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Adaptation to the U.S. and Religion/Spirituality: Experiences of Indian International Students

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ABSTRACT

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Religion and spirituality are deemed an important aspect of human diversity, found to be important to people, and have significant impact on different aspects of functioning. Given the rising numbers of international students on U.S. campuses, it becomes important to examine how religion/spirituality impacts their sojourn in the U.S. This study explored the religious/spiritual experiences of Indian international students here in the U.S. using a qualitative approach. Thirteen Indian international students pursuing graduate degrees in the U.S. were interviewed. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using a synthesis of hermeneutic methods informed by Kvale (1996). The following themes emerged through the analysis of data: religion is a highly personalized and complex concept, coming to a foreign land brings about changes in the practice of religion, context is important in the experience of religion, certain religious ideas and practices are seen as helpful, and new experiences lead to an evolved way of thinking about religion. The findings suggest that religion/spirituality does tend to be important for Indian international students, though often in an indirect manner. These results offer ideas about ways in which advisement and counseling center staff, international student associations, and university personnel can best serve Indian international students through an open and welcoming approach that acknowledges and respects this important aspect of human diversity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

The recent Open Doors report on international educational exchange (Institute of International Education, U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs) indicated that the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased by 5.7% to a record high of 764,495 in the 2011/12 academic year (after a previous increase of 4.7% in 2010/11). This is 3.7% of the total enrollment. India remains one of the leading sending countries, increasing to 100,270 students in the 2011/12 academic year, which is 13.1 % of all international students (Institute for International Education, 2012). This census, which is based on a survey of approximately 3,000 accredited U.S. institutions, highlights the need to study the experiences and needs of this unique and growing population.

The experiences of international students have been examined through various studies conducted in areas like academic stressors and adjustment, as mediated by factors like acculturation, age, years of residency, English proficiency, race or ethnicity (e.g., Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003). Research has also examined issues such as cultural, adjustment, and social interaction (e.g., Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Downie, Mageau, Koestner & Liodden, 2006; Cai, Wilson, & Drake, 2000; Cross, 1995; Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007; Gong & Fan, 2006; Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006). Based on existing research one may say that in many ways, international students are having a true multicultural immersion experience as they learn to negotiate their way through new systems, learn new dynamics of relationships, and develop new customs and habits.

One of the many dimensions along which international students may differ from the host, or dominant culture is their religion/spirituality. The importance of considering religion and

spirituality is evidenced by the ethical codes of the American Psychological Association (2010) and the American Counseling Association (1995), both of which have included religion and spirituality as one of the aspects of human diversity. Existing research in this area highlights the important role that religion and spirituality play in the life of most people whether in terms of coping with stressors or general mental health and well-being (e.g., Magaletta & Brawer, 1998; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Sharma & Sharma, 2006). Interestingly, research has shown that immigrating to a new country has a clear impact on the religious practices and behaviors of people (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). Osburn's (2005) doctoral research, which focused on the religious experiences of international students, found that religion was an important aspect of the students' life; coming to a new country impacted their religious practices and made them think anew about their religious beliefs and values.

However, religion and spirituality have been studied mainly in terms of their role in the process of acculturation (e.g., Ghorpade, Lackritz, & Singh, 2004; Roysircar-Sodowsky & Plake, 1992). There are relatively few studies that look at how living in a new country affects the religiosity/spirituality of an international student. Knowing that religion and spirituality are important for most human beings and that coming to a new country impacts religious beliefs and experiences, the purpose of this study is to further explore this experience among international students from India using a qualitative method.

Coming to a new country and living in a foreign culture requires adaptation to the new world; a person is likely to undergo many changes at multiple levels (behavioral, cognitive, and affective) in order to live in harmony with the dominant culture that they find themselves in (Cuéllar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). The concept of "losing one's culture" in order to adapt to the host culture is not unknown (see Berry, 1980; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993)

while other literature suggests that exposure to a new culture makes one draw closer to one's own culture (see Berry, 1980; Sayegh & Lasry, 1993). Further, international students may get a different perspective of their own culture when they see it through the eyes of another culture.

In terms of religious/spiritual adaptation, being away from various influential sources (parents, family, friends, religious leaders, culture of origin) may cause a loosening of bonds. Conversely, being immersed in a strange new world may cause an individual to stick even closer to the old familiar and comforting maxims of religion. There may be some re-evaluation of personal values previously taken for granted (as seen in Osburn, 2005). Further, the religiosity/spirituality of the individual before leaving their homeland may influence the process of adaptation as may the quality of interactions and relationships formed in the new country. These are topics that are worth exploring further so that psychologists might better understand the experiences and challenges of international students from India. So this study will explore the religious/spiritual experiences of Indian international students.

Review of Literature

This review of literature will begin with a definition of each of the major terms used in this research. In order to establish the background for this research, the existing literature on research with international students will be reviewed. The specific challenges of international students and their experiences in terms of adjustment and adaptation, acculturation, issues of cultural diversity, social interactions, as well as academics will be reviewed. Next, the importance of the construct of religion will be discussed highlighting the important role that it plays for most individuals. The religious experiences of students, the possible impact of education on religious/spiritual beliefs, as well as developmental factors in the religious development of individuals will be explored given that the target group of this research is college students. Available information about the importance of religion as well as the religious experiences of immigrants and international students will be examined next and the need for the current research will be highlighted.

Definitions

The terms religion and spirituality have various connotations in both popular and research usage. Similarly, there can be multiple interpretations and usages of other key terms used in this research. Hence, this section will outline how the central terms are defined for the purposes of this research.

Religion/spirituality. In this research, the terms religion and spirituality will be used together. Although these terms carry different connotations, they tend to overlap substantially and may be used in combination for maximal inclusiveness (Schulte, Skinner, & Claiborn, 2002). Religion is defined as a "commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance, or a personal or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices"

(http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/religion). However, the myriad of existing definitions as well as the general lack of agreement on any one definition needs to be noted. Quoting the sociologist J. Milton Yinger (1967), Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch (1996) state that "any definition of religion is likely to be satisfactory only to its author" (in Hood et al., p.4). Spirituality "has to do with however people think, feel, act, or interrelate in their efforts to find, conserve, and if necessary, transform the sacred in their lives" (Pargament, 1999, p. 12).

It must be noted here that while these definitions will guide the researcher, the participants will be asked to share their own definitions and understanding of both these terms. Their personal understanding will be allowed to guide the participant responses without any imposition of the researcher's definitions.

International student. An international student is defined as an individual who was born and brought up in a country other than the United States of America and has come to this country solely for the purpose of pursuing higher education.

Sojourner. A sojourner is defined as an individual who is temporarily residing in a country other than the country of origin.

Immigrant. An immigrant is defined as an individual who has moved from his/her country of origin to a new country with the intention of settling in the new country.

The International Student Experience

This section will examine the unique nature of international students' experiences and review the existing research regarding their adjustment, acculturation, relationships and social support, academic experiences and stressors, and coping strategies.

Possible challenges of immigration and implications for international students. As Williams (1998) points out, migration to a new country threatens the plausibility structures that

undergird individual and social knowledge, morals, customs, leadership styles, and commitments as well as those that support civic order and personal health. Simply put, individuals have to make adjustments in terms of language, values, systems, and customs navigating in a world that is largely unfamiliar to them. Arrival in a new country is often accompanied by a sense of loss, which may engender a loss of confidence, a sense of unremitting tension, an inability to take time off, or an inability to find ways and means of enjoyment (Hayes & Lin, 1994). This may give rise to behavioral dysfunctions in new cultural contexts (Heikkinen, 1981) causing academic, personal, and social problems (Anderson & Myers, 1985; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Surdam & Collins, 1984). The individual is typically attempting to adjust to their new culture and to the (sometimes temporary) loss of their home culture. Further, there is a need to develop new roles and new support systems in order to function well (Putney, 1981). This is a stressful and complicated process. As Arredondo-Dowd (1981) points out in her discussion, the initial feelings of happiness about being in the host country can soon turn to feelings of sadness and disappointment for many immigrants to America. When it comes to international students not only do they face such adjustment concerns but also find themselves negotiating the confusing academic world that is likely to be different from their own. Understanding the unique challenges of international students would build upon the existing literature regarding the challenges of the immigrant population and help us to better serve their needs.

Comparing the experiences of international and American students. As Yeh and Inose (2003) highlight research indicates that international students experience more psychological problems than students from the host country (citing Leong and Chou, 1996; Mori, 2000; Padilla, Alvarez, & Lindholm, 1986; Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Kilinc & Granello, 2003). Further, studies have shown that international students have limited resources to

deal with the process of cross-cultural adjustment (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Pedersen, 1991; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). International students have been found to experience higher levels of discrimination and homesickness as compared to U.S. students (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Factors like age, English language proficiency, and perceived discrimination predicted homesickness among these students. Interestingly, one study found that though Turkish international students reported a relatively high degree of satisfaction with their lives, they also reported experiencing homesickness (Kilinc & Granello, 2003). In a study with Asian Indian international students in the U.S., it was found that Indian students experienced a greater degree of homesickness, which in turn was related to greater depression and anxiety symptoms (Tochkov, Levine, & Sanaka, 2010). Longer length of stay and greater perceived discrimination were found to be predictors of increased homesickness while socializing with American students was irrelevant. However, socializing with international students was found to mitigate the effects of homesickness (Tochkov et al., 2010).

Various other mental health and personal concerns including academic difficulties, financial difficulties, interpersonal problems with American students as well as with their co-national students, racial/ethnic discrimination, loss of social support, alienation, and homesickness have been also reported (Leong and Chou, 1996; Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). The differential experiences of international and host country students highlight the need for research targeting the unique experiences of international students.

Adjustment. Adjustment may be considered along two separate but related dimensions: psychological (emotional/affective, referring to sojourners' psychological well-being or satisfaction in their new cultural environments) and socio-cultural (behavioral, referring to

sojourners' ability to ''fit in'' or effectively interact with members of host cultures) (Searle & Ward, 1990). As the number of international students on campuses across the industrialized countries of North America, Australia and Europe increase, several scholars have studied the experience of cross-cultural adjustment because it may predict not only the success and satisfaction with the sojourn but also the quality of relations between members from different cultural groups (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Yang et al., 2006). In a review of research about predictors of international students' psychosocial adjustment, Zhang and Goodson (2011) found stress, social support, English language proficiency, region/country of origin, length of residence in the U.S., acculturation, social interaction with Americans, self-efficacy, gender, and personality to be the most reported predictors.

Ward and colleagues' research suggests that a close fit (or similarity) between sojourners' traits and host nationals' traits leads to better psychological adjustment (e.g., Ward & Chang, 1997; Ward & Searle, 1991). Further, sociocultural adjustment appears to be linked with variables that facilitate sojourners' culture learning and acquisition of social skills in the host cultures (e.g., Cross, 1995; Searle & Ward, 1990) one of which is adapting to the communication styles of the host culture (Furnham, 1993; Furnham & Bochner, 1982, 1986, as cited in Oguri & Gudykunst, 2002). As with psychological adjustment, a close fit between sojourners' and host nationals' communication styles leads to better sociocultural adjustment. It should be noted that though these two dimensions of adjustment are interrelated they are differentially linked to a variety of factors (Ward & Chang, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999; Ward & Searle, 1991) and exhibit different patterns over time (Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998), underscoring the importance of considering each type of adjustment separately. For example, factors such as personality, life changes, coping styles, satisfaction, and

identification with and social support from co-nationals in the host country tend to impact psychological adjustment where as the length of residence in the new culture, language ability, cultural knowledge, cultural distance, and the quantity of contact with host nationals are important in sociocultural adjustment (Yang et al., 2006).

Research shows that adaptive personality dimensions may influence the cross-cultural adjustment (Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004) and may be effective predictors of adjustment for international students (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). Ward et al. (2004) found that neuroticism and extraversion were related to psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of extraversion and lower levels of neuroticism adjust more easily to a new environment. Ward et al. also suggest that openness and willingness to try different activities, ideas, and values may have some impact on the adjustment process.

The self-construals (which refer to the individuals' perceptions of themselves as separate from or interconnected with others) and communication styles of international students have been found to impact their psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Oguri & Gudykunst, 2002). The independent self-construal which was similar to the prototypical self-construal in the host culture predicted better psychological adjustment and the interdependent self-construal was not related to psychological adjustment. Further, the use of direct communication and positive perceptions of silence which are typical in the host culture, were related to better sociocultural adjustment. Sensitivity to others' behavior was another factor found to be predictive of sociocultural adjustment. In another study Yang et al. (2006) found that more independent international students experienced higher self-esteem and fewer socio-cultural difficulties. Further, it was found that language self-confidence played a pivotal role, mediating the relations between both host cultural contact and self-construal and psychological adjustment and socio-

cultural difficulty. Interestingly, research also shows that the larger the perceived cultural distance between mainstream and immigrant culture (which may impact communication and self-construal fit), the more difficulties an international student experiences in both psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007).

Age and English language proficiency were also found to impact adjustment with younger age and higher English proficiency leading to better adjustment (Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, & Pisecco, 2001). Other studies too have demonstrated the importance of English language fluency in predicting international students' adjustment (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Yashima, 1995) linking English language skills with academic performance, academic difficulties, general adjustment level, and social interactions with host culture members (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Pedersen, 1991; Poyrazli et al., 2001; Poyrazli et al., 2002, Poyrazli et al., 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

As highlighted by the research discussed above, the adjustment process assumes great importance in the experience of international students. A multiplicity of variables interact with each other in predicting adjustment including the fit between the values and styles of host country and international students as well as cultural, social, and personal variables that impact the communication process and cultural negotiation. One such important value or cultural and/or personal variable is the religious/spiritual dimension. This makes it imperative to understand the perceived disparity and cultural negotiation that occurs in the religious/spiritual dimension as an international student navigates the culture of the host country.

Acculturation and acculturative stress. Acculturation refers to the changes in values and behaviors that individuals make as they gradually adopt the cultural norms of the dominant

society (Graves, 1967). The empirical study of the acculturation process tends to focus on "the attempts of the visitor group to maintain its identity, to identify more fully with the majority culture, and on the tension between these two possibilities" (Crano &Crano, 1993, p. 269).

In examining the acculturative experiences of international students it is important to note that as temporary residents in a new culture they may need to navigate through the culture for a restricted amount of time as compared to an immigrant who is staying permanently. Crano and Crano (1993) make another important point about the acculturative processes of international students. Unlike most immigrants, an international student is not a member of an autonomous group but rather functions as an individual (Dyal & Chan, 1985 and Dyal & Dyal, 1981, cited in Crano & Crano, 1993). Citing various researchers they highlight the importance of familial support groups and other intact social-support networks that facilitate the acculturative process for most immigrants (citing Dyal, Rybensky, & Somers, 1988; Kuo & Tsai, 1986) but which are typically not present for international students. Crano and Crano (1993) suggest that this aspect often gets overlooked in research with international students.

