

Article

The Enlightened Self: Identity and Aspiration in Two Communities of Practice

Erin Johnston

Thinking Matters Postdoctoral Fellow, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA 94305, USA;
efjohnston@stanford.edu; Tel.: +1-201-572-7915

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Abstract: Existing research on religious identity, especially from a narrative perspective, has tended to focus either on accounts of the past (especially occasions of religious change) or on conceptions of religious identity in the present. Religious communities, however, not only provide a sense of identity and belonging in the present—as a “Catholic” or “Buddhist,” for example—they also promote a particular vision of the religious ideal: The way of being-in-the-world that all adherents are (or ought to be) striving to achieve. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews, this paper describes and analyzes the identity and lifestyle goals of participants in two communities of practice: An Integral Yoga studio and a Catholic prayer house. I find that the ideal spiritual self in both communities is defined by three key characteristics: A sacred gaze, a simultaneous sense of presence and detachment, and a holistic style of identity management. I suggest that in constructing and transmitting a shared vision of the “enlightened self,” these organizations offer practitioners a highly desirable but ever-elusive *aspirational identity*. This study calls attention to religious organizations as important suppliers of possible identities—the identities, either desired and feared, we think we could or might become in the future—and reveals the situated and contextual nature of adherents’ religious aspirations.

Keywords: religious identity; possible identities; future selves; narrative identity; aspirations

1. Introduction

“In each kind of self, material, social and spiritual, men distinguish between the immediate and the actual and the remote and the potential”

—William James ([1], p. 200).

While it has been suggested that modern individuals are more like tourists and vagabonds rather than pilgrims with a sense of destination [2], my research in two communities of spiritual practice—an Integral Yoga studio and a Catholic spiritual center—suggests otherwise. Participants at both sites felt their involvement in these communities not only helped them acquire a sense of who they are (in the present), but also provided a clearer sense of who they want to become (in the future). Julia, for example, told me that her participation in a 200-hour teacher training program offered through the Integral Yoga Institute (IYI) changed “how I view the world, how I view myself, and who I want to be.” As William James suggests in the epigraph above, Julia distinguished between her present self and a desired future self—the kind of person she hoped to become.

These communities not only encourage practitioners to regard themselves as “yogis” and “Contemplative Catholics,” but also to view themselves as *aspirants*: People “earnestly desirous of becoming a certain kind of person, and consciously and continuously in pursuit of that goal” ([3], p. 355; [4,5]). However, what exactly are practitioners, like Julia, aspiring to? Drawing on fieldwork and interviews, I argue that these communities provide a shared conception of the ideal spiritual self: the way of being that practitioners are (or ought to be) striving to embody. In the findings, I describe three key

characteristics that mark this collective ideal: A sacred gaze, a simultaneous sense of presence and detachment, and a holistic style of identity management. In constructing and transmitting a shared vision of the “enlightened self,” I argue that these organizations offer practitioners a highly desirable yet elusive (and ultimately unattainable) *aspirational identity* [3].

This paper makes several important contributions. First, integrating theoretical work on narrative identity [6–8] and recent work on aspirational identities [3], I draw attention to the future-oriented nature of many religious identities, and outline a set of theoretical and conceptual tools for investigating the structure, content, and consequences of adherents’ shared aspirations. In doing so, I highlight aspirational identities as an important means through which religious communities shape individual experience and action. Second, drawing from a multiyear ethnographic study of two communities, I demonstrate how religious organizations actively shape the identity goals of their members, revealing the situated and contextual nature of religious aspirations. Finally, this study calls attention to religion and religious communities as an important source of individuals’ *possible identities*—the “positive and negative identities one might hold in the future” ([9], p. 117)—one that has been overlooked in existing psychological research.

Religion, Narrative, and Aspirational Identities

In recent decades, changes in the social and religious landscape—including the expansion of available options and shifting boundaries of identification [10,11]—have fueled interest in the topic of religious identity (see [12,13] for overviews of existing research and calls for more research). How, scholars ask, do individuals construct and maintain a coherent sense of self given the growth and increasing complexity of the contemporary “spiritual marketplace” [11]? How do people integrate their religious identities with other, often competing, social roles and group memberships? Recent reviews have advocated for a narrative approach, suggesting that this perspective can help illuminate how individuals resolve the tensions and complexities associated with identification and meaning in modern social life [12,13]. Narrative identity theorists [6–8] view the self as a reflexively organized and ongoing project defined by the ability to “keep a particular narrative going” ([14], p. 54). Individuals’ self-stories, it is argued, help to locate the individual in both time and space [8], providing structure and coherence to complex and changing individual lives. Storytelling and narration then are considered acts of self-formation, practices in and through which individuals construct and maintain their identities. Moreover, these narratives, while personally meaningful, are drawn from available cultural resources: the plot lines, metaphors, and underlying grammar made available in different social and cultural contexts [8].

