

The entire analysis has been shaped by an ethogenic approach to the study, inviting

young people to describe and explain their lives from their own perspectives. We also followed

an ethogenic approach to data analysis: the research team identified common words and phrases used by the interviewees, common symbols, frequent actions and activities, patterns of interaction, and themes.[1] The last two steps of this analysis – patterns of interaction and themes – take account of the more detail-oriented earlier steps, and then move toward higher levels of categorization and abstraction. These two sets of interpretive findings formed the base for the interpretive work of this paper. While the whole data set has shaped our findings and presentation, we will present the findings with exemplifications from individual narratives.

The paper itself begins with an analysis of the dynamics of "coming out," which happens in many ways in young lives. We have seen in the youth's self-descriptions that the challenge of coming out often shapes the voice of a young person and the places and ways that the person chooses to exercise that voice. A young person may come out as gay, as smart, as economically poor, as physically challenged, as ethnically mixed, or as religious. Youth also come out by taking stances against their parents, school, church, or friends, and these stances are often fraught with emotion as young people take stands on controversial topics such as war and violence, gay equality, and politics. The realities vary, as do the dynamics, but the very act of coming out seems to be a critical force in young lives and their sense of power or agency. Building upon this analysis of the dynamic process of coming out, we can further investigate young persons' self-descriptions: the dynamics of religious voice in their lives, the relationship between inner religious voices and public personas and actions, and the implications for religious education.

Dynamics of "Coming Out"

Questions of "coming out" are major for young people, yet they take different shapes. One factor that many youth identify as shaping their life stories is a sense of being different from others – different in ethnicity, gender, personality, abilities, sexual orientation, or religious

persuasion. One young person, Andrew (18 years), when asked to share a significant, life-shaping event, described the period in his life when others began to identify him as Hispanic:

> Okay, well I guess like when I went, when I lived in North Carolina. It was very diverse … I remember it was just mixed and I didn't think a thing about it … But like when I moved up here, things were different because I never thought that I looked Hispanic at all. I never realized that. I still don't. I don't act Hispanic, and I wasn't raised Hispanic. And people say, 'Wow, what are you?' and I'm like, 'Oh, yeah, I forgot.'[2]

For Andrew, this was not a time when he made a conscious effort to "come out," but a time when others labeled him and he had to decide what that label meant for his life. For Andrew, being different was also marked by some physical features that evoked bullying from other young people. All of this was pulling him down until he began to excel in running and he found a place in his school and in his own self-understanding. Andrew's way of "finding voice" was thus through running and later through listening to music that voiced some of his yearnings and values. When the interviewer asked Andrew what helped him be more outgoing in high school, he responded:

> Seriously, it was music and being on the cross country team because that was something for me to identify with. Like really bring out something in me …But I realized I wasn't like everyone else. And like I'm different than a lot of the people and I wasn't afraid to show that anymore.

Andrew's story echoes many others, revealing a search for his identity and a reluctance to expose himself to others. It also echoes the real rejection that many young people feel as a result of being different in some visible or invisible ways from their peers. Finally, it echoes the path of many young people to find a fitting way to present themselves to others, to exercise agency, and

to identify resonant voices that express their deepest values and concerns. For Andrew, the agency came through running, and the resonant voices, through music.

For Andrew, politics is also important and he keeps up with political events. He also identifies several critical public issues, especially ones on which he disagrees with his father, his pastor, or others around him. The issues he names are homosexuality, immigration, and women's place in the family and social structures. He does not give explicitly religious reasons for his perspectives, but he articulates them in relation to the voices of others around him. He is open to gays, but does not want to be gay himself. He is more open to immigration than his dad, and he strongly disagrees with his pastor on women's being subject to their husbands, but he does not want to identify as a "feminist male." In short, he has clear judgments on many social issues, and they are sprinkled with explicit and implicit religious rationale, but he is not "coming out" to make strong statements to others on these matters; he mostly keeps them to himself and to more intimate conversations with family and friends.