Berry and Annis (1974) talk about acculturative stress, that is, the stresses adult immigrants are vulnerable to as a result of the acculturation process. Smart and Smart (1995) have referred to acculturative stress as the psychological impact of adapting to a new culture. Symptoms of acculturative stress include confusion, anxiety, depression, feelings of alienation, hopelessness, identity confusion, and heightened psychosomatic symptoms (Berry & Annis, 1974; Smart & Smart, 1995). A meta-analytic study by Moyerman and Forman (1992) involving 49 studies of acculturation and adjustment found that acculturative stress is positively correlated with psychosocial and health problems. Further, acculturative stress engenders feelings of powerlessness, marginality, inferiority, loneliness, perceived alienation, and discrimination.

These feelings cause emotional distress that does not remit easily (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). Research also shows that acculturative stress tends to be a strong predictor of mental health symptoms like depression (Constantine et al., 2004; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007) and is related to psychological, physical aspects, and social aspects of life (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Sandhu, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2003). It was found that high levels of emotional stability seem to be linked with more positive perceptions of personal physical and psychological health (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002).

The complex interaction of the acculturation process with various other factors including adjustment, English language fluency, and mental health is highlighted by the following studies. Duru and Poyrazli (2007) conducted a study to examine the acculturative stress of Turkish international students as impacted by demographics, personality, level of social connectedness, and English language competency. They found that marital status (married students experienced higher stress), English language competency (negatively correlated), social connectedness (negatively correlated with stress), adjustment difficulties (positively correlated with stress), neuroticism (positively correlated), and openness to experience (positively correlated) were predictors of acculturative stress where as gender and age did not impact acculturative stress. Similarly in another study, Duru and Poyrazli (2011) found that greater social connectedness, lesser perceived discrimination, greater number of years in the U.S., and greater English language competence were predictive of reduced adjustment difficulties.

Another study examining the relationship between acculturation, perceived English fluency, social support, and depression in Taiwanese international students reported that gender (being female), low acculturation and low perceived English fluency were risk factors for experience of depressive feelings (Dao et al., 2007). Further, English language fluency also

mediated the effects of acculturation level on depression for both males and females. Attachment is another factor that has been examined in terms of acculturation. Attachment anxiety was found to be negatively associated with students' acculturation to U.S. culture and attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, and acculturation to U.S. culture were significant predictors for students' psychosocial adjustment (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

In a study with Asian Indian international students, an intervention to enhance the acculturation of the international students was found to improve the mental health of the students further highlighting the importance of the concept of acculturation for international students (Kanekar, Sharma, & Atri, 2009-2010). In another study that targeted South Asian students (from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), greater levels of perceived prejudice, lower self-reported competence in work, personal/social efficacy and intercultural behaviors were related to increased depressive symptoms (Rahman & Rollock, 2004). Similarly, Rice, Choi, Zhang, Morero, and Anderson (2012) found that an interaction of acculturative stress and self-critical perfectionism led to worse levels of depressive symptoms for Indian international students as compared to Chinese international students.

Certain factors need to be kept in mind specifically when considering the acculturative experiences of Asian Americans. As Kim and Abreu (2001) state, the process of enculturation, or the Asian Americans' retention of their cultural norms during adaptation to the U.S. culture, needs to be paid due attention when evaluating the functioning of these individuals. Sodowsky and Carey (1987) have propounded certain important pre-transitional and post-transitional issues relating to social and psychological adjustment among Asian immigrants and the important pre-transitional factors include religion and spirituality. Further, Inman, Ladany, Constantine and Morano (2001) suggest that South Asians appear to hold on to values related to family

relationships, marriage, dating, roles, and religion. This is similar to the concept of enculturation referred to above.

Both the acculturation and enculturation processes address the negotiation of the individual's values and the adaptation in their expression in the light of the dominant culture. This negotiation and adaptation leads to changes in a variety of dimension including the religious/spiritual one. The unique experiences of international students in terms of this religious/spiritual dimension will be studied in this study to gain better insight into their overall experience in the host country.

Social support and connectedness. Another factor that has been found to impact the psychological well-being of international students is their sense of social support or lack thereof (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu, 1994). Coming to the US typically involves leaving one's family and friends behind. International students may experience a sense of loss for their shared identity with family and peers (Pedersen, 1991; Romero, 1981) causing feelings of loneliness (Schram & Lauver, 1988) and a deep sense of loss (Sandhu, 1994) especially given the difficulty in establishing similar support systems in the U.S. (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

In a study on Turkish international students, Tansel and Gungor (2002) found that the students were dissatisfied with the social aspects of their lives. Interestingly, the social support systems of international students in their home country typically serve to validate their sense of self-concept and self-esteem, and provide emotional and social support (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu, 1994). Furthermore, social support has been found to exercise a buffering effect when international students are undergoing psychological stress (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Similarly, Kanekar et al., (2009-2010) found that Asian Indian students' mental

health improved through interventions aimed at enhancing the social support they received. This makes the loss of this support system even more poignant, a loss which results in feelings of anxiety, alienation, and disorientation (Pedersen, 1991). As Yeh and Inose (2003) aptly conclude, the degree of satisfaction with their social support networks may well influence international students' levels of acculturative stress.

A related concept, social connectedness, has also been studied in terms of its role in adjustment and stress. Social connectedness is an aspect of the self that manifests the subjective recognition of being in close relationship with the social world and directs individuals' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in social situations (Lee & Robbins, 1995, 1998). A high sense of connectedness can help in the formation of relationships and participation in social groups and activities, whereas, a lack of connectedness may engender feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Similarly, international students with a high ratio of host country members in their social/friendship network claimed greater levels of satisfaction and feelings of contentment as well as lower levels of homesickness (Hendrickson, Rosen, Aune, 2011).

Cross-cultural differences in social interaction also influence the formation of relationships between international students and American students (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Yeh and Inose (2003) point out that students from collectivistic cultural backgrounds (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991) are likely to prioritize close relationships. As a result, the Americans students' emphasis on aspects of individualism like independence, assertiveness, and self-reliance (see Cross, 1995) is likely to confuse these international students who may feel that social relationships in the US culture tend to be rather superficial (citing Bulthuis, 1986; Cross, 1995). This may engender feelings of disappointment and discouragement with regard to

interpersonal relationships (Mori, 2000). There seems to be limited social contact among international students and their American peers (Bochner, Hutnik, & Furnham, 1985; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). This is distressing as close relationships with their American peers may predict better adjustment among international students (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). Some of the factors that are relevant in social interactions between international students and host country peers are highlighted below.

Yashima (1995) has found that personality was an effective predictor of satisfaction with host culture members. Downie et al., (2006) found that when an individual's heritage culture was evaluated positively the individual's relationship (with the person who showed such positive evaluation) showed significantly enhanced interaction intimacy, disclosure, and quality, and the individual demonstrated higher feelings of personal acceptance. Research also shows that culture does determine individual's behavior in and the outcomes of intercultural negotiation though this influence is moderated by the role of the individual within the relationship (Cai et al., 2000).

Coming to a new country deprives the international student of their traditional support systems, including the religious/spiritual community of which they are a part in their home country. Indian international students may often find themselves to be in the minority religion group in the host country. Given the importance of social support and healthy relationships in the adjustment, health, and performance of international students it becomes important to understand the impact of this loss of the religious/spiritual community.

Academic experiences, stressors, and coping. Factors like English language proficiency (as highlighted in the next section), acculturation, adjustment, and other cultural factors as well as their interaction are very important in understanding the academic experiences of international students. Some of these factors are reviewed below.

Cortazzi and Jin (1997) have proposed that the cognitive aspects of the acculturation process for students may have particularly important effects on the culture of learning. Thus, cultural beliefs and values about teaching and learning, and expectations about classroom behaviors are likely to affect acculturation and adjustment to a new system. They argued that various aspects of culture are so deep-rooted that rather than expecting sojourning students to assimilate host nation ways the hosts too should make adjustments based on the cultural diversity of the students as change can be perceived as a profound threat to one's self-identity. This concept highlights the need to consider specifically what is going on in intercultural educational settings, and issues about student sojourners' pedagogical adaptation. (Zhou et al., 2008).

This importance of the learning style was also highlighted in another study regarding the relationships among dispositional goal orientation, domain-specific self-efficacy, and cross-cultural adjustment (Gong & Fan, 2006). It was found that a learning orientation was positively related to sojourners' academic and social self-efficacy, whereas a performance orientation was negatively related to sojourners' social self-efficacy. Further, sojourners' academic and social self-efficacy was positively related to academic and social adjustment, respectively. Similarly, personal values of the international postgraduate student were found to predict individual behavior and decision making, which in turn can impact the university experience and satisfaction with the learning environment for the international student (Arambewela & Hall, 2011).

The impact of the international student status in terms of both academic stressors and coping was examined by Misra and Castillo (2004). They found that the respondent's status (American or international) and the interaction of status and stressors were the two strongest predictors of their behavioral, emotional, physiological, and cognitive reaction to stressors. Thus,

stress management strategies too tend to be moderated by the fact that the individual is in a foreign culture. One of the factors that was found to be positively related to direct coping strategies (taking direct action) is independent self-construal by the individual (Cross, 1995). Independent self-construal predicted reduced levels of stress for the international students and the interdependent self-construal was positively related to increased stress. However, the effects of the self-construals and coping were moderated by culture and were not predictive of perceived stress for American students highlighting the unique nature of the experiences of international students.

In another study, Wei, Ku, Russell, Mallinckrodt, and Liao (2008) examined three different coping strategies and self-esteem as moderators of the relationship between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms. They found that there was a significant direct effect of perceived discrimination, a significant 2-way interaction of perceived discrimination and suppressive coping, and a significant 3-way interaction of perceived discrimination, reactive coping, and self-esteem in predicting depressive symptoms. Further, the tendency to use suppressive coping appeared to strengthen the association between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms. Conversely, the link between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms was influenced by the low use of reactive coping among high self-esteem individuals.

The cultural factors in both learning and coping highlighted above include the religious/spiritual values of the international students. The predominantly Christian, Western philosophical approach is likely to either clash with or ignore the values of international students. This study will attempt to understand the impact of the religious/spiritual values and experiences of international students.

Pervasive impact of the level of English language fluency. One of the biggest challenges for a majority of international students tends to be language fluency (Yeh & Inose, 2003, Mori, 2000). Language skills tend to impact various areas of functioning including academic performance. Academic difficulties in turn are likely to affect the psychological adjustment of international students (Lin and Yi, 1997) especially since many of them have had high academic achievement in their home countries (Pedersen, 1991). Language barriers also hinder the social interactions between international students and their American peers (Hayes & Lin, 1994). English proficiency tends to be an important factor in the social interaction and adjustment of international students (citing Pedersen, 1991; Schram & Lauver, 1988; Surdam & Collins, 1984). Further, English language proficiency is found to be negatively related to depression (Constantine et al., 2004).

Exploring Religion/Spirituality

The previous section highlighted research about the experiences of international students. This section will examine the importance of religion/spirituality in the area of general well-being and mental health and explore four factors that may impact religious/spiritual development in general and for international students and immigrants in particular.

Importance of religion/spirituality. As mentioned earlier, the ethical codes for the American Psychological Association as well as the American Counseling Association have recognized religion and spirituality as aspects of the individual's cultural identity (APA, 2010; ACA, 1995). Various research studies have also highlighted the important role that religion/spirituality play in the life, values, beliefs, practices and processes of day-to-day functioning of individuals. Here I will be reviewing some of the research in the importance of religion for students (both American and international).

Research by Bergin, Stinchfield, Gaskin, Masters, and Sullivan (1988) has demonstrated that religion may have both benefits and costs for college students' personality functioning. Bergin et al (1988) found that subjects with continuous religious development and mild religious experiences appeared to be healthier than those with discontinuous development and intense religious experiences. There was no evidence in the group as a whole for an overall negative or positive correlation between religiousness and mental health, but some modes of religious involvement appeared to be related to disturbance, whereas other modes appeared to be related to enhanced stability and resilience (Bergin et al, 1988).

Park, Cohen, and Herb (1990) examined the stress-moderating effects of intrinsic religiousness and overall religious coping on the depression and trait anxiety of Catholic and Protestant college students. They found a significant cross-sectional interaction between controllable life stress and religious coping in the prediction of Catholics' depression, with religious coping serving a protective function at a high level of controllable negative events. A significant prospective interaction between uncontrollable life stress and intrinsic religiousness in the prediction of Protestants' depression was also found; the relationship between uncontrollable stress and depression was positive for low intrinsic Protestants, flat for medium intrinsic Protestants, but negative for high intrinsic Protestants (Park et al., 1990).

Johnson and Hayes (2003) conducted a study to identify the prevalence and predictors of religious and spiritual concerns in a sample of university students. They found that approximately 25% of the sample reported considerable distress related to such concerns. Further, among all students who sought help, considerable distress about religious or spiritual concerns was predicted by confusion about values, problematic relationships with peers, sexual concerns, and thoughts of being punished for one's sins (Johnson & Hayes, 2003). The confusion

about values is a factor that is doubly salient for international students as they negotiate the cultural differences between their own and the host culture.

Osburn (2005) suggests that religion may impact the experience of international students in multiple ways: (a) an exposure to different forms and practices than their own may impact the international students' interpretation of and ability to adjust to the American culture ; (b) an encounter with unfamiliar academic perspectives on religion which may serve to moderate or even diminish the international students' confidence in their religious perspective (citing Maeker, 2001); (c) a lack of opportunities to and support in meeting religious needs; (d) a possible impact on the individual's sense of identity; and (e) a possible impact on the re-entry of international students into their own homeland (citing Abramson & Inglehart, 1995). Further, he highlights the three themes that Garrod and Davis (1999) identify among the thirteen international student writers who contributed to their volume on US college life and culture including: (a) a "sense of displacement" within the new world of possibilites; (b) a need to update his or her interpretation of 'home'; and (c) the process of identity construction accompanying an encounter with American ideologies, values and language. This is in line with Myburgh, Niehaus and Poggenpoel's (2002) finding that educational sojourners report a sense of spiritual displacement.

