

# The Vermont Connection

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Volume 41 *Embracing the Whole: Sentience and Interconnectedness in Higher Education*

Article 6

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April 2020

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### Recommended Citation

Williams, M. M. (2020). Both/And: Self-Authoring a Feminist Christian Identity. *The Vermont Connection*, 41(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol41/iss1/6>

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## Both/And: Self-Authoring a Christian Feminist Identity

Molly M. Williams

*This article is my attempt to make sense of the conflicting, confusing, tumultuous journey of making peace with my religion and my commitment to social justice, particularly feminism. I frame my journey using Baxter Magolda's (2001) model of self-authorship, connecting the development of my religious and gender identities to the learning, questioning, and eventual personalization of external messages. I weave Baxter Magolda's model, my narrative, and existing scholarship together to present a framework by which self-authorship can be applied to understand the needs of a young woman experiencing spiritual struggle within Christianity. I then consider the limitations of such a framework given the lens of privilege attached to both my own narrative and the model of self-authorship as a whole. I conclude with recommendations for myself and other student affairs practitioners interested in engaging more deeply with this topic.*

*Keywords:* Christianity, feminism, self-authorship, social justice

Baxter Magolda (2001) proposed a theory of self-authorship to address how young adults answer three major questions in their twenties: “How do I know?,” “Who am I?,” and “How do I want to construct relationships with others?” The process of self-authorship guides students toward epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development. According to Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory, young adults move through four phases on their journey to self-authorship. The phases gradually move from a focus on external modes of meaning making toward reliance on internal sources of meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2001). In this article, I weave Baxter Magolda's model, my narrative, and existing scholarship on religious identity development together to present a framework by which self-authorship can be applied to understand the needs of a young woman struggling to reconcile Christianity with a commitment to feminist ideals.

This article is more of a letter to myself than anything. While I hope that other

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*Molly M. Williams is a Christian, a feminist, a member of the HESA Class of 2020 and an alumna of Vanderbilt University. She is grateful for the spiritual, personal, & academic mentors whose care and encouragement made this article a reality.*

student affairs practitioners will find value in the framework I lay out here, my primary intention in undertaking this exercise is to make sense of what has been a confusing, heart-wrenching, beautiful, and messy journey, because making sense of where I have been seems like the best way to help myself move forward. I am sharing my story not necessarily because I believe it can or should be instructive for everyone, but because I believe in the importance of sharing individual stories in the pursuit of a greater truth.

### Following Formulas

Like many young people, my first understanding of my religious identity came from my parents. We were Sunday regulars at the Catholic church I grew up in, and my parents ensured that I was deeply involved with the Church through CCD classes (the Catholic Church's religious education program for young people aged 5-16), participation in the annual Christmas pageant, being an altar server, and more. As a young person, I tended to operate without questioning the structures of the Church, instead focusing on doing everything I was "supposed" to do according to my teachers, parents, and priests. I knew I was Catholic because other people told me I was, and didn't feel like I had to think much harder about my identity than that. I was firmly planted in following formulas, the first stage of self-authorship.

For individuals in the following formulas stage, identity is externally defined and highly influenced by input from authority figures and peers (Baxter Magolda, 2001). As I mentioned, my identity at this point was derived from the fact that an authority figure had told me what my religious identity was and what I had to do to "act like it." I not only followed these external formulas, I took refuge in them. As a lifelong people-pleaser, I found comfort in the formulaic structure of the Catholic faith and the sense that church was something I could "ace" by memorizing the right prayers, knowing when to sit down and stand up, and going to Reconciliation often enough. I focused on doing everything I was "supposed" to do according to my teachers, parents, and priests, partly out of a desire for approval and partly out of fear of disappointing those in power – particularly those who held my eternal salvation in their hands. Parks's religious identity development theory calls this stage "authority-bound knowledge" (2000). My knowledge about my religious identity was limited to what authorities and the rules and formulas they handed me communicated.

