

BRANDING FAITH:
OBJECTS AND CONSUMERISM
IN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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AND CONSUMERISM IN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

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a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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To My Grandfather,
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I want him to know how much he inspired me.

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Abstract:

In this thesis I theorize about the potentially negative affects of competition among Evangelical groups in their attempts to attain members on a college campus. I hypothesize that in order to draw the attention of potential members, religious groups will offer “quick-fix” solutions to problems of everyday life which, due to their unsatisfactory nature, will result in either church-hopping or constant changes in religious identity. To observe these processes and investigate an understudied aspect of religious life, I look for how objects come to be a part of, or resist, tendencies towards church-hopping and simplistic short-term solutions. Contrary to my expectations, I found through photo-elicitation interviews and non-participant observation of one Evangelical group that members of the religious group I studied created long-term solutions, community, and a sense of wholeness in their lives through objects.

I. Introduction

There is a long held debate over the affects of consumerism and market competition on the experience of religious life in America. Specifically, there has been an attempt to understand what happens when churches compete for members while consumerism dominates as the mode of producing and sustaining identities for many people. Religions (especially congregations) become brands which attempt to entice and demand their ways into people's hearts, minds, bodies and souls. Roof (1999) highlights the ways that market forces allow individuals construct their religious identities through *bricolage* from the smorgasbord of disparate identity narratives. Practitioners construct a meaningful religious life that is able to produce a sense of a unified identity (wholeness) and help cope with life's problems. Yet there is doubt, even among those who support the concept of the *bricoleur*, that all will be able to find and assemble a meaningful religious identity in the face of the more corrosive aspects of consumerism (Hunt 2005).¹ These authors have not actively sought to study the ways that the competition in a market within a milieu of consumerism produces specific effects in general, nor for American Evangelical Christianity. Extending the logic of consumption in a market leads to speculation about the possibly of various deleterious effects of consumption-driven market competition. Similar to fad weight-loss programs, in order to attract new members some religious groups promise easy solutions to life's difficult problems by offering *quick-fix* solutions (explained in detail later). If religious individuals find these short-term answers to long-term problems unsatisfactory, practitioners may hop from one

¹ Consumerism is here defined as the legitimating ideology of consumption (rather than production) based capitalism (Bocock, 1993).

church to the next, never committing to a long term relationship with a community. I call this trend *transientness*.

Both trends undermine the already fragmented sense of wholeness in our everyday lives by pushing us from one identity to the next, never able to find a meaningful assemblage of our selves (Roof 1999, Hunt 2005, Coleman 2002). I believe that these trends will produce unsatisfactory results and, therefore, it is reasonable to expect that individuals who are in the mix of these trends will actively attempt to make a meaningful religious life by resisting transientness and quick-fixes. Ammerman's (2005) work on narratives offers a lens for understanding resistance to consumerism. Identities can be understood as being constructed through the telling and retelling of autobiographical narratives. We are provided with narratives by our relative subject position though no single account of ourselves; there is no totalizing narrative that is able to capture all our subject positions or deal with all of life's problems. It is through this incompleteness that individuals are able to resist narratives that would be masters of their life stories and selves. Consequentially, I expect consumers of a highly marketed brand of religion to in some ways use their multiple subject positions to resist these trends, thereby finding a meaningful religious life.

To understand these trends and how they are possibly resisted by some religious people in America, I interviewed people and performed non-participant observation from a site where it was reasonable to expect to find transientness and quick-fixes: namely a local campus religious group catering to young people. A useful way of making the above consumeristic trends observable and to gain a different perspective I used photo-elicitation based interviews to question individuals on their use of objects in their religious life. Returning to consumerism, McDannell's work *Material Christianity*

(1995) elucidates the ways in which individuals will purchase (and, in general, use) objects to create a religious identity. Based on this literature, I believe that one should be able to see transientness and quick-fixes as they rapidly purchase new objects to match a new conception of identity and/or believe that the ideas associated with an object will produce happiness quickly. Regardless whether or not I found these trends, one (myself and sociology in general) gains interesting information in the ways that individuals construct their religious identities in a context of consumer-driven market competition.

The results of those interviews produced some unexpected results as I found that neither the individuals nor the congregation displayed tendencies towards quick-fixes and transientness. Rather, many of the objects serve as tools of resistance against these trends helping individuals to create religious identities that helped establish long-term communities and effective long-term problem solving as objects of community and self-reflection. In many ways these objects allowed the participants to feel a sense of wholeness in their religious lives and provided ways to maintain a religious identity despite the problems of everyday life.

IIa. Consuming Religious Objects in a Spiritual Marketplace

Roof's *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999) discusses the massive changes in the nature of religious belief from the 1950s to the beliefs and practices of baby boomers as adults. Many of the aging boomers he spoke with have what he calls "wholeness-hunger" (Roof 1999, 60, 62). The forces of rationalization and differentiation have abstracted religion out of everyday life and relegated it to an institution set aside from other institutions, giving (post)modern life a sense of fragmentation, isolation, and meaninglessness. The term "religion" itself has become associated with this sense of differentiation, with "[t]he language of 'the spiritual' become[ing] a way to express these sentiments outside of the

trappings of traditional religion” (Roof 1999, 47). Roof outlines the ideal-typic identities produced in the specific cultural milieu of the baby boomers, all searching for a sense of wholeness in some way or another.

Whatever else religion may be, in a mediated and consumption-oriented society it becomes a cultural resource broadly available to the masses. Responsibility falls more upon the individual—like that of the bricoleur—to cobble together a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful, (75).

This creates “reflexive spirituality” where people are the agents of their own spiritual formation within or outside of religious communities (75). However, the contexts in which religious identity production occurs, both at the church and cultural level, are important for understanding how individuals assume these identities and the possible limitations to the creative and meaningful “cobbling together” of religious identity.

In the religious marketplace the necessity to acquire a market share results in a proliferation of “instrumentality,” which is “...the practical ways in which belief or practice can meet the perceived needs of individuals resulting in commodification: the turning of religion into a product, something to be sold” (Roof 1999, 69). Most religions in America function in this market, vying for the attention and adherence of individuals by offering material and non-material services such as norms, roles and meaning in a potentially empty consumeristic society (Coleman, 2002). “Suppliers must know their audience and be familiar with and able to reconfigure their religious stories, beliefs, and symbols in ways that capture attention and speak to felt needs” (Roof 1999, 87). In Roof’s interviews he does not deeply investigate the ways that consumption driven market competition may have problematic effects for the message of a religion and how that message is consumed. “Winning” a market share may come at a cost. As Coleman

(p. 148) highlights, markets in general are extremely poor at developing tradition and a sense of lasting confidence. Players in a market must shift to meet the ephemeral demands of the public, producing the most (face value) appealing identities possible and, in doing so, have difficulty creating the very things that many individuals are seeking from religion: stability, lasting community, enduring ways to cope with life's problems, and a sense of wholeness.²

Consumed identities are dropped, bought, changed, exchanged, and rearranged, with all the seriousness of one who is coming to terms with God. However earnest these attempts are, these identities tend to be focus upon *quick-fixes*, which I define as:

- 1) A preponderance of phrases or slogans which emphasize the ease in which one's life is transformed or made better.
- 2) The failure of the aforementioned phrases or slogans and their associated narratives to produce tenable long term solutions to both problems of everyday life and/or ontological or cosmological issues.