While lamenting the lack of research regarding international students religious experiences (Osburn, 2005) highlights some of the findings that do exist: religious beliefs when studied were found to be relatively stable (citing Church, 1965); religious attitudes of international students changed very little, especialy when their sojourn was less than two years and the longer the students were in this country the less regular and consistent their religious observance became (citing Spaulding & Flack, 1976); religion affects adjustment (citing Findsen, 1987 and Pruitt, 1978); some students dealt with homesickness and loneliness by

turning toward their religion as a coping strategy and students who often felt homesick very often reported problems with religion (citing Hull, 1978); Asian students in Australia were significantly more concerned over religious issues and more interested in talking about religion than were Australian students themselves (citing Keats, 1970); and international students join religious groups or nurture religious beliefs as a coping mechanism (citing Myburgh et al., 2002).

In other research, Chai, Krageloh, Shepherd, and Billington (2012) have found that Asian students in New Zealand (irrespective of whether they were domestic or international students) were more likely to use religious coping strategies and used these strategies effectively to improve psychological and social quality of life as compared to European students. Similarly, Hsu, Krageloh, Shepherd, and Billington (2009) found that religion/spirituality were correlated with psychological quality of life for both domestic and international students and with the social quality of life for international students, who may use religion/spirituality as a coping mechanism in response to stressors of acculturation.

In an interesting study comparing the problems of Indian and foreign students in India, one point of difference was that Indian students reported struggles related to the area of morals and religion (Singh, Singh, & Goburdhum, 1982). Similarly, Sharma and Sharma (2006) highlight the role of various religious/spiritual practices like meditation, prayer, and service-volunteering in enhancing the health and well-being of Indian students (in India). These articles emphasize the importance of religion/spirituality for Indian students, and suggest the need to study the possible impact of coming to the U.S. in this area.

Given the importance of religion/spirituality, the following sections will review the research on religion and acculturation, the impact of education on religion and religious beliefs,

as well as the developmental factors in religious/spiritual orientation. The relevant literature on the impact of immigration on religion will also be reviewed and the implications for the population of international students will be outlined.

Factors impacting religious/spiritual development. The following section will first examine how education and developmental factors are likely to affect the religiosity/spirituality of individuals. Then the section will explore religion and acculturation interact for international students as well as the religious experiences of immigrant populations.

Educational factors in religion. Kuhar (2005) has highlighted the fact that education often has transformational impacts on the metaphysical and spiritual beliefs of scholars. He cites the work of various researchers about the transformational impact of education. Lajoie (2001, in Kuhar, 2005) investigated personal transformation in the context of the current post-9/11 global culture in terms of the nature of belief systems and the formation and transcendence of identity as a process of both individual and collective transformation. She argued that education and exposure to other viewpoints challenges our beliefs and creates a tension leading to a process of adaptive dialectics. This tension leads to the attainment of a more comprehensive belief system which may also be subsequently challenged, doubted, and transcended. In terms of psychological processes, education (specifically study of science) is likely to create new cognitions for the students, which need to be processed in an attempt to achieve a balance between old and new cognitions. The two theories that Kuhar considers relevant here are: (a) the developmental learning model of reconciliation through assimilation and accommodation given by Piaget and (b) the cognitive dissonance model where the individual attempts to reestablish consonance by abandoning or modifying previously held notions when psychological tension or dissonance is caused by conflicting new cognitions (Rohmann, 1999, in Kuhar).

Kuhar (2005) has highlighted the work of Welwood (1978, in Kuhar) who suggested that knowledge of science may free an individual from religious dogma learned earlier in life, allowing them to look and experience the wonders of the universe and of life more clearly and directly. Welwood also suggested that the scientific approach allows and encourages individuals to share experiences which may well impact spirituality. Further, attempting to understand religious experiences from a scientific framework may well lead to transformation in spiritual and metaphysical interpretations (citing Barbour, 1994). Further, certain scholars have proposed that religious experience needs to be understood "by drawing on the results of consciousness studies, learning more about the physiology and biology of religious experience, applying implications from such research to their views on the validity of these experiences, and better understanding how significant spiritual experiences have affected Christian and Jewish traditions" (p. 17; Andreson & Forman, 2000, in Kuhar). Interestingly, Russell and Wegter-McNelly (2002, in Kuhar) have suggested that not only may science impact theology but that theology may also impact science in terms of inspiration, choice of topics to explore, and so on.

Kuhar (2005) explored the impact of science education and engagement on the metaphysical beliefs and spirituality of eleven scientists through a heuristic phenomenological analysis. He found that participants' reported an impact on their metaphysical beliefs and spirituality through contributing factors like an ingrained usage of scientific methods, parallel experiences such as non-science classes in philosophy and the social sciences, associations with specific individuals, readings, and pivotal life experiences. This impact was found to be gradual with childhood religious upbringing serving as a starting point for subsequent transformations. Further, there was transformation in terms of both science and religion which lead to higher levels of moral and cognitive development. The group psychological profile included cycles of

dissonance and consonance or reconciliation through assimilation and accommodation, resulting from conflicting cognitions relating to their science and religious experiences.

Interestingly, Osburn (2005) cites various findings that highlight the religious involvement of American students over their college life. He suggests that entering college freshmen have relatively high levels of religious involvement and interest and their overall religious commitment declines over the years (citing Higher Education Research Institute, 2005; Marcus, 2002; Sandeen, 1976; Higher Education Research Institute, 2004b). A few students do show an increase by their final year (citing Lee, Matzkin, & Arthur, 2004). One of the reasons forwarded for this pattern is that the encounter of multiple beliefs in higher education tends to have a corrosive impact on previously held religious beliefs. Interestingly, Lee (2002) found that religious beliefs strengthened for 38 % of the students over the four years of college with only 14% reporting a weakening and the rest reporting no change.

As the above discussion reveals, education carries multiple possible "transformational" impacts on religion/spirituality whether through the exposure of the scientific method or through weakening of the parental influence. Pursuing higher studies in another country is likely to increase the impact of education through the exposure to multiple alternative views of religion as well as multiple philosophical assumptions, making it necessary to pay special attention to this specific population.

Developmental factors in religion. The importance of education and the changes in religious thinking and orientation highlighted above are very important. However, these findings need to be evaluated carefully. As Hood, et al. (1996) highlight, the average changes may mask a change in the opposite direction by some students. Further, there is no direct evidence that this change is the result of the education itself as opposed to factors like develpmental stage,

movement away from direct parental influence, and increasing impact of peers. This section will explore some of the develpmental factors that may be relevant in the religious development in college students.

Adolescence has been highlighted as a period of turbulence and identity crisis for the individual, which gets resolved when the individual makes choices regarding their future in a number of life domains (Erikson, 1950/1963; Marcia, 1966). Marcia talks about different identity development statuses over adolescence: (a) identity diffusion: no commitment made regarding a specific developmental task and may or may not have experienced a crisis; (b) foreclosure: a commitment has been made without experiencing a crisis; (c) moratorium: a crisis has been experienced, but no commitment (or at best an unclear one) has been made; and (d) identity achievement: identity has been achieved by overcoming the crisis and making a commitment. One of the domains of the human identity is the religious/ spiritual one (as highlighted by the literature cited above). Thus, given the model stated above, adolescents are likely to be facing developmental tasks that impact their religious orientation.

The concept of religious socialization that Hood et al. (1996) discuss suggests that religious development is shaped by social influences, primarily, the influence of parents (family), peers, and education. They also highlight other influences that may potentially influence religiousness: the particular religious institution or denomination, social class, sibling configuration, exposure to mass media, and so on. When comparing the influence of parents and peers in religious development it was found that, unlike other realms, parents are more important than peers in the religious realm (de Vaus, 1983). Interestingly, Erickson (1992) examined a conceptual model of adolescent religious beliefs and commitment and found that parental influence was not a direct predictor of adolescent religiosity in his sample of Mormon

adolescents. Rather, "parents direct their children to other social influencers" (p. 149) including mandatory religious education, church attendance, and the socialization that occurs due to these activities.

Perhaps not surprisingly, religious development was found to be related to moral development (Ji, 2004). Interestingly, education was found to impact this relationship with religiosity predicting moral reasoning in undergraduates but not impacting the moral reasoning of graduate students. Ji proposes that this differential impact may be the result of personal factors like intelligence, life experience, age, temperament, socioeconomic status, and family background which may be different for graduate students and may lead to greater principled moral reasoning regardless of education. Another possibility the author highlights is that the graduate education exposes the individual to more information about social and ethical issues such that they define what is right in terms of broader principles of justice than any one social group or authority. This cognitive experience is hypothesized to suppress the effect of religiosity on moral decision making. There is existing literature on the relation between cognitive and religious development that supports this last assertion. The research of both Elkind (1961, 1962, 1963, in Hood et al., 1996) and Goldman (1964, in Hood et al., 1996) suggests that religious development proceeds in the same fashion as the cognitive developmental stages highlighted by Piaget and Kohlberg's stages of moral development too mirror Piaget's stages of cognitive development (see Hood et al., 1996). Interestingly, the findings of another study have highlighted that while spirituality too is positively related to moral development and purpose in life there is no relationship between spirituality and cognitive development (Young, Cashwell, & Woolington, 1998).

An important aspect in religious development is concept the intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation put forward by Allport and Ross (1967). They characterize an extrinsic religious orientation as an immature approach where people use religion for their own ends, embracing those aspects that suit them and rejecting/overlooking others. They suggest that "the extrinsic type turns to God, but without turning away from self" (p. 434). Individuals with an intrinsic orientation on the other hand, are characterized as mature people who place more importance on internalizing and fully living according to the religious creed they embrace. These individuals act for the sake of the religious creed rather than their own needs and "lives his [sic] religion" (p. 464). Some of the research surrounding this concept of religious orientation is reviewed below.

In a study of emerging adults (undergraduate and graduate college students ranging in age from 19 to 33 years), factors such as an intact family structure and family support were found to be a significant predictor of both extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity where as perceived parental marital satisfaction was significantly predictive of extrinsic religiosity alone (Milevsky & Leh, 2008). Further individuals with intrinsic orientations reported higher levels of self-esteem than those with an extrinsic orientation which seems to highlight the original contention by Allport and Ross (1967) that the intrinsic orientation is healthier than the extrinsic one.

The relationship between religious orientation and identity development was studied in a comparative study of high school students from the U.S. and Canada (Markstrom-Adams, & Smith, 1996). It was found that extrinsic religious orientation was associated with the identity diffusion status (highlighted by Marcia, 1966; see above) for both groups. Further, individuals with an extrinsic orientation were likely to score higher on the moratorium status than those with an intrinsic orientation in the U.S. group. Interestingly, this study utilized a four-fold

classification of religious orientation adding the indiscriminate proreligious group (who were high on both intrinsic and extrinsic orientations) and the nonreligious group (who were low on both intrinsic and extrinsic orientations). The indiscriminate proreligious group was found to be higher on foreclosure than the intrinsic or nonreligious group in the U.S. sample and significantly higher on identity achievement than the extrinsic or nonreligious group in the Canada sample.

The role of the developmental level in the religious/spiritual orientation of people is very important given the target population of this study. Not only are these individuals pursuing higher education, they are at a developmental level marked by a preoccupation with identity issues. They are making decisions about the values they want to adopt and the goals or tasks they want to commit to. It is very important to understand how these developmental factors impact the international students' religious/spiritual experiences.

Religion and acculturation in international students. It is important to note here that the acculturation begins with the first contact with a culture that is different from one's own. Unless one comes in contact with a member of another culture (someone who is different from us), we are not likely to be faced with any confusion or doubts about our own identity. It is when we are exposed to different cultures that our process of acculturation begins as a way to make sense of the world that we live in and negotiating our way through the tasks of everyday living. Cross-cultural contact causes people to look at themselves in a much broader context at times leading to changes in perceptions of the self and in self-identity. This change can be quite anxiety-provoking, especially where identity was previously constructed largely from local social interaction (Zhou et al., 2008). Further, our perceptions of and relations with others in our group as well as with people in other groups can undergo dramatic changes (Deaux 1996). This aspect

was also highlighted by Kashima and Loh (2006) who found that international students' social identities may change dynamically during their acculturation.

In light of these findings, it seems obvious that the acculturation experience will also apply to the religious/spiritual domain of an individual's life raising questions and perhaps causing changes. Yet, this is one area that has not received sufficient attention. Osburn (2005) highlights the fact that although religion is recognized as one of the central cultural elements, with significant explanatory value for understanding human phenomena (citing Clayton, 2002; Morris, 1942; Schmalzbauer, 2003) its contribution remains largely unexamined. He suggests that this gap is unfortunate, given the symbolic and motivational value it holds for its advocates and which can serve to moderate or accelerate the process of Westernization, secularization, and globalization that are usually concentrated in academia (citing Friedman, 2005; Furgason, 2001). Some of the research that has been conducted is discussed below.

The acculturation and enculturation processes (mentioned in the previous section) were found to be relevant in a research by Andrade (2006-07). In a qualitative study, international students in their senior year at a private, religiously-affiliated university were interviewed to determine if they had integrated into the mainstream campus culture to be successful. It was found that while the international students saw integration as positive, they did not view their integration as assimilation and felt that they had preserved their own cultural integrity along with adjusting to the host culture (Andrade, 2006-07).

Ghorpade et al., (2004) conducted a study examining the consequences and predictors of psychological acculturation among 320 students (both native born and immigrant) attending a large state university on the West Coast of the United States. Their results show that grade point average (GPA) and income earned were positively related to psychological acculturation.

Psychological acculturation was in turn affected by factors like religion (no religious affiliation, more likely to become acculturated), age of entry to the United States (negatively correlated), enrollment in a graduate program (positively correlated to graduate education), and self-esteem (higher self-esteem, more likely to become acculturated) (Ghorpade et al., 2004).

In their study of the prevalence and predictors of religious and spiritual concerns among university students Johnson and Hayes (2003) found that homesickness may be associated with religious or spiritual distress in that students are experiencing changes in their support and social networks. The change process means that the usual sources of comfort and security may not be as readily available, including those of a religious nature. Thus, students may long not only for the familiarity of home and family but also the religious community and the religious practices and rituals of their upbringing (Johnson & Hayes, 2003).

Religion for immigrants. Williams (1998) in discussing the impact of immigrants from India and Pakistan to the United States suggests that the influx of these immigrants and their religions instigate transformations both in their home countries and the United States. He highlights the fact that immigrants commonly indicate that they are more religiously active in the US than they were in India or Pakistan which "reflects the power inherent in religion to provide a transcendental foundation for personal and group identity in the midst of enormous transitions that migration entails" (p. 188). He suggests that the need to reformulate personal and group identities in a new cultural context makes the immigrant group turn to religion to shape and strengthen identity. He also reports on the importance of religion as the only familiar thing that the immigrants can cling to in the initial phases of the migration process. "A Christian from a small village of Kerala reported that the only familiar parts of the landscape when he arrived in New York were the church towers, and he took great comfort in their shadows." (p. 189).