Andrew's story is unique to Andrew, but some of the patterns are common to most of the youth we interviewed, especially the pattern of discovering himself and his voice through experiences of difference and the pattern of coming to voice through something that he does well or something that means a great deal to him. For Andrew, the important factors were running and music. For other youth, they are friendship, cheerleading, public speaking, or a school subject in which they excel. Another common pattern that is seen in Andrew's story is the seriousness with which he takes his religion (praying, studying the Bible, asking theological questions) and the seriousness with which he takes social and political issues. As for most of the young people we interviewed, however, Andrew leaves the relationship between his religious and socio-political

convictions in a state of tension, mostly separate but brought into active dialogue at points where the public dialogue is already visible as, for example, with homosexuality or women's rights.

Dynamics of Religious Voice

If voice or agency is important to young people and is intertwined with many factors, what influences young people to speak their religious voices or to hide them? The present study does not stand alone. It is influenced by earlier research on youth voice and agency, including the work of Claire Bischoff, Evelyn Parker, Rodger Nishioka, Kenda Creasy Dean, Christian Smith, Katherine Turpin, Almeda Wright, David White, and Anne Streaty Wimberly. This literature accents the influences on youth to be silent, the yearnings of youth to voice themselves, and the potential of educational practices to create spaces for young people to voice themselves – to narrate their lives and their values. The research thus far indicates that the very act of giving voice to one's internal conflicts and motivations can strengthen one's sense of self and one's resolve to live well in the world. Indeed, many of the youth are convinced that sharing their voices is also important for others to live well. Roshawn, for example, seeks to be a leader rather than a follower, and he hopes that, in his future life, he can "keep black brothers out of jail"; "give all the homeless people a home"' and "get guns and drugs off the street."[3]

Analyses of this same interview data in an earlier study reveals that youth navigate the waters of identity through a complex process of formation, (re)construction, and disruption, and they do this, in part, through the very act of narrating their lives.[4] Some life narrations are more formational, as youth identify themselves with the religious narratives and other formative stories offered by their communities. Others are more (re)constructive, as youth seek to identify themselves in relation to, but distinct from, these larger narratives, and as they seek to critique and reconstruct the narratives themselves. Still other life narrations are disruptive, as youth

dismiss or dismantle the narratives offered them by their religious, familial, and cultural communities. These processes are intertwined, but youth usually engage in one more than the others or they move from one to another over time.

The present research reveals how these processes are enhanced and complicated by youth's public voice, but also how easily the public religious voice can be encouraged in some settings and not in others, or thwarted altogether. Stacey, for example, saves her religious talk for church. A 17 year-old African American woman living in the southern United States, she says: "Well, I would say my church community and my school community are totally different. … I feel like I'm two different people." She goes on to say that she talks about God with her church friends but not with her school friends. Some young people are reluctant to share their religious voices, even in their religious communities. Martin, for example, is a 20 year-old European American man from Kentucky, who cannot reconcile his church's teaching with his closeness to people of other faiths. He says, "I can't force myself to believe that my friends here – my closest friends who are Jewish and Muslim – are going to hell. That's just beyond me. And I asked my pastor about that back home and he's like, 'uhhhhh…' It was like 'I don't have the time for this discussion right now.'" For Martin, at least in that moment, the faith community did not encourage his voicing of questions and newly emerging perspectives.

Seung (22 years) gives a more ambiguous picture of his religious community in encouraging or thwarting religious voice. He recalls that the church was "hateful to one of my friends" though his own experience in his local church has been positive: "They are always wanting to know what's going on with me, they're always wanting to talk to me, and they're never not supportive of anything that I doing." On the other hand, he recognizes that "there are a

lot of people out there that are set in their ways, and it's sad that they don't want to hear what we [young people] have to say."

A fourth young man, Julian, growing up in Burma and now living in England as a 21-year-old college student, has quite a nuanced perspective regarding the times and places for expressing a religious voice. Julian grew up with a sense of freedom to speak and act in his church, together with a sense of the political dangers of speaking publically in a conflicted country, where he has seen his father go to jail. He came to recognize that some settings are not safe for a public voice: "My family is still there [Burma] so I can't talk a lot about how bad the situations are, but still I am a bit proud of what I did there at the church." Julian was proud of his church voice but careful of the public settings where he might express that voice. On the other hand, Julian critiqued the church in the United States for being "too private," and he valued more communal and public religious talk. At the same time, he recognized that religious talk was even limited within his church in Burma. For example, his parents and others did not like to talk about "sexual issues and stuff" that divided the church.