The reality of social problems aside, an effective way to bring people into the 'fold' is to promise an easy solution to existential and teleological identity issues, such as a sense of long term purpose, easy to follow guidelines for everyday life, and/or a sense of self-esteem.³ Like fad weight-loss programs (see Griffith 2004 for religious examples), quick-fixes may provide momentary benefits, but I believe that they will fail

² I am avoiding the debate over whether or not post-modern religion is able to produce meaningful identities, rather, I am focusing on the already academically acknowledged deleterious potentialities in a location where one would expect to find them—however, there is a assumption that these trends exist, and they are observable using the methods I utilize.

³ There are two points here. The term "quick-fix" is my term though it is inspired by a conversation with Mary Jo Neitz and *Born Again Bodies* (2004). It is beyond the scope of this study to fully study the ways in which the social problems created by post-modernity are in part exacerbated by these market-oriented religious groups. Even further beyond the scope of this study are the ways in which these problems can be conceived of as being socially constructed *by the groups themselves* therefore creating the necessity for the group (similar to poisoning the well and then selling the cure to the poison).

to provide long term solutions for life's issues. This leads to the second trend, *transientness*. *Transientness* occurs in a variety of ways:

- 1) Transience of location: individuals leave religious groups, narratives, and practices as they are unable to properly explain and/or aid in everyday life⁴
- 2) Transience of identity: the messages of a congregation change rapidly causing the adherent to with equal rapidity consume new articulations of religious identity which may occur within a religion with much greater frequency than the first type (Hunt, 2005 and Roof, 1999).⁵

Transientness becomes apparent in religious adherent's identities as they more or less rapidly discard and acquire new objects/identities. Though the literature speaks of transientness in the sense of just church hopping I am expanding the concept to include rapid refocusing of religious identities within a religious tradition. In these jarring series of transformations (church hopping or identity swapping) there is little satisfaction, for wholeness and community have difficulty developing if the "next-best-thing" mentality is the dominating *modus operandi* of a religious institution.

The above trends can have lasting consequences for a religious movement. As Bartkowski concluded in his study of the Promise Keepers (2004), a reason for their decline was that it simply lost the interest of its adherents: the big hoopla had lost steam. The movement and the identities that it marketed fell under the constraints and limitations of consumerism, which led to its rapid ascension and ultimate downfall. The

⁴ Leaving these groups occurs for a variety of reasons, but here I am focusing on the ways in which a congregation attempts to draw new adherents with "quick-fixes" and other flashy methods ends up lacking the qualities that provide for lasting religious adherents (see Coleman 2002).

⁵ The term "transientness" is my own term however; the concept is from the citations. The ultimate cause of these two varieties of transientness may be radically different. The transientness of a rapidly shifting identity may be caused by shifting trends or fads in personal development, and the rapid exiting of a religion being a result of the inadequacy of the quick-fixes offered by a religious group.

Promise Keepers used popular culture and mass-marketing to spread its message, a message which resounded loudly with many people. However, to be heard and to get new adherents, they used all of the hype and tropes of modern popular culture including sports, anthems and stadiums. In doing so it rendered the movement as a whole dependent on that excitement and good feeling, as well as the identities they were selling. When the enthusiasm inevitably drained away, so did its members. While many men in Bartkowski's study say that their everyday lives were drastically changed by the movement, the tenability of the group as a whole, and most likely the long term consequences of the movement, were cut short by its tactics. However, I believe there is more to the story of the rise and fall of the Promise Keepers. At the time of their fall, the Promise Keepers started preaching a much more explicit and direct self-critical approach to race relations. Bartkowski minimizes the implications of this trend for the movement's downfall. He argues that though promoting self-critical behavior, the organization allowed for many people to easily alleviate guilt, and, with little behavioral change, to move on. In my terms, Bartkowski sees the Promise Keepers' additional focus on race as just a *quick-fix* oriented promise (152).

However, I argue that a probable reason for the Promise Keeper's downfall is a combination of its reliance on hype *and* its new focus on race relations. As many politically interested individuals can attest, racism is, to say the least, difficult for many to talk about, much less solve in five minutes with a hug and tears. The Promise Keepers pledged simple solutions and excitement. When the fix they promised simultaneously undermined the feel-good orientation and was unable to fulfill its promise of a simple resolution to racial issues, members left in droves. This is not to say that the Promise Keepers were flippant partiers solely focused on a "feel-good" religion; rather, the

movement's focus on self-critical introspection that has few short-term rewards *in an environment* that catered to those attracted to hype is a hard long-term sell—especially with continuous pressure to abandon racism. Selling a feel-good “Christian-revitalization” attracts a specific market niche, and changing the mood and focus in this way leads to a “crash” in the good feelings, as well as possibly alienating that group of adherents. While perpetually feeling bad about one's self is part of many marketing ploys, radically changing one's life for an extended period of time through systematic analysis of one's relations with racism is neither easy nor quick. The full extent to which religious groups attempt to pander to the perceived needs of their constituencies and the exact role they play in manufacturing quick-fixes and encouraging transientness is beyond the scope of this study. Yet issues of the marketability of a religion, congregation, or movement cannot be ignored. The literature above indicates that in a spiritual marketplace, quick-fixes and transientness arise (however poorly) to capture adherents. I believe that through the (non)existence of these two trends, one can see the ways that ways that people and religious groups resist or promote consumerism. However, as Hunt (2005) points out, it is difficult to observe the interaction of the market and religion in the everyday lives of people. One way to observe this interaction is to focus on the objects that people use on a daily bases to create and sustain their religious identity.

Iib. Material Christianity

In her section on the history of Christian retailing, McDannell draws attention to the steady movement away from denominationally and theologically focused items to generalized “Christian” products. This alteration is primarily market-driven, as “Christian bookstores survive because they are decidedly ‘Christian’ and not

denominational... Gifts and music producers strive to appeal to a large number of Christians,” (McDannell, 1995, p. 260). To appeal to the widest number of people, religious retailers transform their products and shape them to their vision of demand, thereby optimizing profit as well as the number of people being reached by a Christian message.

In order to sell books to an increasingly pragmatic Christian population, publishers carefully follow secular trends. They know that the average book-buying Christian is focused on family life (especially raising elementary-age children), midlife crisis, dying parents, and marital issues [whose]...concerns are the immediate problems of home, job, and their spiritual lives. Political and social issues, while catching the eye of the media, do not sell as well as life-style and self-help books (260).