Another reason that religious and social organizations hold allure is that they are the only places that offer a familiar structure within which to relax as well as offering help and support in establishing the new identity and support systems that each immigrant needs to establish. Religious meetings and functions are often the only place where the immigrant "can speak in their birth language; enjoy the ethos of their native place; participate in Indian or Pakistani music, drama, and other arts; taste traditional cuisine; and exercise leadership skills that involve oratory in the birth language and manipulation of other symbols" (p. 190). Religious organizations are also ways of connecting with other immigrants as well as staying connected to events and developments back home.

In line with William's (1998) hypothesis regarding the increased religious activity, Baumann's (1998) study of Indian diasporic communities in Europe too reveals that living outside the home country leads to conscious regard for religious adherence. Baumann suggests that this heightened religious awareness may be seen as a result of minority status and the need to preserve one's unique cultural and individual identity (again in line with William's hypothesis). In an interesting study about Asian Indian immigrants to North America, Vohra and Broota (1996) compared the belief system of Indian immigrants with their native counterparts in the country of origin. They found that the immigrant population is higher in the intensity of their religious beliefs and that they used these beliefs as a coping strategy when faced with stressful life events.

While Williams' (1998) work highlights the importance of religion in the lives of new immigrants it is also important to remember that the process of migration brings with it certain changes in terms of practice and opportunities as well. Religion tends to be family-centered and the immigrants being away from their extended families may need to find new ways and rituals

to substitute for the ones they practiced in their home country. Further, there may be challenges in terms of places of worship as well as religious leadership depending on where the immigrants settle. Connor's (2008) research shows that religious participation for immigrants from minority religious groups decreases significantly more than it does for Catholic immigrants after the migration event (though Catholics too show decline in participation). Thus immigration is likely to impact not just the religiosity of the immigrants but also their practice of religion as Yang and Ebaugh (2001) confirm.

Yang and Ebaugh (2001) highlight the historical role of religious institutions as an important resource for immigrant groups in their attempt to "reproduce their ethno-religious identity in new surroundings" (p. 269) as well as adjusting to the challenges of surviving in a demanding and often threatening environment (citing Alexander 1987; Bodnar 1985; Dolan 1975, 1985; Herberg 1960; Park & Miller 1921; Pozzetta 1991; Smith 1978; Thomas & Znaniecki 1918-1920; Wind & Lewis 1994). However, they suggest the role of religious factors for recent migrants has not received enough scholarly attention citing the lack of mention of religion in certain important works on immigrants (e.g., *Immigrant America* by Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; or Handbook of International Migration; or *The American Experience* by Hirschman, Kasinitz, & DeWind, 1999). They highlight the regrettable nature of these omissions given the findings of recent research projects on multiple ethnic and religious groups that present data which demonstrate the continued centrality of religious institutions in the settlement patterns of the new immigrants (e.g., Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Warner and Wittner 1998). They also highlight the fact that the new wave of immigrants are no longer predominantly from the Judeo-Christian tradition as were the earlier immigrants. Outlining research that suggests that religion continues to thrive in today's pluralistic American society (citing Finke and Stark 1992; Shibley

1996; Stark 1999; Warner 1993) they suggest that the religiosity of the new immigrants is one factor that contributes to this robustness (citing Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Warner and Wittner 1998).

In examining the changes in the current immigrant religious communities across the United States, Yang and Ebaugh (2001) studied the religious practices of the immigrants as well as the impact of the immigration/acculturation process on religion. They suggest that rather than merely recreating religious structures, immigrants tend to adapt their religions to social conditions in the host country. They highlighted three main processes of change: (1) adoption of a more congregational form in organizational structure and ritual, (2) return to theological foundations, and (3) reaching beyond traditional ethnic and religious boundaries to include other peoples. Thus, contrary to the old belief that internal and external religious pluralism would lead to the decline of religion, Yang and Ebaugh found that pluralism encourages institutional and theological transformations that energize and revitalize religions.

The research discussed above highlights some of the possible impacts of immigration on the religious/spiritual life of the immigrant. Yet, as mentioned before, international students are not immigrants. They are in a unique position in that they (typically) intend to stay in the host country only for the duration of their program of study. This factor is likely to mediate their experiences. While the literature about the experiences of immigrants can inform our understanding of the international students' experiences, we need more research that specifically targets this unique population.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the nature of religious/ spiritual experiences of international students' from India using a qualitative research strategy. Literature in the field suggests two possibilities for international students, i.e., "losing of one's culture" in order to adapt to the host culture or drawing closer to one's culture to maintain one's identity. There may be loosening or strengthening of bonds or a re-evaluation of own values previously taken for granted (as seen in Osburn, 2005). The religiosity/spirituality of the individual prior to entering the United States may influence this process as may the quality of interactions and relationships formed in the new country. It is hoped that the information gathered through this study will allow for a better understanding of the processes and experiences in international students' life.

Importance of the Study

Given the dearth of research findings, this study will provide valuable foundational information about the religious/ spiritual experiences of Indian international students. This study would be a step forward given the existing research that shows the importance of both the acculturation process as well as the religiosity/spirituality of the individual in performance, adjustment and mental health. The relevance of factors such as homesickness, mental health issues, stress and coping as potentially mediated by religion and spirituality warrants further investigation. Having a better understanding of these processes (as they pertain to Indian international students) will allow experts in various areas (advisement and counseling centers, international student associations, university personnel) to better address the concerns of these students. This will impact the academic experience, adjustment and adaptation as well as general well-being of these students. Better resources and timely help will allow for optimal functioning.

Thus, this study is an important first step in gathering information that eventually will help inform policies and guidelines to assist international students in their multicultural experience.

Research Question

The following research question propels the current research: what is the interplay between adapting to the U.S. and religious/spiritual experiences of international students? That is, how do the religious/spiritual experiences of Indian international students influence their adaptation to the U.S. and how does this adaptation in turn impact their religious/spiritual experiences?

Method

This study employed a qualitative research strategy, based on transcribed interviews of participants, designed to access their views, perceptions, reactions, attitudes, opinions, thoughts, and experiences. Research within this paradigm is focused on understanding the meaning that participants give to their experiences from their point of view, and within the context in which those experiences happen (Moon, Dillon & Sprankle, 1990). In contrast to quantitative methods, a qualitative method will allow the researcher to understand the unique religious/ spiritual experiences of the international student in depth without being constrained by any 'outsider's' models or theories of "what could happen" or items on a measurement scale. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) stated, "…Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). Especially relevant to the stated purpose of this study, a qualitative method aims to describe and understand the phenomenon under investigation in ways perhaps previously not understood by the researcher, participants, and readers (Kazdin, 1998). This will be helpful as this research aims at exploring an area that has not been widely researched before.

Participants

Kvale (1996) suggested that in theory, one should interview as many subjects as is necessary until the desired knowledge is fully obtained; he loosely quantified this, suggesting the number of interviews needed in qualitative designs tends to fall somewhere around 15 plus or minus 10. The current research interviewed 13 participants who were identified through the Indian Student Associations (ISA) of various universities as well as through personal contacts among the international student community. The participants consisted of 13 graduate students, 2 pursuing Masters' degree (school psychology and counseling) and 11 pursuing a doctorate

degree (2 analytic chemistry, 1 biochemistry, 1 material science, 1 molecular pharmacology, 1 counseling psychology, 1 special education, 1 clinical psychology, 1 education, 1 human development and family studies, 1 engineering psychology) in large public universities in Washington, Michigan, Indiana, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Georgia as well as a large religious institution in Utah and a private nonsectarian university in New York. The participants consisted of 12 women and 1 man; 8 participants were living away from their families, 3 were living away from their spouse, and 2 were living with their spouse. In terms of religious affiliation, 10 participants endorsed a Hindu religious affiliation, 1 endorsed Zoroastrian, 1 endorsed being Jain/Hindu (Jain by birth and Hindu through marriage), and 1 endorsed an atheist religious affiliation. The participants' ages ranged from 23 years and 3 months to 33 years.

Procedure

Indian students were approached through the contact persons for ISAs as well as through personal contacts. The contact persons were contacted via email and requested to forward the "request for participation" email (see Appendix A & B) to all the Indian students at the university. Interested individuals were asked to fill out a pro forma (see Appendix C) consisting of basic demographic questions as well as other general pertinent information (see the analysis section). Interested participants were then contacted individually and a time for interviewing was set up. The snowball sampling technique was also utilized by asking participants to pass on information about the research to others who may be willing to participate. All participants were given $ 20 gift cards for participation in the research.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview format was utilized to collect the data for this study. Each interview was conducted by the principal investigator, one-on-one either over the telephone or via the internet using Skype. By and large, the interview consisted of an open dialogue, with the investigator using minimal encouragers, open-ended questions, and rephrasing as tools to help ensure as complete an understanding of the interviewees' perspectives as was possible (Kvale, 1996). However, a general list of relevant questions was generated in order to ensure that the interviews reach their intended depth and that larger topic areas are not missed. For example, if the topic of religious celebrations did not come up spontaneously, the interviewer used a prompt to solicit the participants' experiences in this area. Such a list can also be useful in avoiding leading questions and maximizing the depth and breadth of interviewee responses (Patton, 1990). The interviews were followed by a debriefing: this allowed for a discussion of any unresolved issues, provided an opportunity for clarification, addressed any anxiety or tension experienced by the interviewee, and provided the interviewee with a chance to provide feedback on the interview and research process (Kvale, 1996).

Interview Guidelines and Sample Questions

The following list of questions was used as a guideline after greeting the participant, thanking them for their participation, orienting them about the purpose of the interview, and allowing participants to ask any questions or clarify doubts about the research process.

1. To begin with just tell me a little bit about yourself… (Where you are from, what you are studying here, something about your family background…)…

2. How do you like being here/ what's it been like so far?

3. Tell me something about:

    a. Critical religious experiences that have affected you (both before and after coming here).

    b. Your religious ideas before and after coming here.

    c. Your religious practices before and after coming here.

4. Tell me something about your opportunities and experiences of discussing religion and religious matters with others from the same as well as different backgrounds (with Americans as well as other international students).

5. Tell me something about your opportunities and experiences of … (since you've come to the U.S.):

    a. Religious occasions and celebrations. (Probe: What is it like being away from family and friends during religious occasions and celebrations?

    b. "Group celebrations" with others from your country/religious background.

    c. Places of worship.

6. How do you think your religious experiences are impacting your adjustment, level of stressors, academics (or vice versa)?

7. Any other thoughts you would like to share on this topic?

8. What was it like to participate in this research?

Data Analysis

Qualitative data is analyzed with the primary intent of summarizing and bringing as much significant meaning as possible to the interviews experienced by the researcher and the interviewees. It is the bridge between the initial stories told by the interviewees and the final story communicated to the audience by the researcher (Kvale, 1996). Rather than being the final step of the research, interpretation is, to some degree, a part of the interview process itself with

the responses being interpreted as they are given and accordingly informing the formulation of

further questions (Seidman, 1998).

The obtained interviews were transcribed from their digital recordings and the subsequent

analysis of this qualitative interview text gathered was conducted using the synthesis of

hermeneutic methods informed by Kvale (1996). Mahrer's (1998) discovery-oriented approach

too was utilized to guide the data analysis. This use of multiple methods is reflective of the

endeavor not to uncover objective reality but rather to achieve in-depth understanding of a

phenomenon, and represents a strategy that adds complexity, rigor, and richness to interpretation

(Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The interpretive process consisted of:

1. An unfocused overview of the text which attempted to study the text with as few

   presuppositions as possible in order to approximate the meanings articulated in the

   dialogue with the participants (Jackson & Patton, 1992; Kvale, 1987, 1996).

2. Forming interpretations through successive readings of the materials, seeking to uncover

   progressively deeper levels of meaning in the text (Hoshmand, 1989; Kvale, 1996;

   Polkinghorne, 1984).

3. Finding the most effective language to communicate the findings (Kvale, 1987, 1996).

   Precise description of the meaningful themes was not sought.

The process of identifying themes is "a back and forth process between the parts and the

whole" (Kvale, 1996, p. 48). The first reading aims at getting a sense of the general meaning of

the text. Themes start arising as the researcher looks for deeper meaning and compares special

expressions, single statements and interpretations to the global meaning of the interview as a

whole (Kvale, 1996). The primary researcher conducted the initial analysis, with a faculty

member serving as an auditor of the process of analysis. The analysis was conducted as follows:

(a) The researcher conducted several successive reviews of the transcripts, to identify an initial set of themes; (b) Themes that continued to be supported in successive readings of the transcripts were retained while themes that did not have broad support in successive readings of the transcripts were removed; (c) Once the researcher concluded the initial independent analysis, the findings were presented to the auditors for review. The auditors reviewed the analysis in order to verify themes and check the methodology of the researcher. Themes were refined through an ongoing dialogue between the researcher and the auditors in order to obtain maximum clarity in the communication of the results.

Trustworthiness of the Research

Various steps were taken throughout the research process to ensure the trustworthiness of the current research. Firstly, the interview guidelines and sample questions were created based on existing literature and refined through consultation with committee members. Secondly, a pilot interview was conducted to assess approximate time as well as clarity of the interview questions and process. The committee chair heard the audio recordings of both the pilot and the first interview to ensure flow of the interview and to check for biased and/or leading questions. Thirdly, participants were asked both to talk about other experiences not probed by the interviewer (to ensure completeness of information) as well as their experience in participating in the research (to check for level of comfort, intrusiveness, thoroughness, etc.). Fourthly, two of the committee members served as auditors for the data analysis process. The identification, checking, and refining of themes was conducted in consultation with both these auditors and keeping in mind the assumptions and biases of both the researcher and of qualitative research.

Factors that may influence the research

There are certain philosophical assumptions that are inherent in the qualitative method as well as certain assumptions and biases of the researcher that may impact the current research. These assumptions and biases are examined in the following section.

Philosophical assumptions inherent in the qualitative method. As with any scientific research, qualitative research has certain underlying philosophical assumptions. Qualitative interpretation is a complex endeavor, which has no distinct, singular foundational paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Unlike a quantitative approach, qualitative research is characterized by subjective, phenomenological, and relational elements. The analysis conducted for this study will reflect these assumptions: rather than attempting to discover universal facts the focus will be on revealing reported themes, meanings, and perspectives. The aim of qualitative researchers is to better understand the subject matter at hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Due to the subjective nature of this type of research, care needs to be taken at all points to ensure accurate and meaningful communication of the significant themes reported by the interviewees as well as avoid simply verifying the interviewer's presuppositions (Gilbert, 2001). The interviewer/ researcher also needs to examine and be aware of own biases, opinions, and assumptions throughout the process in order to prevent 'tainting' the interview data as much as possible. It should be noted here that without the person of the interviewer, including views and perceptions, the interview would not be possible. Thus, it becomes very important to achieve a balance between allowing oneself to be part of the interview process without overly influencing it.