Learning how to be Catholic also came with a specific set of rules about how to perform my gender. I was taught to emulate women who were praised for their obedience and service to male teachers. Authorities taught me that the ideal Catholic woman was submissive, modest, and pure of heart and body. My peers and I were cautioned against premarital sex, abortion, and masturbation and were expected to follow the Catholic "party line" in voicing our opposition to such behaviors.

As I got older I didn't always follow these rules, but their importance in my life did not lessen. Still holding onto the formulas I had learned about how to be a "good Catholic," I tried my hardest to convey at least the appearance of the "ideal" woman and experienced deep shame when my private behavior didn't match the public persona I tried to convey. It never occurred to me that the problem could be with the formulas themselves and not with me.

Once I graduated high school, I put some distance between myself and the authorities I had grown up with by attending college several thousand miles from home at a private institution in Tennessee. This foray into the Bible Belt was my first prolonged exposure to Evangelical religions and the ways that they differed from my Catholic upbringing. As I met friends who identified as "born-again" and went to events on campus hosted by Evangelical groups, I started to suspect that the formulaic approach to religion I had been enacting had somewhat short-changed my religious experience. I realized that despite my commitment to following religious doctrine, I felt very little connection to the actual spiritual world to which that doctrine purported to connect me. I began to branch out from my Catholic roots and explore other perspectives on and practices of Christianity by joining a Presbyterian church and getting involved in a nondenominational Evangelical Bible study group.

On its surface, this moment in my story seems like a progression forward toward self-authorship. In practice, though, it was followed by a quick backslide into following formulas as I sought out new authority figures and rules to follow. Parents and priests were replaced by Bible study leaders, disciplers, and even friends who had been "on their walk with Jesus" for longer than I had. I remained afraid of doing the wrong thing and often worried about whether I was acting Christian "enough" to keep up with my peers. This shift illustrates that while self-authorship is a staged model with distinct phases, it is not necessarily a linear process – movement can occur in multiple directions before an individual is fully ready to commit to developing their own internal sources of meaning making. This understanding of self-authorship aligns with Parks' (2000) depiction of religiospiritual development as a multidimensional, nonlinear progression.

Engaging with new religious traditions and authorities also exposed me to more formulas and rules about my role in the world as a woman. In on-campus groups, Bible studies and discipleship groups were almost invariably segregated along binary gender lines. In these spaces, which were most often led by older college women, messaging about dating and relationships was especially salient. Formulas I took in from Bible study leaders and peers emphasized marriage as the ultimate goal of womanhood. I heard older women I looked up to talk about how their singleness was a source of anxiety, pain, and feelings of insufficiency. I came to understand that as a woman, I should not feel fully whole until I had a husband,

or at the very least a serious boyfriend. Trying to follow this formula was a messy process, particularly because as I started dating I realized that the idealized Christian relationship – “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord” – made me feel trapped, belittled, and more than a little uncomfortable (Ephesians 5:22). For all that discomfort, though, I remained committed to following the rules set forth by religious and personal authorities. Fear of repercussions in relationships – with other people, or with God – inhibited me from acting to resolve the dissonance I was feeling. It was not until I reached the next stage, the crossroads, that I began to critically evaluate formulas and make my own judgments about how to make meaning of them.

### **The Crossroads**

The second half of my college experience marked an important turning point in my journey through self-authorship. By that point I had begun to develop a sociopolitical consciousness and commitment to social justice informed by my work as a resident advisor and national events like the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which brought conversations about systems of oppression and the institution’s role in them to the forefront of the campus zeitgeist. I experienced much of this development separately from my religious development, which continued to be siloed in majority-white, relatively homogenous, and somewhat conservative communities both on and off campus. I had started to feel a little wary of my religious communities’ lack of concern with social justice, but I mostly pushed those concerns aside in favor of maintaining the compartmentalized system that didn’t make me question my meaning-making formulas. And then came the 2016 presidential election.

In the months building up to election day, I felt more aware of and empowered by my gender identity than I had in a long time. Hilary Clinton, while not a perfect candidate, was a symbol of the promise of equality I had heard since childhood. I thought that if she could become president, I could finally believe that when people told me girls could do anything, they meant anything. But on November 5th, I sat shell-shocked in a friend’s living room watching the symbol of my childhood hopes lose the election to Donald “Grab them by the P#ssy” Trump.