Putting aside the critical perspective that highlights how mass marketing undermines the intellectual and cognitive aspects of religion, one can see in the above trends that religious people are consuming religious products for dealing with everyday life rather than “purely spiritual” pursuits. The majority of people who buy products from Christian bookstores are middle-aged women with families (McDannell, 260-4 1995) . The aforementioned products are marketed towards their specific need sets (e.g. raising elementary-age children). Rather than buying books and objects that remove their thoughts from “this-worldly” activities, these women purchase what is salient to their everyday lives. Here, religion and the Divine are not the found in absence of the ‘mundane’ material world; rather, they are *in* that world, and are used for day-to-day necessities and living.

Simple objects such as a note with scripture on it or a bracelet are not “sacred” in the sense that they possess some holiness in and of themselves. They are used in a variety of ways in one’s lived religious experience in a multiplicity of ways that

transcend the strictures of orthodox conceptions of religion. When I buy a WWJD⁶ arm-band I am doing many things—namely, setting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (possibly for multiple groups), reminding myself of how I believe Jesus would behave in an everyday context, imploring others to others ask themselves the same question, possibly being ‘fashionable’, and reinforcing and demonstrating to myself my sense of who I believe myself to be. The above possibilities are just the tip of the metaphorical iceberg in terms of the uses and meanings of these objects. Each additional product offers additional means for describing one’s self to oneself and others. One must consider the ways in which objects serve as both tools for and limitations to identity construction, and the context in which these objects are purchased—namely, a consumer society.

In a consumeristic culture, tendencies toward transiency and quick-fixes mean that products used to construct identity will change as rapidly as the identities, with individuals purchasing their identity for whatever fad that strikes their spiritual fancy and, finding it inadequate, discard the old and purchase the new. This begs the question: for every alteration of religious identity, is there a simultaneous buying frenzy to *complete* the identity/image?

I must highlight that the mass-production of objects does not *necessarily* affect their ability to produce meaning for identity construction. Rather, it is the context of consumerism that shapes the uses of these objects. As McDannell (and many others) notes, there is no inherent meaning in an object. I potentially can convey a multitude of meanings that deeply impact my life with a mass-produced wrist-band just as much as a

⁶ “What Would Jesus Do?”

hand-crafted cross. It is the context in which I purchase and then use these products which makes a consumeristic culture unique.

However, individuals possess the agency to resist the vicissitudes of the market. While consumerism alters, limits, and “hastens” the changes of one’s identities, individuals still actively construct themselves using and adapting the materials at hand (objects or otherwise). One must balance her/his conception of consumerism and influence upon trends in identity construction, with consideration for the ways in which consumers of these identities and products are, in the words of Robert Orsi, “constituted—sembled—by cultural bricolage,” (1997, 7). Consumers are not mindless drones blindly exchanging identity for identity without reflection. We consume ideas from a variety of resources across many subject positions, and resist forms of identity and external tendencies that may lead to dissatisfaction. Nancy Ammerman’s understanding of religious identity as narratively constructed offers an insightful tool for balancing these opposing forces.

Iic. Religious identity as narrative

Narratives offer a complex perspective on the functioning of structure and agency in identity construction. We tell stories about our selves using the available stories from our various intersectional positions. In day to day life, the “top-down” stories associated with one’s race, class, and gender are never totalizing, as “...no situation is rigidly bounded, multiple public narratives are always present, and no institutional field is defined utterly in its own terms” (Ammerman 2005, 215). To greater or lesser extents, we are all “in between dominating or controlling narratives” as “no single story and no single context is an adequate account of an identity” (215). Turning towards understanding religious identity and consumption, consumerism acts as a meta-narrative,

a fast paced romance or action/adventure novel in which the college-aged heroine/hero is guided by her/his feelings trying on a multitude of identities symbolized through objects that purchase along their path to God. The story of the long spiritual quest is as old as spirituality, however, the rapid alteration and emphasis on purchasing objects in this story makes it distinct.

These mighty and/or clever spiritual adventurers may find that their quest is not fulfilled by the quick exchange of identities/objects for new ones, and here they may resist the consumer context, or to use a quote from Orsi's *Thank you, St. Jude*:

But women were not passive consumers of devotions. They engaged their tradition actively: they took objects away from the Shrine in Chicago, for example—its oils, waters, holy cards, prayer books, and above all, its many representations of St. Jude—and used them in ways unforeseen, and often unsanctioned, by the clergy in Chicago. The devout told stories about the saint, and about themselves in relation to him, in their own voices; they spoke to him in their own words, besides saying the published prayers of the Shrine, addressed him with their often secret, barely acknowledged needs. Jude was not imposed on women, in other words, nor did they simply inherit him; they invented him, too. (Orsi 1996, 94).

These devotional objects could never be fully circumscribed within the boundaries of orthodoxy as the women who used them could never fully be constrained by those understandings. Objects in these narratives of identity serve as *props* for these stories by highlighting, possibly directing, and, in various interpretations by the religious adherent, holding meaning and establishing boundaries. While possibly being a part of consumerism (as they were potentially part of self-hating discipline in Orsi's example), objects play a vital role in the construction of religious identity in general and therefore can deeply impact or simply signify one's relation to consumerism. Consequentially, an individual's interaction with objects, especially in a consumeristic context, is an excellent site for understanding the affects of consumerism on identity religious construction. A large group of consumers of religious paraphernalia are white middle-class high-school

and college-aged men and women. Particularly at these ages, individuals are more likely to be in the midst of differentiating themselves from the one they were given by their parents. Consequentially, the products they buy will be most likely pertaining to this process of identity construction and therefore make them ideal candidates for participating in research on objects and identity construction.

Perhaps I over-extend the metaphor, but in terms of objects and religion, individuals often literally try-on an identity and its associated products. One can use Neitz (1987) for a sense of how this process occurs. In her study of Catholic Charismatics, Neitz highlighted the ways in which individuals slowly adopt a religious perspective by testing and slowly adopting the narratives of a religious group. Beyond the beginning stages of religious conversion Neitz's perspective may be extended to understand how an individual purchases an object and adopt the narratives with it they, their relevant groups, and the advertisers place upon it. In doing so, the religious adherent is essentially adding a prop to the story of their religious lives, indicating to themselves and others a way to live that story with and/or through the prop. They question their lives and the meanings therein by slowing purchasing and trying on an identity, literally investing their selves in it. Wearing a WWJD wrist-band, they see how others react to it, and how its message helps, harms and affects their life. Successful adoption of an identity has the objects as being fully integrated into their lives with its perceived narratives and additions to their self-narratives being accepted. One can question how much consumer trends in products *weigh* behavior towards individuals purchasing new religious identities. When WWJD wrist-bands fell out of consumer favor, what happened to the narratives they carried when the object is exchanged for a new solid gold cross—is the meaning and the questions one sees posed in that object

discarded as well? Does the religious adherent no longer question “What would Jesus do?”