Assumptions and biases of the researcher. The assumptions of the researcher/ interviewer of a study are always worthy of consideration. Given that I am myself an international student from India and am having my own experiences with respect to the areas

highlighted above, is what first generated interest in this area for me. Some of my assumptions include, a belief that religion/spirituality is important, coming to the U.S. has an impact on the religion/spirituality of Indian international students, religion/spirituality will be a salient aspect of the lived experiences of Indian international students, and trying to translate religious experience into another language is hard and frustrating (e.g., trying to explain religious concepts/ideas/stories with no equivalent reference in American culture). This personal experience may well bias my response to the participants and the information they share, causing me to note those experiences that conform to my own and ignoring others that provide contradictory information. However, even before beginning this research I had noted in talking to others from the international community here that everyone has different "reactions" to the same "stimuli" of being an international student. The intensity of emotions and reactions varies from individual to individual. This information, in addition to my personal belief in the uniqueness of each individual, served as a check for any biases that may crop up. Further, the auditor for the data analysis provided another check for my own biases. Keeping in mind that in conducting this research, I was not hoping to duplicate instances of my own experience but rather to understand the wide range of experiences possible was also helpful in this respect.

Results

Analysis of the transcripts revealed five general themes related to the participants'

religious/spiritual experiences: (a) religion is a highly personalized and complex concept, (b)

coming to a foreign land brings about changes in the practice of religion, (c) context is important

in the experience of religion, (d) certain religious ideas and practices are seen as helpful, and (e)

new experiences lead to an evolved way of thinking about religion.

Religion is a Highly Personalized and Complex Concept

This theme highlights participants' general beliefs and perceptions about religion, mainly

that rituals are less important than the personal meaning attached to religion, that religion is a

"way of life" and can be a way of "inculcating values," and that religion and spirituality are

different in personally meaningful ways. This theme yields the sub-themes (a) emphasis on

personal meaning, (b) religion as a "way of life," and (c) religion and spirituality have differing

connotations for people.

Emphasis on Personal Meaning. While all participants, except one, endorsed affiliation

with a particular religion, they were quick to highlight what religion/spirituality meant for them

personally. They spoke about the general beliefs and practices that they had been taught and

commented on those that held personal meaning for them. In general, participants expressed

reduced emphasis on rituals and primary commitments to what they saw as the values and

principles that their religion espoused. As one participant put it, "It's not that I go to the temple

every day, or something you know, that's what I meant… But inside I don't do something

wrong… and I don't do something that my God would not ask/have wanted it for people to do…

or something like that."

Though participants emphasized movement away from blind ritualism, some participants did stress the importance of certain rituals in their life based on personal and family values. Thus one participant explained the meaning she finds in the *Navratri* [Hindu festival in India with differing interpretations, generally dedicated to Goddess Durga] festival, which is "celebrated when there is a season change" and involves "fasting for seven days" by emphasizing the non-religious benefits associated with the practice. "So, if we don't consider the religious thing, and we come to the... the other aspect, and then, it's like that, whenever the season changes you should fast to make our metabolism strong. So, it's more like helpful that ways."

Another participant also spoke about certain rituals around her father's death, sharing her experiences as follows:

"Two years ago when my father died... you have to perform all these different rites um, and so... so the ritual is that you put, according to the Hindu faith, you put all these different um, things that the soul might need on its journey, to the other world. So you put shoes, and food, and like a blanket, and then you do the ceremony offering each one. So, when I was doing that, like obviously it was a time when I was, I was... in the midst of all this grief... and somehow I found it to be cathartic... and, give me a sense of closure, you know, when... when I could, I could do all these rituals, and you know, offer these objects to him, like, these are the slippers that you'll need... on your journey, or this is the blanket that you'll need. That made sense to me, because I can see how, whether or not... you know, there is a soul, and if they need all of this... it's just, it's just a way, I think it's a very beautiful way of... of saying goodbye... to someone."

Religion as a "Way of Life." Other participants spoke about the lack of emphasis on rituals, expressing that for them their religion was "more a way of life" with one participant

sharing her belief that her religion, "[Hinduism]'s not just about religion, it's just how you deal with your life in general." Another participant expressed "I have always been very drawn to spirituality and the reasons, you know, the symbolism behind the rituals and things like that" emphasizing that "if religion can't teach me how to live my life better, from a more… I don't want to use happy… it's not, it's not happy, but it's more… like, from more grounded place, where I am not reacting constantly to things, then I don't really see the value."

Some participants rejoiced in the lack of restrictions they perceived in their religion and spoke about how this allowed them to choose from multiple paths and levels of spirituality, move away from blind rituals, and incorporate ideas and values across different religious teachings/philosophies. As one participant put it, "one of the best things that I like about Hinduism is that it, it places no restrictions on me. So, I believe in God, I believe that there is a higher power above me, but in no way was I ever *compelled* to visit a temple or pray, or you know, chant something, otherwise something bad will happen to me." Another participant extended the idea of religion as a way of life, stating that this conception "maybe allowed me to develop this idea that you know, I can incorporate different aspects [ideas from different religions] into... into my religious beliefs."

One participant stated that the religious teachings were "a part of, you know... inculcating our value system in me" and added that by her interpretation religion "allows for multiple realities, it allows for multiple choices." Another participant spoke about the idea "it's not God who made the religion, its people who made the religion," expressing her belief that a lot of the rigid ideas stemming from religion are not mandated by God. She further added that the path to spirituality may be different for different people based on their life circumstances and stage of

development "so [certain guidelines to achieving the highest levels of spiritualism] I feel are probably unnecessary, like for living a general life and I think um… God knew that too."

Religion and Spirituality have Differing Connotations for People. Some participants used an emphasis on understanding the core teachings of their religion as a way to separate religion and spirituality.

> Participant: And... that sort of rubbed off on me... not the rituals and the prayers and the um, going to temple parts, because that wasn't, I mean, that wasn't the focus at all. But, the spiritual part, that is thinking about um... thinking about the world and how the world functions and the nature of God and existence and all that.
>
> Interviewer: … just more of a spiritual or a philosophical commitment to the values maybe or the principles I guess, would you say?
>
> Participant: Yeah... It's, yeah, it's more about that.
>
> Another participant also shared her perceptions about the divide between religion and

spirituality as follows:

> "I mean, I think, when I think of religion, I think of, the blind rituals, or I think of the systematized um, um doctrine that you have to follow, and I think of like, like you can only be a Hindu and there's this checklist, or you can only be um, um, you know, you can only be a Muslim, or you can only be a Buddhist, if you follow these things. And, and, I guess that just puts me off, the idea of checklists, that, I can only subscribe to being religious, being a Hindu, being, being, belonging to the Hindu religion if I can check off these things. Um, so that, as opposed to I think, spirituality is more, in my mind, like understanding. Um, why I am doing certain things... it's um, it's um, it's the reason

behind it, it.... OK, so how I see spirituality is that you live your life, um, in a more connected fashion. You see yourself as part of a larger um, connection."

She further added that she "whenever people ask me, if I am religious... I, I get a little wary of saying yes" because of this perceived divide and her own lack of adherence to rituals. Similarly, other participants expressed that while religion was important to them, others might not view them as religious. As one participant puts it, "from childhood I was exposed to religion and like, I think I am religious. So I don't know how others will interpret, but… yeah, I think I am religious."

Coming to a Foreign Land Brings About Changes in the Practice of Religion

This theme highlights participants' reports regarding the changes in the way they practice their religion since coming to the U.S., specifically in terms of rituals, celebrations, and the sense of togetherness that is perceived to be a part of religion. Participants reported varying degrees of distress and dissatisfaction over these changes based on personal meaning attached to each of these aspects. This theme can be discussed around the sub-themes of (a) availability of resources as a potential barrier to the practice of religion, (b) differences in celebrations, and (c) importance of family/community.

Availability of Resources as a Potential Barrier to the Practice of Religion.

Participants stressed that their practice of religion in terms of rituals has changed since coming to the United States due to lack of resources (travelling, appropriate religious apparatus, etc.), time pressures, and demands of their educational programs. Many participants spoke of minor, non-distressing changes like "In India we would have the um, what do you call it... oh, you have oil and you light a *diya* [traditional oil lamp usually made from clay, with a cotton wick dipped in ghee or vegetable oils], so here you just use tea light candles." Some participants also spoke

about being unable to visit temples and other places of worship (specific to their religion) stating "I feel like going to temple. That would provide me peace. But, I don't have a car over here, so... we have a, like a Lord Krishna temple in [place name], I guess, yeah, ISCON temple. So... whenever I... I have time, I go there by bus." Other participants stated that while they would like to visit temples, they are not distressed about not having the means and/or the opportunity to do so "I can hardly say that I have... maybe, 2-3 times, I have visited a temple, I would, yeah, in the United States. But it does not bother me... it doesn't."

Not surprisingly, those participants who indicated that certain rituals held deep personal meaning for them, expressed distress at being unable to continue those rituals here. One participant was particularly expressive of her distress at not finding the appropriate ingredients for one of the Zoroastrian celebrations important to her:

"The simplest thing is... the most important fruit that I really need for my table is a pomegranate. And in this... it's... you... in this time of the year, you will not find a pomegranate. Go search where-ever you want, you'll not find a pomegranate... *you will just not find a pomegranate anywhere.* And that is the most important ingredient of my table... I'm like... what do I do now? My Mom's like... 'it's fine' I mean what can we do...? We *can't* do anything you know."

Another participant expressed her dissatisfaction over not having time to join in important festivals/celebrations "because you know, you have so much to do. So even last year, when my sister would like, offer... that you know, that this celebration or that celebration... I often found that it took a backseat, um... which is this the amount of workload, so I would be like, no, you know, I can't come, I have this going on, that going on... so... so, I mean, um, I

guess the resources are there in terms of me knowing a place where I can go, but the time resources weren't there."

Interestingly, one of the participants gave a contradictory account about the availability of resources stating "And I think the other thing is you know... 50 years, I mean 20 years before, two generations before um, U.S. was very different... so now, you know there's a *mandir* [Hindu place of worship] 10 minutes, like 5 minutes, literally 5 minutes away from our house... and there are *pandits* [Hindu priests who are initiated in performing various Hindu rites & rituals] who you know, come home and do puja for us... so you know, the accessibility of practicing religion has also become easier."

Differences in Celebrations. Another point of difference endorsed by many of the participants was that celebration of festivals was not "as at home" with one participant stating "of course here the style [of celebrating] was different than what it was in India." Another participant shared her reduced enjoyment of festivals stating "I mean here you don't feel anything and those things are going on in India. So I kind of feel, um... that's something I really miss. But, um, we just see stuff online and all... and do our prayers at home and do our stuff and … make our home environment as close to our Indian environment as possible, something like that." She also emphasized the lack of resources adding "it's just not possible, even if there are Indians... none of the Indians have those resources or those kind of stuff that they can actually do that [celebrate as at home]."

Some participants also shared their dissatisfaction that celebration of festivals often becomes more of a social gathering than a religious one. One person spoke about the social/cultural tone of what was supposed to be a religious celebration, indicating that while she enjoyed the social aspect she did "miss that religious element in it... when we celebrated."

Participants spoke about the lack of proper guidance in doing things "the correct way" when celebrating over here. As one participant put it "you know, not everybody knows how to do that... um, so it was kind of difficult to find out people who could do that, in the correct way." However, she added that "you've got to do with whatever you've got" indicating that "it's really good" to have the opportunity to come together and celebrate even if it's not "the correct way." This last sentiment was echoed by other participants one of whom shared that "yeah, you still felt that you were away from home and it would be nice to go and have the real *modaks* [special sweet, usually prepared for Ganesh Utsav, a festival celebrating the goodness & glory of Lord Ganesh], and all that... But it was like, OK, you know, we are in our way trying to create the same experience here."

Importance of Family/Community. Interestingly, many participants had stressed the sense of togetherness and community associated with religious celebrations back home. As one participant put it when talking about a religious celebration she had enjoyed growing up:

"But it was more about... more because everyone would come together and we would make a big fuss and there was, you know, it was... it was a social experience and so it was that part, and I think that's true for a lot of people. It's, um, more than religion it's really an excuse for people to come together and eat and just um, you know, do something different."

Another participant echoed this sentiment about religious celebrations stating "It's not just about the religion at all. So... it has a lot of you know, social aspects. So you meet people... and even *Diwali* [major Hindu festival] for that matter, it's not merely religious, but it's more about, you know... being happy and having fun with people."

This sense of togetherness that was important in celebrations meant that celebrations here were different due to the absence of family members. As one participant put it, "Yeah... so, it's like a, get-together on festivals [back home]. We can't do that here. We don't have, even our parents over here, so it is a... a different thing. So that's one of the things, we, I really miss in U.S." Others expressed that celebrations and rituals became a way of "connecting back with [people back home]." One participant expressed the importance of this sense of connection in the following words:

"I, I know a lot of people miss the religious um... festivals, they miss the Indian community. But for me, my sister has, she's been here for almost um... like, she moved here when she was married, which was, must have been like almost 16 years ago. So... so she's lived in [place name] and then here for, for almost 7-8 years, so... so, she has a friend circle, and um, like, if I... if I miss home I can always come here, and there's... there's like, I get, um, I get reacquainted with you know, Indian food, Indian customs."

Similarly, another participant expressed the importance of the religious community she had finally found during her third year in the United States:

"And it's so great, the fact that... um, they know what you're talking... talk the same language, you all eat the same food, you know, typical whatever we eat. And, um... it's just that... oh, well it's like, I don't know, it's just like, oh, you're a family, you know. I don't know, it's the things I get in family. I know, it's different when it's like, you know, a White university...? Any person, any Indian would be my family, you know what I mean? And now I am away from university, um, it even becomes further, there are so many Indians around, um, that... I am like, oh, I wish there was some Zoroastrians also,

you know. Indians are extended family, but then Zoroastrians are my closer... not closer, but my family ke family [immediate family]... you know what I mean?"

Context is Important in the Experience of Religion

This theme explores how the participants' family of origin, the friendships they form, personal preferences, and the larger American community in which they live allows for differential experiences of and conversations around religion. Culturally supportive conversations revolved around sharing of ideas, gaining additional knowledge and perspective, and learning about the host country. Culturally distancing conversations involved the frustration of trying to "translate culture," lack of acceptance as well as becoming targets of proselytizing. Thus the sub-themes of (a) family and friends' influence, (b) personal preferences, (c) American community influences, (d) culturally supportive conversations, and (e) culturally distancing conversations further elucidate these ideas.