My initial response to the election results was to turn to religion for comfort, but I found nothing. I walked into my internship at a Christian counseling center the day after the election, a little puffy-eyed and still reeling from the night before, to find that everyone else at work seemed relatively unaffected. At our Wednesday morning staff meeting, the director asked the rest of the staff to join her in praying for the success of our new president. On campus and in church, things weren’t much better. I was struck by the general apathy I saw from some Christians toward electoral results that were absolutely devastating for other neighbors and friends.

As more statistics about the election began to roll out and reveal unnerving truths – 81% of Evangelicals voted for Trump, 52% of Catholics voted for Trump, 53% of white women voted for Trump – I began to realize that the formulas of my fledgling feminist identity and religious identity couldn't be separated into neat little boxes. They were directly contradicting each other, and one or the other had to adapt if I was going to be able to hold onto both of them.

Baxter Magolda calls this process of reconciling tensions between external formulas “the crossroads” (2001). At the crossroads stage, young people begin to experience tension with the formulas they have followed and the external ways that their identities have been defined (Baxter Magolda, 2001). I came to a crossroads because I realized that the formulas I had been following were no longer working. Keeping my religious, feminist, and other activist identities totally separate was not a viable system in the long term because external forces were continuously bringing those identities into conflict with one another. This realization precipitated a process of self-reflection, evaluation of external formulas, and reexamining my answers to the Big Questions about faith, purpose, and meaning in life. Baxter Magolda would call this process the crossroads; other scholars refer to it as spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008). Whatever the name, though, it was not an easy time.

At the crossroads, I felt anger toward organized religion for making me choose between my faith and my commitment to feminism. I found it much harder to accept any kind of human religious authority. I gradually stopped going to Bible study and disengaged from the religious community on campus. In general, I found it hard to connect with other Christians because I didn't fully trust their worldview. Things got even more difficult once I graduated and started “church-shopping” in a new city. I still went to church, but I kept the people I met there at arm's length. I became even more frustrated by the emphasis on coupling and marriage among 20- and 30-somethings in Christian communities, annoyed by the judgment (or even worse, pity) I received as a single woman for not living up to gender roles I didn't care all that much about in the first place. The near-constant barrage of civil rights attacks from the new presidential administration was met mostly with silence from the pulpit, which continually reinforced this cycle of distrust and anger.

The resolution of Baxter Magolda's crossroads is that individuals begin to shift from external sources of meaning making to internal ones (2001). As painful as it was to question and distance myself from external definitions of religion that had defined my identity for years, I also experienced freedom to explore my own internal spirituality. I stayed connected to my faith by reading the Bible on my own and seeking out readings from progressive Christian authors whose work I had not been exposed to before. I tried to expand my view of what Christianity could be, and began to ask myself the Big Questions that I previously would have posed to Bible study leaders, disciplers, priests, etc. I rarely had the answers,

but I started to see my internal senses of right & wrong and true & false as valid sources of knowledge.

Shifting my focus internally also allowed me to invest more in learning about myself and my other identities, hopes, and dreams, which opened quite a few doors. I applied to graduate school, moved to Vermont, and started to clarify my professional identity and sense of purpose in higher education – all things which made me feel excited and confident about the direction my life was moving in, despite the shifts in some formerly central parts of my identity. While the crossroads was a challenging and sometimes painful period, negotiating it was essential for my forward progress as a Christian feminist and a student affairs professional.