Resisting the rapid exchange of identities and products can, in theory, take many forms and will be an interesting site of study. Using Ammerman’s perspective on identity, actors are agential to the extent that their subject positions are at the boundaries of multiple narratives. While a metanarrative, consumerism is not totalizing; there are ways of resisting it through a self-narrative that is more fixed, or demands persistent depth, or is not pleasure-oriented. For example, men who are working-class often focus on moral self-worth rather than material gain as a source of status and dignity (Lamont 2000). While they still purchase the markers of their identity, which is difficult to avoid, working-class individuals do not focus on rapidly “trying on” identities the same way that an individual who can afford such transitions do. While possibly quick-fix oriented, perhaps these working class identities are not as transient. University students come from a large number of social locations (though not as wide as one would hope), and possibly have access to many forms of cultural resistance to the effects of market competition.

My extension of Roof (1999), Hunt (2005), and Colman’s (2002) account of the negative market effects into quick-fixes and transience requires a balanced understanding of the ways that religious adherents can pursuit a meaningful and useful religious autobiographical narrative/life. Tempering the potentially deterministic aspects of my theory, I utilize Neitz (1987) and Ammerman (2003) to understand how individuals potentially can resist these the aforementioned trends and create a sense of wholeness through the use of objects as indicated by McDannell (1995). To study both the ways in which they adopt these identities with objects in the context of consumerism, and resist the effects of consumerism, one needs to be able to be able to invoke the feelings and

memories associated with those objects through a variety of research methods specifically photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002).

III. Methods:

For this research I conducted four non-participant observations over a month of large (roughly 100-150 people) group meetings of a campus non-denominational Evangelical Christian group. During the meetings I focused on the narratives introduced at this level and how individuals at these meetings marked themselves as their religious, and how objects in general are used. My presence and intention to interview people was announced at the beginning of the first session. My major goal in attending these meetings was to get a feel for the institutionally available narratives to aid in developing questions and to inform/gain at least a semblance of translation competency the later interviews. At the first meeting I was able to gain 2 volunteers and then using snowball sampling attain another eight volunteers—with two dropping out because of time constraints, leaving eight participants.

Those individuals who agree to participate were given an index card and disposable camera (see appendix 1), and asked to take pictures of any object regardless of how long it has been owned or what it was, that they felt was related to their religious practice/belief. After a week, I scheduled a semi-structured interview with the participants with questions listed below (see appendix 2) using the photos that the participants took as an elicitation device. In line with what proponents of photo-elicitation have argued (Harper 2002), I was able to get rich data from the participants; especially given that I was attempting to access their interpretations of religious narratives through objects. Without the individuals actually bringing said objects, it

might have been difficult for them to access their thoughts and feelings regarding the object in relation to their everyday (religious) life.

IV. Limitations

There are numerous limitations to my study revolving around six issues, three of which were expected and three unexpected. Regarding the former, there is no comparative, longitudinal, and little macro data. Without these three elements I cannot make any claims to the representativeness of my study (especially beyond the confines of Evangelical Christianity), nor make much in the way of causal attributive statements, especially in regard to the *effects* of consumerism. I can only highlight trends that I see within the study and attempt to get as wide of a cross-section of members (in terms of length of membership) and make use of the strength of this study, namely the site.

The benefit of this location is that group is comprised of youth who are raised in a consumeristic society and the group is attempting to cater to their religious needs. Unlike other religious organizations, it is not attempting to get members who are in young families, or the elderly. Rather, its explicit focus and sole source of members are young, college-going adults—an age group in which individuals are more likely to convert to new religions or recommit to existing beliefs as they have been isolated from or broken existing social networks that may have limited or directed prior affiliation (Putnam, 2000). Without being able to theorize as to *how* frequently transientness would occur (especially as manifest in church hopping), college-age students are in a transitional period and are most likely to demonstrate the processes by which they choose and possibly consume a religious brand. Additionally, because of their unique position of not having a dependent family and being in school, this demographic is normally associated with a strong desire to participate in consumer culture regardless of actual disposable income

(Palmer, Pinto, & Parente, 2001). These factors, the explicit and exclusive focus of the group, an age group associated with advertising, disposable income, and religious change, makes this specific site ideal for at least providing grounding for future research involving objects, consumerism and religious identity construction.

In practice though, there were three unexpected issues. Firstly, the introduction into the group was structured in such a way where I encountered a preponderance of committed and/or long term members. The meetings typically occur in an auditorium in which most of the members typically sit towards the front. The first time I was there, to remain unobtrusive, I sat in the back. However, older members for various reasons sit in back (such as to meet hesitant new-comers), and as such I encountered these individuals first—the members who are extremely committed. My use of snow-ball sampling was problematic because the networks of committed members are likely to be populated by those members who are similarly committed, even if they have not been present for as long. While I was able to attain diversity in the member's length of membership, the level of commitment had little variation. These individuals represented a 'strong case' of religiosity. All but one of the participants plan to be involved with Christianity either as a vocation or an associated job (in six cases they were directly planning to continue working with the group). Consequentially, the scope of my study is limited to exploring consumerism and the production of religious identity with objects in the strong cases of religiosity.⁷ My model of consumerism tends to weigh religious identities towards transientness and focuses on quick fixes. Therefore it was unlikely that highly devoted religious persons would be overly affected by consumerism (assuming that these are

⁷ I did not use a scale to determine religiosity, however, I can gather that plans for religion as a vocation, committed prayer and Bible reading everyday, and frequent attendance to religious groups is sufficient grounds for this claim.

proxy measures of consumerism). Yet the limitations of the sample and the lack of the indicators of consumerism within this specific group do not render the study useless in regards to the study of consumerism and religion. Roof's (1999) argument focuses on individuals whose lack of trust in traditional religion allowed them to transcend institutional boundaries and be "Christian" while also believing in reincarnation and karma. However, because of the restrictions on my sampling method, I encountered only individuals who were dissatisfied with organized religion, though they did not cross into alternative belief systems, instead remaining squarely within the Christian tradition (or subsuming other traditions within it). These individuals therefore provide a unique perspective on religious life in a context of consumerism and the forces of differentiation. As will be covered in more detail in the discussion section, this group provides interesting information as to why transients and quick fixes are *not* present when it was reasonable to hypothesize that it would be.

The second unforeseen limitation is my underestimation of a congregation apart from the group. One participant called this congregation the "take two" of their group, reporting that many of the members of her group also went to this church. Realizing this factor late in the research, I was not able to sufficiently adjust my questions to gauge the role of this church in providing narratives for Christian identity. I was able to glean from the limited information regarding the church that it is Biblically focused and is the site of many small and larger congregational meetings. However, given the importance that three of the eight participants placed upon the group, I cannot discount its role in the participant's construction of religious identity (the three that mentioned it indicated that many of those I interviewed also belonged). Unfortunately I am unaware of the effects of this church upon the group or the participants in specific and therefore cannot speak to

how it may have influenced them; I can merely recommend its inclusion in future studies. The implications of this other group are further reaching than simply an additional site for the construction of identity. The dual affiliation of the group members and this church highlights an assumption in my theorizing about the affects of market-competition on religious identity. Implicit in my understanding of transientness was a sense that participants were monogamous with a congregation. Transientness of location (church hopping) can mean disaffiliation with a specific group, or here an ideologically-linked set of groups. In either case one must consider the whole of an individual's network of affiliations rather than concentrate exclusively on one particular site.