These four young people reveal how complicated religious talk can be, even for people within a religious community. Sometimes young people, like Stacey, make clear distinctions between their religious voices within their communities and outside of them. Sometimes, they are cautious to express a religious voice even within their own religious community, especially when the community itself is conflicted or when it does not really welcome young voices, as for Martin and Seung's friend. And sometimes, they develop fine-tuned distinctions regarding when and how religious voices can be raised, as for Julian. Julian recognizes that the effort to keep religious talk within a religious community can be a political necessity, but he also recognizes

that religious talk can be complicated *within* religious communities when people disagree on important issues.

Some communities tend to be privatized and not to encourage religious talk, even within the community, and some encourage religious talk as long as it avoids controversial issues. Youth learn to navigate these different perceptions and realities as they find and speak their voices. Those youth whose identity is largely in *formation* and strongly rooted within a particular religious community are often content to let religious talk be within the community, though some of these youth are comfortable in both religious and other social settings to witness to their faith. Those youth whose identity is under major *construction or reconstruction* are often prone to ask questions and explore their religious perspectives within their religious communities and in the larger world, as are those who are strongly deconstructing their lives after some kind of disruption, such as a series of deaths or a growing sense of their own difference in sexual orientation, economic status, or values. Thus, "coming out" religiously might be more assertive of particular beliefs and values by someone who is in a more formative time of his or her life, and it might be more question-posing by someone who is living through a more constructive or disruptive time of life.

Inner Religious Voices Interacting with Public Personas and Actions

We have focused thus far on the more public voices of young people and the factors that influence youth to come out with a religious voice. Another important aspect of coming out religiously is attending to one's inner religious voice or one's motivation to act in certain ways as a result of one's religious beliefs and values. Many of the young people describe their life passions with direct or oblique reference to religion. Andrea, for example, says, "I want to go in the Peace Corps, like I just want to save the world … I just want to do whatever I can do to like

help other people."[5] Andrea, like Andrew in the earlier description, has sorted her values partly in contrast to those around her. For example, she compares herself with her sister: "And even though we were raised in the exact same house by the exact same people, she is like so materialistic, like things that are important to her are just not important to me at all."[6]

Similarly, Acharris describes her passions as listening to friends and really helping them: "I know that some of them are actually alive because of me."[7] Her interpersonal values and actions are shaped by religious motivations, as are her perspectives on global issues. Acharris, for example, urges the United States to talk with people.in situations of conflict and war. She argues strongly for non-violent diplomacy: "If we actually went out there and tried and tried to make this better, we could do it because there's so much potential in the American people – in the whole world."[8]

The stories of Andrea and Acharris reveal seemingly straightforward influences between their inner religious voices and public action. Their "coming out" could be described as the movement from inner conviction to outer, visible action and active dreaming for future action. The line between inner and outer does not always appear to be so straightforward, however. Young people who are more actively involved in (re)constructing their lives or asking disruptive questions may reveal their inner religious motivations in oblique or confusing ways to larger publics.

Consider Jordan, whose deep inner life is often missed by people who see only her public persona.[9] As a child, she stood out from her class for too much talking. She was thrown into the identity-construction process by being different from others. She described the role of her fourth grade teacher, Sister Lucy, in helping her make her way.

She was the first teacher that I ever had that saw past my inability to stop talking in class and realize that I was actually really smart. But because I talked so much and my teachers hated me it's like we were in trouble all the time. And then when I got in her class she … took me under her wing and then I became this little genius kid. And I love her for it.

In addition to these inner struggles to find herself, Jordan also had some significant religious experiences that deeply influenced her, such as her baptism and the times she "caught the Holy Ghost." Because of her openness with her voice of critique and non-conformity, however, people are often confused by her public persons. She says: "Most people think I'm an atheist because of the way I come off. I'm very loose with how I speak about God. I'm not like revering, … but I'm very much a believer you know."

In fact, Jordan is not only free about saying that she is a believer, but she also likes to be honest about being a lesbian. She says, for example: "If my church [destroyed by a hurricane] is ever rebuilt I will probably come out to my congregation because I don't like the idea of sitting in church and listening to a gay bashing sermon when I completely disagree with everything they're saying … because I'm sure there's someone in my church whose gay." She adds: "I honestly don't care how they react. I just want them to know that I disagree with them and, if they don't accept me, that's fine." Jordan's story is complicated by her own love of Jesus and the tensions she feels about what is and is not safe to say in the church: "My struggle with Christianity right now is what's very important to me."