Family and Friends' Influence. Given that religion involves "inculcating our value system" and carries strong family and larger social associations, it is unsurprising that an individual's family of origin as well as the family one marries into makes a difference in an individual's experience of religiosity. Thus participants stressed the "lack of compulsions" around participation in religious rituals and the element of personal interests and motivations, "It is intrinsic to me. It's not because of an external pressure," when talking about their experiences both at home and here. An additional dimension was added by the presence of religious versus non-religious friends while here in the United States. Thus, one participant stated, "And we have our friends probably... that is also um, a guiding force for us. Because we have few of our friends who are very particular about going to temples on the weekends, so, we hear their experiences, we feel, "why not?" Let's do it... and we like... and there also we see scope for socializing."

Participants also spoke about how this experience would be further moderated if and when they had children, based on what values one wants to pass on to one's child. As one participant put it, "I right now do not have a kid. I think that also is a factor that I am not so much thinking about what are my religious beliefs or cultural beliefs. Versus my friends who are having kids are people who are more into the idea of 'Oh, what should I preach my child?'"

Personal Preferences. It makes sense that one's personal preferences around religion and religious practices can emerge/flourish when one is away from family influences. This was reflected in the unique experiences around religious conversations and celebrations of one participant who endorsed an atheistic orientation. She specified that back home she would often "go along" with her family on religious occasions even though she did not believe in what they were doing. She shared that while it's nice not to have to deal with these conflicts here, she does miss the opportunity to interact with her extended family that such occasions afforded.

"I guess it's more also because sometimes you know, you just get home sick and you want feel something familiar so... Just when you are in India you know you take these things for granted that people are celebrating and these things are happening. When you come over here you know, it's really... it's so different. You don't see those things... So, I guess you know, it's more to get that feeling of familiarity and that feeling of being back home. So I guess I see it more of that than yeah, religious things."

She also spoke about the pleasurable freedom from constantly having to justify her feelings/beliefs. "And you know in that sense coming to the US has been a refreshing change... because you are not constantly bombarded with such questions you know." She shared experiencing greater acceptance about being atheistic in the United States where as at home her

parents and her extended family would constantly talk to her and hope that "I will become religious some day."

American Community. Similarly, the larger American community in which one finds oneself also makes a difference. This factor was highlighted by one of the respondents who stressed how her experience varied based on where she was in the United States:

"I think in some respects, I would say that, you know, there are certain pockets in the US that are more religious and more conservative than what I was experiencing in India. I mean, I think you know, just also because Bombay is more liberal... So, you don't really know the full extent of it, but, I was in [place name] before and over there I didn't really see religion having much of an impact... but when I moved to [place name] you know, over here there is like a Church in every block and, people are generally more religious and my department too you know, I mean... it's not religious, but it's more conservative. So, I mean, I do see these changes you know and, I visit [place name] pretty often, so that's again a very liberal thing and I don't think you know, I have not seen a lot of religion over there. So, I do keep seeing a lot of interesting contrasts over here too. And you know, sometimes when I do strike a conversation with some of my friends who are religious you know, they... they sound the same like my religious friends from India."

Another participant expressed her surprise at "how religious a country America is... um, I did not expect that coming in... but it is, it is pretty religious, even in the public um, not just privately, but publicly religious." Thus, depending of their context some participants indicated that religion was never a topic of conversation for them when interacting with Americans while others stated that religion came up either directly or indirectly in various conversations with one

participant stating that religion "ends up being, um, a topic of conversation, even when I am reading about, or talking about um... economic policies, or um, I don't know... politics."

Culturally Supportive Conversations. Participants who did report having conversations about religion stated that these conversations were generally positive as "people are open" and "respectful" about the participants beliefs. They characterized these conversations as an exchange of ideas or information sharing, one participant stating that Americans she interacted with were "[v]ery positive, very curious people... very... there was a sense of curiosity... positiveness... yeah... and open-mindedness... of accepting you know, where I come from and what I follow." Some participants spoke about the basic information/awareness that people already have about Hinduism, with one participant expressing surprise that people "are really interested in Hindu culture... um, and they ask me about it, and um, they also find it interesting, and they, they already know about *Bhagvad Gita* [major Hindu religious text, highlighting some central tenets of Hinduism]."

Another participant spoke about how conversations about different religions led to a discussion of similarities rather than differences. Talking about a conversation that began with her American friends curiosity around Hindu marriage rituals, she stated "and surprisingly there are a, I mean, even if you think about Hinduism and Christianity or any other religion as you know, different religions... you can draw parallels you know, for what you would do in a wedding... wedding vows, are equal to probably our *saptapadi* [important rite within the Hindu marriage ceremony, literally meaning "seven steps" taken together and symbolic of the vows of togetherness and commitment shared in the ceremony], or things like that. So, you know, you would have conversations around, 'oh, yeah, you know, that is, that is similar to what we have, when we get married.' I think those are the kind of conversations we have about it."

Some participants shared that rather than being asked about their religion they would often be the ones to initiate conversations about their host country friend's religious and cultural practices. One person described this as being "part of my acculturation" as she tried to learn more about her host culture and be sensitive in her interactions with Americans she met. Similarly another participant shared her desire "to know more about what is happening around my own society. So I was more open to the ideas. I wanted to absorb it, and understand it, OK these are their ways of celebrating... American ways of celebrating... So in the first year it was more about learning it" and how it drove her to participate in and experience the American celebrations like Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Halloween.

Some participants also spoke about how these conversations with Americans as well as fellow Indians lead to increased knowledge of and appreciation for one's own religion/culture. As one participant puts it:

> "I had never thought about it before, you know, because nobody usually talks about that; like, I know, I mean, in our um, um... family we had sometimes, discussions about, you know, how Hinduism is good and you know, I am always proud of being a Hindu and all that. But um, like going to like, deeper philosophy, um, usually people don't want you know, the youngsters to go into these things. Um, it's, that is usually um, taken as something which older people should do. Yeah, so you know... um, but... No, I came here and um, actually this friend of mine, it was... it was really good to you know, chat with him and talk about things."

Another participant stated "I feel more good about my religion being a Hindu here, in [place name] than in India for some reason" and added upon reflection that people's interest in

Hindu concepts like yoga and meditation "sort of puts me in a position of power for some reason" as they ask her about her opinions and experiences as an "expert".

One participant shared her insight that conversations with people are about cultural differences rather than religion per se. As she put it, "they are more curious about my experience and I would not say that that would just be a religious identity, you know. It would just be because of the fact that I am Indian, so they're just curious about Indians in general and religion just happens to be one part of it."

Culturally Distancing Conversations. Interestingly, one participant shared similar beliefs about people's interest in broader cultural differences (rather than religious differences) and the negative consequences she has faced. She expressed her frustration with the process of explaining cultural differences, stating "there are things like... in culture, that cannot be expressed in a verbal form, so that's something that I experience like, yeah, that's frustrating... because nobody can translate culture to me…" and "I cannot translate my culture to them." She also shared some distancing experiences where people she was interacting with were unsupportive of the cultural differences she brings to the table such as the use of terms like "expired" stemming from the fact that "our English is like um... expired is a classical way of saying, like it's a very British way of saying stuff. Um, it's a classical word for connoting death."

Another interesting point that emerged spontaneously in conversation with some of the respondents was the concept of religious conversion. Some respondents expressed dissatisfaction and frustration over what they perceived as "manipulation" in order to convince them to join a particular religion. One respondent urged "please don't try to force your stuff on others. That... that's not going to work. I am a born Hindu, and I, I would like to be so throughout my life. I won't, I don't like anyone, someone else forcing their culture, their religion on me." Another

participant spoke about the freedom she had experienced in India in terms of joining in religious activities/services of other religions without pressure to convert. She contrasted this with the pressure to convert she experiences here, making her unwilling to join in religious activities of other religions. As she put it:

"Because, I mean, I would just naturally go to church in India without people asking me.... but here, because they try to convert and all I feel like protective and I don't want to go here. I am like, if we could just go to church just because it's a religious place and it could give me a nice spiritual experience and make you feel good like any temple does to us... But I don't want to go because somebody is trying to convert you or baptize you."

Interestingly, one participant spoke about religious conversion in the abstract suggesting that this could be an interesting aspect to explore. He shared that while he hasn't had to deal with people trying to influence his religious ideas, he has "heard stories of friends who have had people trying to convince them to... change their religion... after coming to the US unfortunately." He further added his belief that some people might be more vulnerable and experience greater stress due to such pressures.

"Students who come here, you know with the stress, especially because of the culture shock and everything new... um... having to deal with, someone telling that... your religion is wrong, and if you change to a different one... which is more right for whatever reason... um... that can be... um... a stressful factor in life... um... and friends who have described this to me... um, we were able to deal with that easily... I imagine that... a more vulnerable person in such a situation can, can suffer little more."

Certain Religious Ideas and Practices are Seen as Helpful

This theme covers participants' reports on how religious practices and ideas offered support in times of need and provided a grounding influence in a challenging new environment, while stressing the fact that belief in a higher power who "take[s] care of things" does not override personal responsibility.

Participants shared that their belief in God as well as certain rituals like prayers and celebrations were supportive in times of need. One participant shared the importance of prayer in her life stating "in the sense that I told you, prayer is something, it relaxes me, it energizes me for the day, when I am starting the day. So, it's been… positive I guess." Another participant spoke of her formative experiences praying with her father and grandfather, and how she goes back to it in stressful times as a way of calming down and re-connecting with memories of her father and grandfather. "I think even after coming here, how that *Ramraksha* [Hindu prayer, addressed to Lord Rama, seeking protection] translates is, suppose if I am not able to sleep, and you know, I'm, you know, my thoughts are too wild, or I am too, I am really buzzing and I can't fall asleep, that is how... I use *Ramraksha* to fall asleep. So um... that and sometimes you know, if I think of my grandfather, if I think of my father... sometimes, that *Ramraksha* just comes to mind and I just say it you know."

Some participants spoke about the feeling of being grounded that religion, prayer, and similar rituals gave them, especially in the face of the many challenges of coming to and studying in a new country. "It's just like, you know, asking for more strength to face whatever. And you know, and it's like, chanting the *Gayatri Mantra* [Hindu prayer/chant, believed to bestow wisdom and enlightenment], it's very soothing. So, it is not for, you know, um, anything,

um, else, but just to kind of calm yourself down, I guess." One participant was particularly eloquent in capturing the transitions and how religion supported her:

"I think that, whatever... um, you know, teachings I have got from my religious experiences... really.... are really helping me survive here in this foreign country. Um, because um, you know um, at this um, like, it was a huge, um, turnover from you know, the Indian cultural and, I mean not the culture, I mean the kind of environment and everything that I was used to, and when I came here, I was extremely lonely. And, as I, as I said, I was used to city life, so I missed that a lot. Then, on top of that, I left my house for the first time, I came here... OK... we, used to living with my parents, for 24 years of my life, and the first time I left, I came directly here. So like, it was like, a very tough path, like you know, not having the family around, on top of that, I... you know, the pressures of studies, and the educational system is... system here is new. So I didn't think to... this new educational system was really overwhelming. But, what made me survive here, is the strength that my religion um, you know, that my religion has given me. So the, just stay calm, believe in God, do, your stuff and just leave the rest to God... this kind of belief which we have been taught in Hindu religion, that made me survive here. So that's really important, you know, it was a... a great help... that... religion gave me when I came here."

As another participant put it "the learning curve [after coming here] is so steep, because you have to not only um, you have to not only, you know, learn all this new material, in terms of coursework, and... it's that, lots of social learning involved, like, you have to, you have to make lots of, you have to be like, you've to find your own, you've to build relationships, you have to find a niche for yourself. So, in the midst of all that, there, there seems to be, like there are times

in which you feel, like, it is, I, I at least would feel a lot of like, why am I doing this, or, what is consistent... because everything feels unfamiliar, so, I, I feel like religion has... a way of grounding you to that."

Interestingly, some participants while sharing the support that belief in a caring higher power offered expressed the idea that this belief was powerful whether or not God existed. As one participant put it, "[prayer]... it's trying to reach out to a higher power saying, please help me through this. Um... so whether or not there is an actual higher power [that is] helping... it's... it's probably comforting yourself that, you know there's someone looking after you… which, kind of helps too, when you are stressed." Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating that belief in God helps "hold on" through difficult times:

"I kind of think about even that way, I mean it is possible that there might not be any God. But, it has been developed in such a way, because, yeah, people, sometimes do feel that, there is nothing to look forward to. So then, there comes in God, and you know? There's something you believe in, and which, lets you hang in there for longer. And you know, it probably, yeah, so that you can cross the bridge and um, trust something, which you don't know what it is. So the mystery thing in that will, I mean, usually helps the belief, um, and um, I guess it's basically so that people can you know, hang in there... longer... yeah, yeah."

Another interesting point came from two participants who did not believe that a higher power would "take care of things." One of these participants reported being atheist and related a religious friend's experiences around belief in a higher power stating "So I mean, from that perspective I think it's good you know, if you have that belief that there is a higher power who is sort of controlling what is happening in your life and things will eventually get better because

someone is looking out for you, you know... So, I can see how that's comforting." The other

participant to raise a similar point endorsed a strong spiritual commitment and shared her

experiences thus:

> "A lot of people I know, um, they are deeply religious; like they have a very strong faith
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> in God and have a belief that God will carry them through, some trying times, etc. I don't
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> think like that, and I think they, they benefit from thinking like that because then they
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> have, then they have this feeling of having a divine power on their side. Um, to think that,
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> to have that belief that things will work out because God is looking, um, after them or
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> something like that. My... my brain doesn't go in that direction and so when I am
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> worrying, um... I will not think that, God is there to take care of me, or that I shouldn't
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> worry, because God will get me through this. So I don't, um, and sometimes it can be... I
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> think it can be comforting, to just um, stop worrying about something, or stressing out
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> about something because um, because of your faith, because of your belief, because you
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> were grown up believing that God is there and you don't need to worry... you know what
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> I am saying?"

In line with the emphasis on personal responsibility highlighted by these two participants,

some other participants too were quick to highlight that while religion/religious activities offered

strength, they did have to work toward the solution of whatever they were struggling with. As

one participant put it "I feel like if I am in a... trouble, and if we pray to God, I do think that, we

can get rid of our troubles. Like, we can't get rid automatically, but we can get it, I mean, a right

direction, where to go on. So, I definitely feel that God shows us a right direction, so that we can

lead our lives in a proper way, or in an easy manner." She added that "[e]verything can't

disappear, you're, you need to take an action, but, not God will do everything for you, but yeah, you can, you can... get a right direction."