Lastly, I did not account for the ways that religious identity is intertwined with gender. There were many indications from the men and women who participated in the study that their autobiographical narratives were deeply structured by the ways that their faith articulated "proper" gender expression. Gender and consumerism are deeply intertwined, and at the best I can only state that a focus on gender must be included in further studies to see the fullness of consumerism, objects and the construction of gendered religious identity. While there are numerous limitations to the study, which may have reduced its initial scope, it was able to find that despite the potential trends produced by the market, this is a thriving religious community which actively promoted resistance to consumerism and the forces of differentiation.

V. Findings

The results of the photo-elicitation interviews and the non-participant observation found no or limited indications of *transience* or *quick-fixes*. Each of the 8 participants

have been in the group (or one very similar) for a year or more,⁸ and while some (3) did some “church shopping” in the spiritual marketplace, they only briefly did so and decided upon their current group almost unanimously because of its welcoming community-oriented atmosphere. The other participants often choose the group due to the presence of family members in the group upon their arrival in college, or it was the first place they went to. Within their narratives there seemed to be little change besides the typical transformation narrative to Evangelical Christianity. The objects which they choose to take photographs of were normally gifts (especially Bibles) from close family members, reoccurring purchases (indicating their usefulness and use), or of limited use. Further, they did not photograph or speak of purchasing many new objects when they joined the group (save possibly music), indicating that objects of importance to them were not the result of “shopping sprees”.

There was a high degree of consistency in the type of purchases. Participants followed trends of purchasing specific types of journals (mole skin) and portable Bibles (for the durability, portability and texture). However, consumer trends do not equate the negative effects of consumerism. When telling the stories of coming to their current religious disposition, participants mentioned that there were objects they got rid of. Two members discarded newly objectionable CDs, and third got rid of drug paraphernalia. Ultimately, it is nearly impossible to *not*, in some capacity, consume an identity using products. However, in this specific group they did so without deleterious tendencies that myself and other authors have foreseen.

⁸ One participant recently moved, though he picked the current group (and the church mentioned in the limitations section) in part out of its similarity to his home church and welcoming atmosphere.

Based on my non-participant observation and the interviews, the subject-matter of the group held persistent overall themes, with variation depending upon the decisions of the group of interns who were running the program rather than rapidly shifting the actual message (however, there was a great deal of changing spectacle before and after the sermons). The persistent message for my brief observation period was a focus on relational religion and the inability of worldly things (people, places, things) to grant lasting happiness. Interviewees revealed these to be relatively consistent, with the perception of some limited variation over time.

There was no or very limited indication of a quick-fix orientation in either the sermons or in individual narratives. It was often stressed in sermons that it is not simple or quick to be a Christian, and that it is only with long term effort that one gradually finds answers to lives questions. Difficult questions of time management, interpersonal relationships, and a meaningful life were addressed, and, though the solution (a relationship with Jesus) was seemingly simple, there were often statements in the sermons such as “at first I thought it was silly...” and “I still struggle with this everyday...” that indicate an emphasis on long-term work and difficulty. There was no indication in the sermons of a spiritual equivalent to the “5-minute workout” approach of some weight loss programs.

Insofar as quick-fixes are concerned on the level of interviews, it seemed that the individuals were not attracted to nor practiced a simplistic “easy fix” approach to their religious faith. All participants prayed everyday and used the objects to help their problems, express their emotions, and bond with others (to be covered in the next section) in satisfactory ways. The general mentality of the participants was that the group was largely a place for them to worship and build community, helping to make worship an

everyday part of their lives as a part of a long-term belief in the practice and ideals of their faith. As stated before, all participants indicated a hope to either go into vocational ministry or be in a Christian-oriented business. All of the aforementioned factors combined—emphasis on long term problem solving, practical and successful management of everyday problems (indicated via objects), future plans involving the same religious community or at least style of religion, and no rapid purchasing of objects with religious narratives attached to them—indicate that this religious community does not invoke a quick-fix mentality (at least) in its strong members. However, when questioned about other members, there were some indications of both transience and quick-fixes. In one conversation it was mentioned by a participant that there was a high number of new-comers, many of whom leave. Additionally, there were several instances when the topic of materialism and the use of objects was brought up. In these cases, the participants believed that there were some members who bought a considerable amount of objects and put great weight into keeping religiously fashionable. While I have spoken at length on what I did not find, what I did find was a thriving religious community that actively resisted the forces of differentiation and consumerism by utilizing objects of bonding and reflection to create meaningful and enduring religious lives.

VI. Discussion

Due to the limitations of the sample and scope of the study, I can only postulate as to the reasons quick-fixes and transience were not being present. In simplistic terms, the reasons are tautological. Highly religious people simply do not church-hop, nor are they interested in quick-fix religious solutions to everyday life problems because that is the definition of highly religious people. However, the picture is more complicated than simple definitional issues. There are indications in the literature that highly religious

individuals do buy into quick-fix solutions for many problems (Griffith 2004). Being highly devoted in terms of belief and practice does not mean that the solutions offered by the congregation to some of everyday life's problems (e.g. child rearing, weight management, work/home conflicts, work/spiritual conflicts) are satisfactory. Many people persist in general religious faith and belief despite the inadequacy of a particular religious narrative. Further, religious individuals may church (s)hop a great deal if they have difficulty in finding a site of worship that fits their needs.⁹ Consequentially, being highly religious does not necessarily "buffer" one from transience or quick-fix solutions. So the question again arises: why did these particular respondents not have any of these qualities? And for that matter, what is the significance of the group to which they belong in this matter?¹⁰

Transientness can manifest as the ability for a religious adherent to briefly "try on" many identities, thereby enabling them to review and consider many identities and ways of being in order to find one that suits their needs (even if it does so only for a short time). Transience may also manifest as extremely high turn-over rate for individuals who join the group. The second term, quick fix, is an emphasis in the narratives on the simplicity and ease by which one can achieve spiritual, physical, and mental happiness offered by the religious community or in the expectations of the participants. None of the participant's stories fit any description of these terms. In many ways, it seems that objects served the opposite role, maintaining religious identity through the problems of everyday life, thereby being objects of community and self-reflection *fighting against*

⁹ My focus on qualitative interviews on objects mitigated the possibility of these sorts of events providing false-positives to my investigation of consumerism. If I were simply to record the correlation of purchases with new group affiliation I would not know why this occurred.

¹⁰ I only am able to ask this question working under the assumption that these qualities do exist as discussed in the literature review—especially my extension of Roof's assessment (1999).

consumerism and anti-wholeness differentiation (as discussed later). Competition between religious providers and a general atmosphere of consumerism did not produce tendencies towards quick-fixes or transientness, as some of the literature and the site would indicate. As opposed to reacting to the market by producing quick-fix and transient narratives, the group is in part an effective reaction against these qualities, producing an enduring community, identity, and long term solutions to life's problems; therefore catering to the specific needs of its constituency and helping develop strong members.