### **Becoming the Author of One's Life**

Since coming to graduate school, quite a few things have shifted in my modes of meaning-making. For one, I don't really go to church much anymore. Some part of me wants to include an apology here to family and friends who might read that statement and worry about my spiritual well-being, but that would feel disingenuous because in actuality, moving further away from organized religion has deepened my personal sense of faith and spirituality. As I have distanced myself from the constraints and judgments of external formula-makers, I have also become more committed to the beliefs that have remained important to me across contexts and stages of identity development. The process of a young person becoming more committed to their beliefs and standing by them in the face of opposition (even well-intentioned opposition framed as worry) is the penultimate stage in self-authorship, becoming the author of one's life (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

According to Baxter Magolda, young people at this stage understand and may even be comfortable with the idea that belief systems are contextual, changing, and often unclear (2001). The understanding that it is okay for belief systems to evolve over time has been essential in my faith development. I have become less engaged with traditional religious practices like going to church and have also continued to become more socially liberal, in opposition to the more conservative teachings of my faith tradition. At the same time, my commitment to caring for others has grown deeper, as has my awareness of my role within larger systems and connectedness to others. Astin et al.'s (2011) model for assessing religious and spiritual development frames these shifts not as losses or gains, but as natural progressions in development. While I may score lower on the authors' measures of religiosity, I also score higher on measures of spirituality. I can accept that my belief systems have changed over time without feeling shame, since I understand change as an important and expected part of development.

To say that I have become less “religious,” though, does not imply that I have to-

tally eradicated any sense of religious identity from my life. I still readily identify as a Christian, but my definition of what that means is based on my own sense of connectedness to God and Jesus rather than a definition handed to me by others. I believe Christianity can be summarized in two simple commands: to love God and to love your neighbor. The way I make meaning of those commands is informed by my commitment to social justice and reciprocally reinforces that same commitment. When I look at the world with a feminist lens, I feel like I am seeing the world more in the way that Jesus sees it – paying attention to the marginalized, calling in those who are excluded, calling out those who are doing the excluding. These aren't the ways I learned to practice Christianity growing up, but the ways I practice now make me feel more in touch with Jesus than following external formulas ever did. This deeper commitment to self-defined beliefs through a shifting understanding of one's role in community is characteristic of the penultimate stage in self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

In this stage, young people renegotiate important connections with others as they refine their own self-concept and meaning making mechanisms (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This process is not easy – I sometimes experience fear when talking to people I met through Bible studies or other religious institutions about the current state of my spiritual life. In fact, I'm experiencing fear now thinking about the people who might read this article and challenge my status as a Christian or as a feminist based on what I have shared here. However, I have also found moments of joy in renegotiation, particularly in discovering that some of my women friends had been asking the same questions I had been for the past few years. We haven't all come to the same conclusions, but being able to share perspectives and encouragement has been a huge asset in my continued development of a self-authored Christian feminist identity.

Progression toward self-authorship at this stage is also marked by the ability to translate beliefs across multiple contexts (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This is best exemplified in my journey by the fact that I no longer keep my spiritual and social beliefs separate in my professional and personal life. In an earlier section, I discussed how I used to think about social issues and religion totally separately, while I now see them as mutually reinforcing: my religious beliefs inform my commitments to social activism, and my commitment to social activism in turn affects how I make sense of religious texts and traditions. In no longer having to keep those worlds separate, I can also connect my religious beliefs more explicitly to my practice in student affairs. My philosophy toward the work I do is strongly influenced by and rooted in Christian ideals like loving your neighbor, caring for the marginalized, and sometimes even turning the other cheek. I see my work as a vocation – the role I have been intentionally created and called to play in the greater service of shaping a more equitable, just, and whole world. While I may not openly talk about my beliefs with students and colleagues, particularly since

I work at a public institution, I am cognizant of how they influence my interactions with every student who comes into my office and every classmate I engage in discussion with. Across contexts, I can maintain my beliefs while acknowledging the ways they inform my actions in implicit and essential ways.

### **Internal Foundation**

I am at peace with where I am currently in my journey toward self-authorship. However, I also know that my journey is not finished. I still feel the effects of external factors and at times, they still influence the decisions I make more than my internal foundation does. Simply put, I feel like I don't have all the answers or a fully-formed Christian feminist identity just yet. Perhaps I never will, or perhaps it will come later in life for me. In any case, I can look forward to continuing to progress through self-authorship's final stage, internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