At the same time, Jordan is actively constructing a religious identity that takes account of the many significant influences on her life. She says of herself:

Well, Jordan's religion is kind of strange because I've merged … … My Mom was Buddhist for 20 years and then she converted to Christianity. I don't know why. I

wouldn't have. … … Because I think Buddhism is pretty awesome. You know you're

responsible for things that happen to you. … … Plus I'm a Jesus freak so I can't let go of

Jesus and I love the principles of Buddhism so I made 'Jordan's religion' and that's what

I do. I think God's OK with that.

Jordan reveals an active construction process as she navigates her identity, and that process includes public exploration of her religious experiences and perspectives. Her inner religious voices interact with her public persona and actions, which sometimes confuses others but represents a robust religious identity for her and a considerable desire to be public with her religious voice. Like Andrea and Acharris, she identifies complex relationships between her inner religious voice, or convictions, and her public persona and action.

New Possibilities for Religious Education

The present set of interviews represents a limited sample, but some conclusions are strong in the data and worthy of future research. Young people come out religiously in relation to the cultural, religious, and communal contexts in which they live and in relation to their own identity-shaping processes. Experiences of difference – their own and others – often sparks a process of "coming out." The ways by which youth navigate identity – whether more formative, (re)constructive, or disruptive at a particular moment in time – shapes the ways by which they offer their public religious voice. And youth's internal religious voices, or religious motivations, shape the ways in which they live their public lives. These insights are not only worthy of future research, but they are also suggestive for religious education.

One of the largest insights thus far is that *teachers and leaders in religious and school communities need to be alert to the differences with which young people are wrestling and the ways that those differences shape their lives*, for good or for ill. For educators to respect those

differences and to encourage young people to develop their own unique selves is to strengthen the identity-shaping efforts of the youth as well as their public religious voices. This includes encouraging young people to develop their unique potential and to wrestle with the hard questions that emerge in their lives, whether through tensions with others or internal tensions.

Another major insight is that *religious institutions and schools need to engage with young people in different ways as they navigate their identities in different ways*. For young people who are shaping their identities in a more formational, tradition-abiding way, the clear presentation of a tradition can be empowering. This does not rule out the possibility of stretching the boundaries of those traditions with the youth, but it recognizes that some youth in some periods of their lives seek the solidity of a particular religious orientation that can shape them and empower their religious voice. Similarly, young people who are engaged in more disruptive or (re)constructive processes of identity-formation need space to explore religion and their own perspectives and attitudes and to engage in that exploration with people similar to and different from them.

One further education insight is that *young people need opportunities to explore and question their internal religious voices and the ways by which those voices shape their public personas and actions*. The self-presentation of young people in public settings can be deceiving, and their exploration of the inner life and the motivations that arise from that life are critical to their own self-understanding and integrative living.

All of these insights beg for more, and that is the work of the discussion in our REA session. We look forward to the new insights that will emerge there.

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[1] Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Dynamics of Religious Culture: Ethogenic Method," in *International Handbook of the*
[2] Andrew is a pseudonym for an 18-year old boy of European-American and Hispanic ethnic background, who lived in a small north Georgia town at the time of the interview. All interviewee names are pseudonyms, and other identifying information is removed from the presentation.

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[3] Roshawn (pseudonym) is a 13-year old African American boy, living in Atlanta at the time of the interview, 14 February 2008.

[4] Moore, "Youth Navigating Identities: Charting the Waters through Narrative," International Academy of Practical Theology, Toronto, 13 April 2013.

[5] Andrea (pseudonym) is a 19-year old European American girl who lived in Atlanta, GA at the time of the interview, 17 October 2004, lines 983-985.

[6] Ibid., lines 994-997.

[7] Acharris (pseudonym) is a 18-year old African American girl, who lived in Young Harris, GA at the time of the interview, lines 281-282.

[8] Ibid., lines 357-359.

[9] Jordan is a 19-year-old African American lesbian woman living in the southern United States.