Every participant in this study had a similar theme in their story of coming to the group; raised religious and in a dense social network, they were socially isolated and/or moved away from their traditional faith upon coming to college. The group offered a particularly open, safe, and community-focused environment where they could renew or grow in their religious lives. The attention to community and the accepting religious environment coupled with the specific needs of the participants makes for an ideal location for these individuals to stay within a single group for an extended period of time and develop long-term solutions to their problems. Describing their first over-all experience coming to the group all individuals who commented on the subject said that they felt welcomed with one individual statement epitomizing this sentiment:

Interviewer: What was it that you did before and after, like...?

Participant: I'm trying to think. Before I was really nervous, I get really nervous about like going into big groups; like when I get there I'm fine, but I just get really intimidated. I don't even remember, it was a really long time ago, but I remember what we did afterwards. Afterwards we went and played ultimate Frisbee on the quad, and it was so much fun and I remember one of my best guy friends to this day, his name is X, I don't know if he's doing this study with you, but he went to throw me the Frisbee, and he went "You! I don't even know your name, catch this!" And like, people were just nice and fun even though they didn't even know who I was, they were just still really nice, I just had a really good time. And I remember afterwards sitting around on the side, like a couple

different people just talking to me and trying to get to know me, like I didn't even have to try to make an effort, which is weird because I'm really outgoing, so I wasn't used to people trying to like pursue trying to get to know me, and afterwards I was like ok, well I'm going to go get my car now, and they were like "Where's your car? We can drive you there; we don't want you to have to walk by yourself," they totally just went out of their way to make sure I was happy and comfortable. I totally felt like this is it, this is where I want to be.

The woman who is quoted above was one of the most enthusiastic about the positive aspects of the community. She felt that the group offered a place where she could be herself and still develop lasting relationships. Her perspective was shared by most of the other respondents.

Objects played an integral part in the group's efforts to provide community against the tendencies toward transientness and quick-fixes. Overall, objects directly move against quick-fixes and transientness by promoting an inner spiritual life whereby the participants analyzed themselves and their life creating a sense of long-term progress and sustained grappling with life's problems (objects of self-reflection). Further, objects contributed to this by aiding in social bonding or reminding the participant of social experiences (objects of community).

Objects of community are objects that are used through practice and given meaning to help the participants establish and reaffirm social bonds that had been broken by/in coming to college. Several participants had dramatic breaks with their original religious identity and some of the people associated with it, such as losing long-term platonic and romantic relationships. Some of the participants underwent a period of drug or alcohol experimentation which they report to have found extremely unsatisfying. As mentioned before, the general openness and attempts at establishing friendships with the participants when first going to the group was a major reason they decided to continue going to the group. However,

maintaining “community” is a dynamic process and requires constant maintenance to sustain. Many of the objects participants used, such as a guitar and the music to which it is inextricably bound, functioned in a variety of ways to help *do* community, both interpersonally and internally.

Interviewer: Cool. So in this picture you were singing, what was it you were singing?

Participant: We were singing worship songs, I don’t quite remember what song this was we were singing but we were doing praise and worship right before we were doing a long devotional from our speaker at our retreat.

Interviewer: What do those songs do for you, what do they...?

Participant: Sometimes I feel like my spirit worships God during worship music, sometimes I don’t, it’s not always the same, no two worshipping experiences are the same. I feel like God chooses to speak in different ways. I wish I could remember what song we were singing that night. It’s really good to worship all together, even though I don’t do it as much, I don’t have as easy a time in a corporate setting, with this it’s a little different because there were only like 30 girls here and it was kind of quiet, just a guitar, you know, it was still small enough that I wasn’t distracted. I don’t know, it’s so hard to describe a worship experience. Like my soul just feels light and they call it being spirit-filled, like I just feel like the holy spirit on me like my whole soul feels light and I’m at rest and at peace and a joy, but not the kind of joy where I want to run around and scream, but the kind of joy where you want to run around happy, but the kind of joy where you just sit down and are content. Like, that’s what I feel when I worship. It’s hard to describe...

When the participant comes together with her friends and other group members, she is connecting her community, the experience of her faith (joy), and her sense of self together to form a coherent network of ideals and people that provide for her religious needs. In forming a community, transientness and quick-fixes as marketing ploys and ways of living are reduced, though a quick-fix mentality is especially undermined through the use of objects of self-reflection that promote contemplation and long-term planning/solutions to the struggles of everyday life.

Participant: This was my last picture. I was like, I can't take pictures of the tools of my religion without taking a picture of these. This is my book and my bible, my notebook and my bible, and I take notes on sermons, I take notes on what I'm thinking, I write down prayers, I write down bible verses that I think are cool, I just generally kind of draw my thoughts out into this book. I don't know, it's been good for me to be able to look back and see the progression of my prayers being answered, the progression of my thoughts kind of changing, the progression of like Bible verses that I can kind of see where I'm doing well at, things I've thought that I should do better and I still haven't done better...

This woman's relationship with her journal is exemplary of the tendencies of the participant's use of their journals. Her and the other participant's daily use of their journals functions to move their lives away from quick-fixes by providing a sense of time, progress, needs, and critical reassessment of their lives (in conjunction with the Bible). These are vital needs in a society which stresses fast-passed, Hollywood block-buster, America's Next Top Model senses of self, all with the associated life-style purchases. Having a meaningful long term religious life requires more than simple "3 easy step" solutions to spiritual needs. These objects of community and self-reflection help one tell the story of her/his life (to themselves and others) in ways that can produce sustainable identities and meaningful relationships (which also sustain the identities). However, beyond struggling against consumerism, these objects assist in maintaining a religious narrative that is constantly under siege by both the problems of everyday life and the fundamental disintegration of (post)modern life.

The community enlisted objects and members to produce a sense of totality and unified experience filling the lack of wholeness that the hyper-differentiated world produces. One participant highlighted these factors in her narration of coming to Evangelical Christianity:

Interviewer: So like can you tell me about that transition?

Participant: Like I said, in high school I was a Christian, and I went to church and I read my Bible sometimes, and it was just a part of my life, that I would check off, like “ok I prayed today,” or “ok, I went to church” but the rest of my life was just whatever I wanted to do, it was about me or whatever. And then when I came to college and I got involved in [the group] and kind of started changing my view of God a little but, just being involved in that ministry. And it was really hard coming to college, and like leaving my family and leaving high school was really tough for me, like that whole transition.

Interviewer: You said before that you were very connected to your family?

Participant: Yeah yeah, and um, I’m really close with my family, so leaving them was really hard, and I just had a hard first semester at school, trying to work through all that, and everything, I remember I was with one of my friends one night, and I was really upset cause I was really homesick, and I didn’t feel like I fit in here, at school, I just couldn’t you know, I was just really upset, and we started talking, and we, she was a Christian too, and we started talking about our faith, and she started talking about her faith and she had me draw this, and she drew a circle, like a pie graph, and she had me write down in the pieces of the pie, everything that was important in my life, so I said, my family, and my friends and God, and [the group]. And all the different things, and then she took a pen and she scratched out the God little section and then she put a G in front of the circle and a D after it, and she said you have to take God out of your life and make him your life, so just take him out, like he’s not just a part of your life he’s not just one little sliver out of everything that’s important like, he is everything else, everything else is within God. and so that was like, that’s really I think the turning point in my life, like making that mental, or that, pictorial transition I guess.