While my narrative may not have progressed to this stage yet, existing literature provides some idea of where this stage could lead. Many of the women whose stories contributed to the existing body of literature on Christian feminism have already reached the internal foundation stage, where their own beliefs are consistently more important to them than external factors. For instance, Catholic nuns in Gervais' (2012) study articulated that they made decisions about negotiating Catholicism and feminism based on what they internally believed to be right. These decisions contributed to organizational change that disrupted the structures of Catholicism in ways that were small but significant to their personal experiences (Gervais, 2012). Bulanda (2011) found that women drew on their individual agency and sense of foundation to resist "traditional ideolog[ies]" and in essence design their own gender roles within their family and their religion. These studies demonstrate that internal foundations help women not only develop a Christian feminist ethic, but translate that ethic into action across contexts and over time.

I don't know what the internal foundation stage will look like for me. I am happy with where my journey has taken me so far, but I am also hopeful that further growth and reconciliation of my Christian and feminist identities is possible. For instance, I would love to grow to the point where I no longer feel like I need to keep organized religion at arm's length to maintain my sense of self. I hope that with a stronger foundation, I could join a church and view its shortcomings not as things to fear, but as opportunities to contribute to the growth and evolution of the community toward a more inclusive and socially just vision of Christianity. Right now, I feel more fear than excitement because I am not totally comfortable with my beliefs coming under intense scrutiny or challenge, but progressing further through the final two stages of self-authorship has the potential to help me

get to a place where that reversal is possible.

### **Limitations**

While I stand by the validity of the framework I have presented as it helps make sense of my journey, I feel compelled to acknowledge its limitations. First, this framework and the theory of self-authorship as a whole are limited by their centering of whiteness and white students' experiences. As a constructivist theory, self-authorship does not acknowledge how systems of oppression, including race and racism, affect students' meaning-making processes which may limit the theory's applicability to students of color (Abes & Hernández, 2016). This limitation is also evident in my own narrative which, being focused on my experiences as a white woman, does not consider the realities that a woman of color might experience in navigating not only sexism within the Church but also racism within feminist movements and religious ideologies.

I also note that the privilege I experience as a cisgender, straight person impacts the way that I navigate conservative religious spaces. Queer and trans\* women, experiencing multiple forms of oppression from a religious context, would likely have a very different experience of self-authorship than I did. Unfortunately, research on the experience of queer and trans\* feminists in Christianity is largely absent from published literature, and therefore presents an important area of future study for scholars interested in engaging in this line of research.

Finally, my ability to go to college and therefore be exposed to formulas other than the ones I grew up with is a privilege tied closely to my socioeconomic class, status as a later-generation college student, and access to quality K-12 education in my hometown. For women who do not have the mobility or opportunity to access higher education and be exposed to alternative formulas about gender identity and religion, the path through self-authorship may proceed at a different pace, if it occurs at all.

As noted in the opening section of this paper, my intent in writing this paper was to make sense of my own journey toward self-authoring a feminist Christian identity. Given such a personal starting point, that the resulting analysis is not necessarily applicable to individuals who hold different identities than me is unsurprising. However, I hope that future research will cast a broader net to understand the effects of intersecting forms of marginalization on young women's journeys through self-authorship and their relationship with religion.

### **Closing Thoughts**

In reflecting on my own journey through this process, I have identified several

recommendations for myself and other student affairs professionals supporting students in navigating similar moments of self-authorship and for those who are navigating this journey themselves while trying to support students. They are:

- Leave space for conversations about religion in social justice spaces and about social justice in religious spaces. Always assume that both are present on folks' minds.
- Avoid making assumptions when religious beliefs are expressed. Ask more questions, seek to understand. If you are afraid of what the answers might be, you will always feel disconnected.
- Someone sharing their religious beliefs with you should be the beginning of the conversation, not the end.
- Don't stop asking the hard questions of yourself, too. Your answers matter just as much as your students'.

As I hope is obvious from the preceding sections, I am aware that this model does not make sense for everyone and that it may not resonate with many readers. However, if you do connect with anything I have written here, reach out to me – let's get coffee and talk about how we could go on this journey together. If my story doesn't resonate, know that it is my most ardent hope that you find liberation and peace in your own path, even if your path is radically different than mine.

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