New Experiences Lead to an Evolved Way of Thinking about Religion

This theme covers the participants' perceptions about how their experiences have resulted in subtle changes in the way they think about religion, while differentiating the reduction in previously meaningful activities from a change in religiosity per se. The role of current challenges and absence of family and elders in strengthening relationship with God is also posited.

Interestingly, many participants reported "no change" in their religiosity after coming to the U.S. but went on to add how their experiences had changed them often leading to increased awareness and a more open-minded and evolved way of thinking. One participant captured this subtle change saying "I feel the transition is about, you know, life in general. Like, the kind of music you listen to and kind of stuff like that. I don't think so really the religion aspect that changes... Because we still have our Gods like, you know, frame in our house, the idol, and we pray and kind of stuff. So I mean, and we do that stuff in India in our houses, right? So I think it won't change." Another participant spoke about religion being a "part of my identity" in the following words:

> "I think it's a part of going back to my childhood, of going back to what I've grown up with. And I think that keeps, that is, that is a part of my identity now, because... you know, that's who I am, and it kind of um, reassures me that I still, I still, I am the person who I used to be... I have changed, but I still have that part in me as well."

Other participants spoke about "no change" in terms of religiosity back home and the lack of importance to religious rituals and activities in their lives. One participant stated "So, I

did not feel a stark difference, because I was never religious person in India." Another indicated that religion did not really impact her stay here "because... um, as I said, um, active religion was never a part of my life. Um... so, it's not something I miss after coming here." Interestingly, one participant shared that while "I have not lost my faith in my religion" she had noticed a reduction in some meaningful religious activities like evening prayers "because of two things as I said. There is the, you know, a lot of studies pressure... that's here... and secondly, I don't have my family around... So I am... used to do this with my family around me."

Another participant emphasized the continued importance of religion, "When it comes to my ideation of religion, I have not changed anything. What I used to do earlier, is something I still continue to do it here." However, she added that she has "become more open minded" and "more lenient" about certain aspects of practice due to practical adaptations (such as those noted earlier) and also "because, I look at myself and um, if I do it, if I continue the practice... I don't want it to create a rift between... if I have a daughter, you know. I don't want that to create a rift between mother and daughter. So in that respect I said that, you know, why stick to... I just... I don't do it. I don't do it."

Interestingly, one participant spoke about her struggles to maintain her religious/spiritual practices here citing academic and financial pressures as draining her of time and energy to pursue previously meaningful activities. She shared that things are "not coming along so well" and that she "want[s] to be spiritual again." She shared how her inability to balance these academic and financial pressures with self-care through spiritual practices (that she valued in the past) has negatively impacted both her health and her ability to cope with stress. As she put it "I've worked so hard throughout my semester, that um... that when the semester finished I was like, I crashed."

Participants also spoke about the impact of exposure to a different culture and different ways of thinking on their religious ideas. Thus, one participant recognized that "in India probably I would have um, gotten much deeper in Indian customs and values, and religious beliefs" where as "today here, sitting in America, I feel more open to other cultures and religions. And I love knowing about their experiences... it's so fascinating." Other participants also spoke about the increased awareness and information availability which helped them think deeper about various issues.

One participant shared his thoughts about exposure to ideas saying "I don't follow any particular spiritual leader at all; I am not that spiritual. But, you do get exposed to, some philosophies here and there, and you do see um... sometimes people's thoughts really resonate with you and, you think about it... that's how... your... way of thinking about religion can change." Another participant spoke about the "change which comes about in people whenever they live apart from their homes" stating "I have... just the awareness, which was not present before" and "it's just a more crystal clear awareness in myself that what it means to me... rather than... there being any change." Similarly, one participant spoke about the impact of open discussions with fellow worshippers as well as culturally different Americans stating "I, I feel that I have been more spiritual now than before, and I've been thinking more deeply about things now than before, um, especially because of these discussions and all that."

Interestingly, some participants highlighted how they perceived the changes in their religious ideas to be "a continuous process that started in India" and not "necessarily a consequence of being here." Thus, one participant stated "I don't know if I have become more of a spiritual person or not. I... I can't say because.... it has been a continuous process that started in India. So I can't say there is a change, but I have... um, more of a student now than I used to be, I

think, that's how I will put it. More of a student of spiritualism, spirituality, than I used to be." Another participant spoke about how coming over here hasn't "really changed my religious views as much. Except perhaps like I said, being here almost 9 years, the way I think about God and religion, may have slightly evolved with time" but added thoughtfully that "maybe if I was back in India, it could have still changed, or subtly changed as I would like to call it. Um, it could have done the same thing in India too. I don't think it's necessarily a consequence of being here."

Some participants also spoke of the way absence of elders and family here in the United States makes for a stronger bond with God. One participant highlighted previous reliance on support from elders stating "I guess, it's also an habit... because in India if you have a big presentation or a big exam, you'll like touch the feet of the elders or whatever, but here, you pretty much don't have any elders to do that, so I mean, you'll... that... the bond with God is you know, more strong I guess." Another participant expressed similar sentiments stating "It's also because you know, it's like, um... you are alone and I mean, you definitely... I don't say that I am doing it because I want something and because I have nothing to do. But it's just... the fact that, you are... you need God more... Not that you did not need God when you were in... It's not that; it's just that you need God more, because um, because you don't have anything, here. You just... you know what I mean...?" One participant shared her belief that "I am becoming more spiritual" after coming here "I don't know, maybe because I miss my family a lot." Another person spoke about the role of the challenges that coming to another country brings humorously stating "I would say it's… most people do get more religious when things go bad!" adding that "when things are not working out that much you probably do turn to God a lot more."

Interestingly, one participant actually spoke about having a more spiritually fulfilling experience here in the United States than she had back home in India. She spoke about "not having a spiritual community" as well as the struggle to find people who shared her values back home. As she put it "whenever I've tried to, discuss things with my friends, I felt like, these values are... are, are out of place" and "as I started talking about spiritual issues, I would find people who would, who would kind of, like I, I really wouldn't find anyone that was interested... in these things as like I was. Like, they didn't seem to matter, to anyone else. So that was, that was something that I found really, difficult to deal with." She contrasted this with her feelings of excitement at finding a spiritual community here, stating that she enjoys talking about spiritual ideas especially as "I am just beginning to... um... assimilate into my beliefs of, of spirituality." As she put it "I can only talk about ideas as they make sense to me" adding that "when I can talk to people about it, it feels... it feels fulfilling in some way."

Discussion

Coming to a new country brings many challenges and requires adjustments and changes to adapt to a new environment. One dimension of such change can be religion and spirituality. This study used a qualitative approach to examine the nature of religious/ spiritual experiences of international students' from India. An attempt was made to understand how the religious/spiritual experiences of Indian international students influence their adaptation to the U.S. and how this adaptation in turn impacts their religious/spiritual experiences. The responses of the participants suggest that religion/spirituality was supportive of their adaptation process and that coming to a new land in turn wrought subtle changes in their religion/spirituality.

Participants spoke about their experiences around religion/spirituality both before and after coming to the U.S., sharing their stories of growth and change. Prominent themes that arose from the analysis of their stories included (a) religion is a highly personalized and complex concept, (b) coming to a foreign land brings about changes in the practice of religion, (c) context is important in the experience of religion, (d) certain religious ideas and practices are seen as helpful, and (e) changing experiences lead to an evolved way of thinking about religion. The discussion section will assess these findings in light of the current literature, highlight implications of the results, review the limitations of the study, and provide suggestions for future research.

Reflection on Themes and the Current Literature

The themes that emerged from this study add to the extant research about the experiences of international students coming from India. Osburn's (2005) research with Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian international students found (among other things) religion to be important to participants and that coming to new country impacted their religious practices, made them think

anew about religious beliefs and values, and led to a re-evaluation of own values previously taken for granted. Similarly, the current research identified the adaptations that take place in the practice of religion and identified ways in which participants' thinking about religion evolves through their experiences here in the U.S. This process of evolved thinking has been posited by various researchers (Ward et al., 2001; Kuhar, 2005) who speak about the transformative potential of exposure to a new culture and diverse viewpoints. Similarly, Brown and Graham (2009) found "exposure to a new culture and distance from origin culture act as a catalyst for change" such that individuals may become more culturally aware, more independent, more confident, and more assertive through their experiences as educational sojourners.

As one considers these adaptations and "transformations" it is important to note the highly personalized and complex conceptions of religion/spirituality endorsed by the participants. Interestingly, both the Hindu as well as the Jain and Zoroastrian participants shared personalized ideas around what religion means to them and what about religion is most important to them. Similarly, participants from each religion stressed their participation in and understanding of other religions they had been exposed to in India. Thus, it might seem that the personalized and complex conception might be a function of Eastern/Indian religions rather than being in the U.S. A further point of interest in understanding the personalized and complex nature of religion might be how gender roles may overlay religious/spiritual roles. Thus, we have the women in the sample talking about how their experiences would or could change based on the family they married into as well as having children that they are "preaching to" about religion. A greater representation of males in the study might have highlight if this is also true for men or whether this is a unique experience of women due to gender roles both within and outside of religion.

The personalized conception of religion appears to allow for greater flexibility and openness as well as greater appreciation of other religions and aspects of diversity. This idea was endorsed by the participants who spoke about how their values led them to seeking a better awareness and understanding of the cultural (and religious) differences they encountered in the U.S. This flexibility and openness might also help explain the Zoroastrian participant's comments on having the option of going to a Hindu temple even if there was no Zoroastrian temple accessible to her as well as participants from all religions stressing the importance of the coming together with other Indians as a compensation for missing family and friends back home during religious celebrations that did not necessarily hold personal significance for them.

The literature on the impact of immigration on the religious practices and behaviors of people appears to be mixed. Some scholars suggest that people become more religious after immigration as a way to shape, strengthen, and maintain one's unique identity as well as a source of support in an unfamiliar world (Williams, 1998; Baumann, 1998). Others talk about the decrease in religious participation (see Connor, 2008; Spaulding & Flack, 1976, in Osburn, 2005) as well as the adaptations that people make in the practice of religion (see Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). Participants in this research largely expressed no change in religiosity, but did speak about adaptations and even reduction in the practice of religon either due to practical considerations like availability of resources, adacemic and time pressures, or absence of family members. Osburn (2005) had similar findings with participants citing "accomodating to coursework," "forgetting," and "prioritizing religious practice" as some of the relevant points in the practice of religion. Interestingly, while the particpants endorsed "no change" in religiosity, they did speak about becoming more aware about and gaining a new appreciation of their

religion as well as becoming more thoughtful in their approach to religion, which perhaps highlights the "transformative potential" discussed above.

It must be noted that there are other factors like education (see Kuhar, 2005), normal developmental processes (Erikson, 1950/1963; Marcia, 1966), and religious socialization through the influence of family, friends, and education (Hood et al., 1996) that have been found to play a role in the development of and changes in religious thinking. Thus, the "transformative potential" must be understood in light of other factors that may be leading to the changes in religious thinking cited by the participants of this research. In fact, some of the participants were quick to note this very ambiguity as to the cause of this evolution of their thoughts around religion. They spoke about the possibility of a similar change over the life span, irrespective of whether they came to the U.S. or not. Further, some of the participants spoke about the fact that their family and friend circle probably led them to be more thoughtful about participating in religious activities, which in turn contributes to their religious experiences and thoughts here in the U.S.

It is important to note, that international students are in a different position from immigrants (as noted in the literature review section). The fact that often international students do not have intact social or family support networks is one major point of difference from immigrants and is likely to differentially impact the adjustment and acculturation process of international students (Crano & Crano, 1993). Interestingly, the current research highlighted this differential impact through the experiences of participants who had extended family and/or friend circle present when they arrived and those who did not. Thus, participants spoke about the benefits of having an extended family presence in terms of both feeling connected to home and combating feelings of homesickness as well as having more resources and opportunities for

religious participation. Other participants expressed missing such a support structure when they first got here as well as sharing the positive impact of finally forming such a support group later in their course of study on their general feelings of connectedness. Scholars in the area of acculturation suggest that perceived cultural distance between the host country and the country of origin will influence the ease with which people adjust to their new surroundings (Yang et al., 2006; Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007). It is possible that the sense of connectedness that comes from having a good support structure (whether family or friends or both), helps decrease the sense of cultural difference and the sense of unfamiliarity in a foreign land allowing for better adjustment.

This sense of social support and connectedness is especially important given its importance in the adjustment, acculturation, mental health, and general sense of well-being among international students (see Osburn, 2005; Yang et al., 2006; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu, 1994). Participants in this research stressed the importance of the social aspect of religion and religious celebrations, in terms of helping them connect to others both in the host country as well as with family and friends back home. In fact, some of the participants stressed the social aspect over and above the religious significance of their participation in some of the religious activities here in the U.S. suggesting that the sense of community that is part of their religious experience is very important to them. Thus, even the participant endorsing an atheist position welcomed the opportunity for "religious" gatherings that allowed her to connect with culturally similar others. Williams (1998) addresses a similar connection building function of religious participation. This highlights the potential beneficial impact of continued religious participation as explored in extant literature. Thus, Johnson and Hayes (2003) talk about homesickness in terms of loss of usual social support

networks, including those built around religion. They suggest that feelings of homesickness may lead international students to seek religious activities, which are associated with feelings of comfort and security of live in the country of origin. Further Myburgh et al., (2002) suggest that international students may join religious groups as a coping mechanism, seeking support and aid in adjustment to a foriegn culture.

The idea of religion/spirituality as a coping mechanism too has support in the current body of literature. For example, religion/spirituality plays an important role in general mental health and well-being of students (Bergin et al, 1988); intrinsic religiosity has stress moderating effects (Park et al., 1990); and may help individuals cope with the stressors of acculturation (Hsu et al., 2009; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). Further, religion may have many indirect effects on an individual's functioning in a foreign land through values that influence self-construal and communication style (Oguri & Gudykunst, 2002) as well as learning and coping (Gong & Fan, 2006; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Zhou et al., 2008; Misra & Castillo, 2004). Participants in this study endorsed using religious beliefs and practices as a supportive coping strategy, sharing that they would often find themselves turning to prayer and other such practices automatically when experiencing heightened stress. Further, participants also shared how the religiously learned value of openness helped them to adjust and acculturate better in their new environment. Interestingly, some participants also shared that being in a new culture in turn helped them become more aware and open-minded. This last idea highlights that the process of acculturation and negotiating the value differences between country of origin and host country is not only influenced by but also in turn influences religious/spiritual beliefs of individuals.