The group maintains that God cannot be a part of someone’s life, but must instead be the ultimate foundation of one’s existence. Objects of community and reflection allow an attempt at harmonizing the plurality of experience under a single explanatory rubric (especially the journals held by 6 of 8 of the participants) thereby providing a unity of experience. This orientation is an extension of Roof and Orsi’s conception of *bricolage*. Rather than just indicating individuals piecing together a religious identity from disparate places and locations into a religious identity, I extend *bricolage* in this study to include the ways in which individuals creatively homogenize disparate experience within a larger story. These group of participants seek to find God not just in a church, but in their everyday lives, thereby resisting the impact of differentiation even to the extent of

rejecting the term religion in exchange for less institutionally bound (and therefore more integrated) articulations of their faith. Quick-fixes and transientness are exclusive of a sense of wholeness as individuals cannot hope for a unity of existence if they are bouncing around from one failed religious narrative to the next. Yet, resisting forces of differentiation and market driven consumerism do not cover the width and breadth of object's role in religious life. Imperative to the desired unity of experience of wholeness seeking is the ability of religious adherents to maintain their autobiographical religious narrative in the face of everyday life which put the ideals and stories of a religion to perpetual test.

Neitz's (1987) perspective on conversion offers an interesting way to look at the way objects play in identity construction. In a step-by-step (thin)-rational¹¹ fashion, individuals move towards religious conversion and religious group affiliation. New attendees "try on" various interpretive structures and attributive narratives to negotiate their day-to-day ordeals. Finding that these structures work for them and can adequately explain their everyday lives, they adopt, to some degree, the group and its ontological and cosmological beliefs. Yet these stories are never totalizing, as per the intersectional nature of subject positioning highlighted by Ammerman (2003), and are constantly assailed by the slings and arrows of everyday life.¹² Autobiographical narratives and the identities associated with them require constant maintenance to provide explanations and practices for coping with problems and expressing emotions; to fail to provide answers to problems is a potential failure of the religious system and may cause doubts.

¹¹ "Thin" in this context is to distinguish from strong rationality. Thin rationality is the process in which an individual makes self-interested semi-calculatory decisions.

¹² It is interesting to note that Ammerman's insight multiple subject positions and is both a potential way of resisting dominating narratives and a problem to be solved if a lack of wholeness is an overriding pressure.

Objects function in this process in a unique way. For individuals who are already part of a religious community, objects often are attached to these interpretive structures and attributive narratives and in doing so serve to help maintain the adherent's religious identity. Some function as reminders of various important aspects of one's religious life, such as community or a belief in God's totalizing plan for them. Regardless of the specific meaning or use of an object, it reaffirms one's sense of self as a Christian.

Interviewer: Change of pace. Let's say at some point in the future you have a house, and you're fairly well to do, not overtly, and you, how would you incorporate religion into that house? What would make it a space that you would feel comfortable in your faith?

Participant: If I was really good at this. Something my mom does, she gets note cards and she'll write Bible verses and different scriptures, on the bathroom mirror, or door posts so that you're constantly being filled with the word and seeing God's promises and stuff. So I guess if I was really smart I would do that, I would start putting those kind of verses around. I would probably have a room set aside my time of worship, my time where I'm going to meet with God, playing on my Guitar. And a place where I have most of my books, were I can delve into study, like religious or secular study whatever it is study. And then yeah, kind of like with my pictures and stuff, I've had different things, of places I've been and things done regarding my religion my faith. More of that, probably, the [place of charity work] pictures, and [other country visited].

The participant wants to create a space where he is constantly reminded of his faith, with specific spaces for more intense religious reflection. He also wants to surround himself with pictures and memorabilia of places he has visited on mission trips. With each picture, each Bible passage, and each corresponding story the consistent telling and retelling of these stories keeps the religious autobiographical narrative salient and helps it serve as maintaining a holistic religious worldview. Objects can serve as a nexus point connecting their sense of self, God's plan in the world, their struggles, and a way to express emotions. Take for instance the ribbon around the wrists of two participants (including the one directly above). This ribbon was given to the participant while she did charity clean up work in city affected by a disaster, to indicate to security that they were

not looters. The ribbon helped her recall an emphasis on acting from faith (not for the sake of the rewards of acting) because their faith demands of them to be charitable.

When looking at the ribbon, she recalled her experiences in the city her group visited, and in doing so she is describing to herself as a Christian who acts out of faith not seeking rewards—simultaneously reaffirming their identity as Christians, and understanding her lived experiences from a Christian interpretive framework.

Additionally, one of the participants attached special significance in that a self-described “piece of ribbon” could last stay on their wrist for many months and through as many physically rough ordeals. The durability of the object was integral to it being considered important to the participant, attaching an enduring memory with an enduring object. However, the importance of these points is that the memories attached to the semi-permanently attached bracelet and its physical durability *both* help to reaffirm the participant’s identity through a host of connections related to her story of the charity work. It is the subject’s definitions of self that is being perpetuated by the telling and retelling of these properties to their self’s and others. The objects communicate to them an understanding of self, because they have attached specific memories and a meaningful physical quality to it, which include themselves and their actions, thereby further intertwining themselves in their religious narrative. Yet, as objects of community (by no means exclusive of these objects), these objects do not exist solely in the minds of their owners. They are often viewable and often on the body of the wearer; they exist in intersubjective space allowing for multiple interpretations and reactions. These reactions can be an inextricable element of the objects use and meaning to the owner.

When others react positively or negatively to an object, it can draw the memories held by the object to owner’s mind. Even cases of negative reaction to the object

promoted their conception of religious self. Participants responded to negative perspectives by ignoring critiques or defending its place on their body due to the importance of the story and the object relative to that same story. Returning to the ribbon around several of the respondent's wrist, the participant's interaction with another person (even negative) helps reinforce the identity and narrative of her religious self.

Participant: Yeah, I think about it a lot, I think it's really cool that it hasn't fallen off yet, cause its like, I don't know I worked in, I wore this for an entire summer, where I did dishes and worked in the kitchen, like hot soapy water, and I've taken however many showers I take in a year, it hasn't come off, I've played sports in it, I've I don't take it off, I haven't taken it off for weddings, which is kind of funny but...I think about it a lot.

Interviewer: Why is it kind of funny?

Participant: That you didn't take it off for weddings, like my brother said something to me, cause, like it's kind of beat up, it's not really like pretty, so you know, I guess he thought I should take it off, because I was getting dressed up, but I don't want to, so I leave it on.

Interviewer: Why don't you want to take it off?