Navigating in an unfamiliar world and the need to acculturate to a new environment also create a "sense of displacement," requiring a possible re-interpretation of the concept of home as

well as personal and social/group identity (Garrod & Davis, 1999). Part of this sense of displacement may consist of spiritual displacement for an international student (Myburgh et al., 2002). Interestingly, participants in this study shared mixed experiences around "missing" religious activities. While one group of participants expressed distress over missing such activities, others expressed mild regret but no distress. The latter group of participants was quick to stress that such activities were never imposed on them, were not a regular part of their life before coming to the U.S., and were meaningful more in terms of the coming together with family and friends that often accompanied these activities. Those who did express regrets shared the lack of resources (time or materials) as well as the absence of family and friends as some reasons for their current reduced participation in religious activities.

All participants were quick to point out that religion remained important to them, and as one participant eloquently put it, religion was a part of her identity that she did not want to lose through the process of learning about and adjusting to a new culture. In line with the participants' emphasis on maintaining their religious identity, the acculturation process also involves working to maintain the delicate balance between maintaining own identity and identifying with the majority culture (Crano &Crano, 1993). The concept of enculturation, of retaining own cultural norms during adaptation, has been considered especially important in the case of Asian Americans (Kim et al., 2003). Andrade (2006-07) has stressed that acculturation is more positive when one feels able to preserve own cultural integrity along with adjusting to host culture. Interestingly, many participants responded "no change" when asked about their religiosity/spirituality but in discussing their experience revealed the changes in their thinking around religion/spirituality. Participants studying in religious institutions were perhaps more emphatic in stating that their religion continued to be important to them. This could perhaps be

explicated as a "defense" against losing or being accused of forgetting their own culture/religion ("don't want anybody to say… you've become such an American"). The participants claim that this is not something that they've previously thought about or articulated might also be a reason for these contradictory responses, perhaps suggesting a lack of introspection and/or awareness of the changes that are taking place for individuals in terms of their religious/spiritual thinking.

An important factor in acculturation and the formation of positive inter-cultural relationships is the perceived positive evaluation of own culture by host country members (Downie et al., 2006). Similarly, participants in this research highlighted the positive nature of their interaction with host country members, sharing their pleasure in finding open-minded people who want to learn more about the participants' religious/spiritual experiences and culture. Participants reported feeling more positively about the people they interacted with, expressed satisfaction about their experiences here, and also shared feeling pride in their own religion through these interactions. The few participants who shared negative interactions around cultural and/or religious differences correspondingly shared less satisfaction, greater feelings of distress, and more difficulty in adjusting to being in the U.S. It is perhaps not surprising that a lot of the culturally distancing conversations around proselytizing were reported by participants studying in a religious university where such issues are likely to be of central importance. While these participants reported largely positive and respectful social interactions with host country members, they reported considerable frustration and higher levels of dissatisfaction due to the being the (perceived as well as real) targets for religious conversion efforts. The literature too supports the notion that forming healthy inter-cultural relationships is associated with better adjustment and greater satisfaction (Ward et al., 2001; Yang et al., 2006). In light of the

importance of healthy inter-cultural relationships, it is indeed heartening that most participants expressed great satisfaction in their inter-cultural interactions.

Implications

Both previous and current research suggests that religion/spirituality is important in understanding the experiences of international students (e.g., Osburn, 2005; Brown & Graham, 2009; Myburgh et al., 2002). The current research suggests that religion/spirituality may offer a source of personal and social support to Indian international students and provide an avenue for socialization. It may also moderate the quality of their interpersonal contact with host country members and indirectly their sense of satisfaction with their experiences in the U.S. The fact that there are contextual factors that impact these experiences is also significant. Further, the highly complex and personalized nature of religious/spiritual beliefs highlights the need for sensitivity in interacting with Indian international students and avoiding making assumptions in order to best serve their needs. These findings offer insight into ways that Indian international students can be offered support during their sojourn here as students as well as points to keep in mind while interacting with them.

Advisement and counseling center, international student associations, and university personnel can all work to create an open and respectful environment for international students. The findings from the current research highlight the need to increase awareness of and sensitivity toward various issues of diversity, specifically religion/spirituality. An open and respectful environment that makes possible conversations about values in terms of both similarities and differences would allow international students from India to feel accepted and comfortable, which in turn is known to facilitate general adjustment and academic performance. Awareness about different religions and important celebrations, symbols, and values would also aid in

creating a welcoming atmosphere for Indian international students. Many participants in the current research lamented the fact that generally people here are unaware of what back home would be an important occasion. While it is not realistic to expect everyone on campus to know about the important events associated with all the religions represented on campus, possibly the international student associations on campus can take the lead in at least acknowledging the various celebrations associated with different religions as they come up. Creating opportunities for religious/spiritual gatherings or at least offering information about possible religious/spiritual resources on or around campus too would aid those students who wish to find a religious/spiritual community.

University personnel, professors, and counseling center staff can also aid international students overall experiences through increased awareness of and sensitivity toward issues of diversity. Counselors and mental health professionals especially need to be aware that Hinduism and other eastern religions may be family/community based and require sensitivity in probing what religion means to each individual. Exploring what separation from the family/community units might mean to the Indian international student would also aid in understanding their overall experience and struggles. Further, professionals need to attend to the subtle changes that the individual may be experiencing in their values/worldview with or without conscious awareness. Such changes are likely to impact the individual's functioning here in the U.S., their journey back to their home country, as well as interactions with family and friends at home and are thus possible sources of distress. In understanding the experiences of Indian international students, counselors and mental health professionals may also need to attend to the culturally distancing conversations and experiences of being the target for proselytizing. There is a need to create

space for talking about such experiences in order to gain perspective and brainstorm ways to navigate the same.

Similarly, dialogue about the core values and beliefs of international students and how these values and beliefs influence the choices that the students make can be very important. Values and beliefs can influence choice of major, career, decision to stay in the U.S. or return home, whether and what they value in interpersonal relationships, and so on. The current findings particularly highlight how religious beliefs and practices offer support to Indian international students. This suggests that counselors and mental health professionals need to assess whether religion/spirituality is a resource for the Indian international student, and if so how it can be used to aid them in their struggles. Helping the student identify their personal strengths (as derived from religious/spiritual beliefs) as well as available religious/spiritual resources can support the Indian international students in overcoming any stress, anxiety, isolation, and homesickness that they may be experiencing.

Interestingly, some researchers have spoken about the need for host country members to make adjustments based on the cultural diversity of the international students they interact with (both on an individual as well as group/policy level) in an academic setting (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Zhou et al., 2008). From a multicultural sensitivity perspective, this might be seen as sharing the responsibility   for intercultural communication rather than placing the sole burden of understanding and adaptation on the international student. Such a change on the part of the "hosts" would require a commitment to diversity issues, and a openness and willingness to learn and adapt to the differing needs of the diverse population that they interact with. In line with this idea, participants in the current research expressed appreciation for their American associates' interest in learning about their religion/spirituality and participating in their events, practices, and

celebrations. Cultivating an open and respectful atmosphere and willingness to meet the international students halfway appears to be the overarching principle in interacting with and helping Indian international students.

Limitations of the Study

The above findings need to be understood keeping in mind certain limitations of the study. Firstly, the findings reflect the experiences of the participants of the study and should be generalized to larger groups of Indian international students as well as other international students with caution. Further, a majority of the participants endorsed a Hindu religious orientation, they were all graduate students, and included only one male, which also limits the scope of generalizability. The high religious diversity in India as well as the possible overlay between gender and religious/spiritual roles needs to be taken into account while understanding these results. Secondly, the semi-structured interview format may lead to a non-uniform coverage of the various relevant areas as participants focus on what they consider important based on their unique experiences/perspectives. Thirdly, the research utilized a convenience sampling procedure that may have lead to participants with interest in the topic volunteering for participation and excluding those participants who found this area to be less important relevant. In utilizing these findings one must remember that the experiences of each individual are likely to be unique and each individual's story should be heard and understood within its own context. However, the consistency across interviews as well as agreement between researcher and auditor suggest that the findings are valid and offer insight into the general experiences of the target population.

Additionally, certain researcher assumptions must also be kept in mind while understanding these results. These assumptions included the belief that religion/spirituality is

significant in understanding the experiences of international students, coming to another country impacts religious/spiritual experiences, and that there is a heightened awareness about own religion/spirituality given the contrasts created by residing in an unfamiliar environment. However, there is sufficient support for these ideas in the literature. Interestingly, while most participants supported these ideas, it was found that religion/spirituality was not as consciously and overtly a part of their experiences as the researcher assumed.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study build on current research and suggest various avenues for further exploration. First, this study consisted of a heterogeneous population in terms of religious affiliation. Research that explores the experiences of participants from different religions or alternately with no religious affiliation within India might add to the depth of insight in this area. Secondly, those participants who had been in the U.S. for longer periods of time spoke about their experiences over the years noting the changes when they first got here and a few years down the line. This suggests a need to study the religious experiences of students over time to better understand the needs of the students at different stages of their educational stay. Third, the participants of this study were all graduate students. As such, a study that explores the experiences of undergraduate level students would allow for a better understanding of what/how developmental factors might be important in these experiences. Fourth, the participants of this study included only one male, stressing the need to further study these phenomena and experiences from the male perspective. Fifth, while this study explored the participants' religious/spiritual ideas before and after coming here a quantitative study that assesses religious/spiritual commitment before and after coming here might enhance our understanding of this experience. Fifth, the phenomenon of religious conversion and proselytizing that some of the

participants mentioned might be worth exploring on a fuller-scale to understand the negative (and possibly positive at times) experiences in this regard. Lastly, some researchers have suggested that the changes that take place in an individual through an academic sojourn in another country might make re-entry back to the home country a difficult process. Research that explores this re-entry phenomenon in terms of religious/spiritual experiences might be worth pursuing as we try to understand and optimize the experiences of international students.

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APPENDIX A

Email to the Contact Person at the Indian Student Associations

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Kirti Potkar, and I am a graduate student at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah pursuing a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology. As part of my doctoral research, I am examining the religious and spiritual experiences of international college students from India who are studying in the United States. Specifically, I am interested in learning what coming to a new country (and often being away from one's family) means in terms of religion and religious/ spiritual experiences of the students. I am conducting this research under the guidance of my chair, Dr Rachel E. Crook-Lyon.

I am looking for participants who will be willing to participate in telephone interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes. This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Brigham Young University. I would be very grateful if you could forward my request to the Indian international students at your university. If you have any questions or concerns about the research you may contact me (email address: kirtiap4@yahoo.co.in) or my chair (email address: rachel_crooklyon@byu.edu). Thank you for your help!

With warm regards,

Kirti Potkar

APPENDIX B

Email to Participants

Dear Indian International Student,

My name is Kirti Potkar, and I am a graduate student at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology, and as part of my doctoral research, I am examining the religious and spiritual experiences of international college students from India who are studying in the United States. Specifically, I am interested in learning what coming to a new country (and often being away from one's family) means in terms of religion and religious/ spiritual experiences of the students. I am conducting this research under the guidance of my chair Dr Rachel E. Crook-Lyon, Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education, Brigham Young University.

I am looking for participants who will be willing to participate in telephone interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes. This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Brigham Young University. If you are interested in participating, please fill out the attached forms and contact me by email at kirtiap4@yahoo.co.in. Please attach the completed forms and include your contact information (e-mail address and/ or a telephone number) so that I can contact you to set up an interview.

Participation in this research carries minimum risk and you will be allowed to withdraw participation from the interview at any time. If you have any questions or concerns about the research you may contact me (email address: kirtiap4@yahoo.co.in) or my chair (email address: rachel_crooklyon@byu.edu). Thank you so much for considering this offer.

With warm regards,

Kirti Potkar

PS. If you have any friends who are interested in participating in this research, they are also welcome to fill out the attached forms and contact me for an interview time.

APPENDIX C

Consent Form and Pro Forma

Religiosity/Spirituality: Experiences of International Students from India

Consent to be a Research Subject

Introduction

This research study is being conducted by Kirti Potkar, a doctoral candidate in Counseling Psychology, at Brigham Young University to understand the religious/spiritual experiences of international students from India, who are pursuing higher studies in the United States. You were invited to participate because you meet these initial criteria (i.e., international student from India, studying in the United States).

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You will complete this informed consent form and the attached pro forma.

- If you meet the further inclusion criteria, you will be interviewed for approximately 45 minutes to an hour about your religious/spiritual experiences here in the United States.

- The interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements.

- The interview will take place over the telephone or via the internet as per your preference and at a date and time convenient for you.

- The researcher may email you later to review initial themes from the interview, which may take about 15-20 minutes. Here I will be emailing you the initial themes derived from the interview data. You will be asked to read and comment on them and email them back to me.

- Total time commitment will be: 10 minutes for the initial informed consent and pro forma, approximately an hour for the interview, and about 15-20 minutes for the review.

Risks/Discomforts

There are minimal risks for participation in this study. However, you may feel some discomfort when answering questions about personal beliefs. You will be allowed to discontinue participation at any time, if you are no longer comfortable or willing to continue.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefits to you. However, it is hoped that through your participation researchers will learn more about the experiences of others who are in a similar position as you and how these experiences impact your functioning here. This in turn will help experts in various areas (advisement and counseling centers, international student associations, university personnel) to better address the concerns of international students and eventually will help inform policies and guidelines to assist international students in their multicultural experience.

Confidentiality

The audiotapes and transcripts will be kept in a locked office or digitally on a password protected computer. All identifying information of the participants will be deleted, and code numbers and pseudonyms will be utilized. Following the completion of the study, the raw data will be kept for 5 years post-publication in a locked file cabinet. Only the researcher and immediate study personnel will have access to the data.

Compensation

Participants who complete and return the pro forma will be entered in a drawing of two possible gift certificates worth $20. Participants who complete the interview will each be given a gift certificate worth $20.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at anytime or refuse to participate entirely without suffering any negative consequences.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact the researcher (Kirti Potkar), email: kirtiap4@yahoo.co.in; or you may contact her faculty advisor Rachel Crook-Lyon, PhD email: rachel_crooklyon@byu.edu.

Questions about your Rights as Research Participants

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact IRB Administrator, (801) 422-1461, A-285 ASB Campus Drive, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, **irb@byu.edu.**

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

The completion of this consent form and the attached pro forma implies your consent to participate.

Type in Your Name: _____   Date: _____

Pro Forma

Name_____

College or University_____

Gender_____ Ethnicity_____

Age (year and month) _____

Religious affiliation_____

Length of stay in the US_____

Check one of the following:

☐ Undergraduate

☐ Graduate

Are you planning on staying in the US or going back? _____

Are you living with family or away from family? _____

If with family, are you living with:

☐ Spouse

☐ Spouse and children

☐ Parents

☐ Others; Please specify _____

Contact Information:

Email: _____

Telephone No: _____