Participant: Umm, I think going to [place of service trip], was really a really awesome experience for me, like putting my faith into action, and like helping people and like calling myself a Christian and helping people because of that, because I want people to know about God and know about Jesus, that's just a big part of my faith too, is I know it's not my faith, I know my faith isn't based on the actions I do, but because of my faith, I want to help people and do, and go and help people that are in need, and it's really just representative of that, and just like I love, I really love that city, and I really love going down to help.

[later on]

Interviewer: Cool, so that what does that bracelet make you think of, when you reflect on it.

Participant: Yeah, well I usually don't, I don't know, it was kind of cool just to tell you all that because I haven't really thought in a while about all of that, like about what it really makes me think of. But I guess, on first glance I just think "ooh [place the participant went to]" and I want, I wished it were you know something, that when I looked at it, I would pray for them, like it would be my reminder to pray for them. I think I could make it into that, but a lot of times, I just look t it and I think, ooh, or I think of the trip that we took, that was fun, with all of my friends and everything.

The object is associated with the faith that she believes in, memories, practices, and people. The interaction with her brother, and myself (the interviewer) reaffirms these linkages providing the substance of her autobiographical narrative even when the participant herself had let the memory fade. The object connects her with the friends in the religious group she went with and at points of interaction on the basis of the object, it renders a whole series of other meanings more salient.

Objects' role in the work of maintaining a religious narrative becomes most salient in how they aid in dealing with stress, expressing emotions, and (previously mentioned) community bonding. An interesting common "object" that worked for these purposes was music and musical instruments.

Interviewer: Here is your guitar, you've mentioned your guitar before, what does this mean to you?

Participant: That's just kind of like, my, that's like, my closest instrument, feeling God kind of think. You know what I mean, you know there is prayer and stuff, and I'm definitely a fan of prayer, but being able to play my guitar and commune with God, that's like my greatest time of Worship.

[later on in the interview]

Interviewer: Awesome, um, see here, so you said that you feel God, in communion with. Good, can you give me examples of when you use it though?

Participant: Yeah like, do you mean time of day or situation?

Interviewer: Time of day or situation

Participant: Ok, time of day, usually in the afternoon say like whenever I get done with class, a lot of times when I'm just starting to feel overwhelmed, and man this is really hard, most of the time when I'm feeling overwhelmed, and this semesters been a lot, I'll just go and play on the guitar for half and hour.

There are multiple components to these sections; music and necessarily the practice of playing the instrument function both as a specifically powerful form of worship, but also in helping to alleviate the common everyday stresses of college-student

life. The guitar again comes to play an important role in participant's religious identities. Through its use they are able to come to provide a religiously bound solution to problems, thereby providing a sense of wholeness while maintaining through practice the story of being Christian.

VII. Conclusions

I have discussed a fraction the of ways that objects are used in religious life. They are an essential element in resisting quick-fixes and transientness by (re)produce community and aiding quiet self-reflection. Objects also play a role sustaining a religious autobiographical narrative and providing a sense of wholeness. Through *bricolage*, the participants reconfigured seemingly incongruent elements of their lives into a more unified story and identity, thereby establishing a sense of wholeness in the socially chaotic and isolating landscape of a college campus. In the site (college campuses) where one could expect transientness and quick-fixes, these anticipated trends were conspicuously absent from the lives of the participants. The group was able to provide for the needs of its constituency without having to resort to superficial practices that may have led to dissatisfaction. To an extent, individuals purchased their religious identity through products that were religiously affiliated, in part because of consumer trends. However, they also used the objects in meaningful long-term ways to help produce their sense of religious identity. It is nearly impossible to *not* purchase aspects one's identity, narrating the self to one's self in purchased bits and pieces. Ultimately, to investigate consumerism one must attempt to get a wider diversity of members and somehow find individuals who are very new, have left, or are less integrated into the group. The limitations of my sample precluded the possibility of encountering or interviewing these sorts of individuals and without speaking to them, I cannot hope to (in)validate my claims

about the forces of the market on religious identity for Evangelical Christians. The brand of Christianity practiced by the participants in this study was 'sold' to them, but it was not a fad devoid of long-term solutions or meaningful identities. Here, faith branded is not necessarily faith lost; it is merely a different (and effective) way of doing business.

Appendix 1: Note Card

Hello and thank you for participating! Here are the instructions:

- 1) Take pictures of everything you use in your religious life--this can be anything from a guitar, CD, or napkin.
- 2) You have 1 week to use as many of the 24 pictures in the camera as you like.
- 3) When you are done, please meet me at services or call me at the number below to return the camera for the development of the pictures.
- 4) When the pictures are developed I will schedule an interview with you regarding your thoughts and feelings on the pictures and your religious experience in general.
- 5) There will be no monetary charge to you at any point in this process—including development, and the cameras are yours to use at no charge.
- 6) If at any time you do not want to participate you are free to withhold the camera and any pictures therein, or upon development, you may ask me to not look at and dispose of any pictures taken by you.
- 7) Feel free to call or email me at any time at 573-529-3635 or tjj9q3@mizzou.edu with any questions you might have.

Appendix 2: Tentative, open ended questions –in practice, the photo-elicitation section came first. It ultimately answered many of the questions here, rendering them redundant.

- 1) What religion/denomination (if any) where you raised in?
- 2) How did that work out for you?
- 3) How did you find yourself going to your current group?
- 4) What were your thoughts at the time?
- 5) Did you hesitate at all?
- 6) Is there any person(s) who was involved with going? If so, how?
- 7) How did your family react?
- 8) How have things in the group changed since you first started coming?
- 9) Could you describe the story of how you came to see yourself as a Christian?

- 10) If you were to be asked to tell the story of your religious life thus far, what would you say?
- 11) Where do you see yourself in terms of your religion in a few years?
- 12) What was your first time coming to this group like?
- 13) Do you remember what you did after and before that service?
- 14) How would you describe a typical large service? Small group service?
- 15) What do you enjoy about each service?
- 16) Is there anything you would change about either of these?
- 17) Are there any particular services that you attended that stand out in your mind?

Photo-elicitation element: each picture will have the following questions, (subject to change depending upon the object, and its relation to other objects)

- 18) How did you get the object in the picture?
- 19) What propelled you to buy it? Or, what convinced whoever got it for you?
- 20) When do you wear it?
- 21) What does it mean to you?
- 22) How long have you had them/it? Or, when did you get it?
- 23) Do you have friends, church going or not, that own anything similar to what you own?
- 24) How does it make you feel to have and/or wear and/or use it (if at all)?
- 25) Can you give me examples from your life when you found it important to you and the situation surrounding it?
- 26) Why do you own, wear, or use it?
- 27) What do you feel that people think of that?
- 28) Is there anything you've had your eye on or were planning to buy?
- 29) After you started going to church X, is there anything you got rid of or just stopped wearing/using?
- 30) If so, why?
- 31) How did you do so? When?
- 32) Imagine, in the future, that you have your own house, and you are reasonably well off, how would you incorporate religious objects into your home, to create a good space for you?

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