While a narrative perspective on religious identity is becoming increasingly prominent, existing work has focused primarily on accounts of the past (especially religious change) or on discussions of religious identity in the present. Existing work on religious conversion, for example, focuses on how religious adherents integrate past affiliations and the conversion experience itself into a coherent and continuous self-story. Narratives have been shown to play a role in both accounting for and in accomplishing religious change [15,16]. Other studies have shown how individuals’ self-stories are shaped by conventional patterns of telling the story of conversion in their new religious communities [17–19]. More recently, scholars have focused on how individuals understand and describe their religious identities in the present [20,21]. Cadge and Davidman [20], for example, find that both Jewish and Buddhist Americans tell stories which construct their religious identities as simultaneously ascribed (given at birth) and achieved (the result of personal effort and active engagement).

One key element of narrative theory, however, remains underemphasized in existing research: narratives not only “emplot” the past and present—integrating events and experiences into a coherent storyline—but also project forward into the future, suggesting where the storyteller is heading. In fact, the self is defined, from a narrative perspective, as a “working theory of who one is, was, and will become” ([9], p. 117), which includes not only “a selective reconstruction of the autobiographical

past” but also a “narrative anticipation of the imagined future” ([6], p. 99). A coherent sense of self, then, requires not only an account of “how we have become” but also of “where we are going” ([22], p. 47). A sense of direction and destination is consequential. Starting in the works of Mead [23] and Cooley [24], scholars of identity have suggested that imagined futures inform and shape current self-understanding and individual action just as much as the past. As Bauman writes, “Destination, the set purpose of life’s pilgrimage, gives form to the formless, makes a whole out of the fragmentary, lends continuity to the episodic” ([2], p. 22).

Previous work on conversion has clearly demonstrated that the collective identity of the group can provide a sense of destination for novices and newcomers. Religious groups promote a shared understanding of what it means to be a member of the community—the practices, attitudes, and values that define, for example, what it means to be a “Christian” or an “Orthodox Jew”—and existing members serve as prototypical models or templates during the process of initiation and socialization [25–27]. Often, people enter religious communities because of their admiration for existing members and community leaders, driven in part by a desire to emulate their lives.¹ However, in this paper, I aim to make an analytical distinction between the process of initiation—through which individuals become members of the group, adopting an identity as “yogis” or “Catholics,” for example—and the ongoing process of spiritual formation—akin to a process of divinization in these communities—that is expected of all practitioners, even the most experienced.

In many religious communities, spiritual formation is considered a continuous and ongoing process [11], and the religious ideal remains an ever-elusive goal for the vast majority of members [4,5]. This requires that we distinguish between the social and aspirational identities provided by religious communities: in other words, being a “yogi” is not the same thing as being “enlightened.” Rather, membership in many religious communities is defined, at least in part, by the continuous pursuit of an ideal that is considered unattainable, at least in this lifetime. Armato and Margislio, for example, find that members of the “Promise Keepers,” an evangelical Christian movement for men, “have undertaken a *continuous* project of gender identity work to become godly men” ([28], p. 41). Like those in the communities that form the basis of this paper, the Promise Keepers encourage adherents to view spiritual formation as a “never-ending, life-long process” ([28], p. 44). Likewise, in the organizations I studied, spiritual persons—yogis and contemplatives—were marked by their continuous and concerted efforts to move closer and closer to “Enlightenment” (or “Christ-consciousness”).

Despite the fact that many religious communities likely encourage adherents to view themselves as aspirants, the content of these aspirational identities, the means through which they are transmitted, as well as their consequences have not been explicitly examined. In this paper, I analyze what precisely teachers and texts in these communities encourage their members to aspire to. In the results section, I describe the content and structure of the ideal spiritual self—what I refer to as the “enlightened self”—constructed and transmitted in these two communities. In the discussion section, I argue that the enlightened self is best understood as an *aspirational identity*, an important and analytically distinct component of the practitioners’ religious identities.

2. Data and Methods

The findings outlined below come from a larger ethnographic study examining the process of spiritual formation in two communities of practice: a yoga studio and a Catholic spiritual center. Trinity Prayer House, run by a Sister of Saint Joseph (Sister Nancy) and partially funded by the local diocese, teaches a contemplative approach to religious life. Many of the classes, workshops, and retreats offered at Trinity engage the practice of Centering Prayer. In this form of silent prayer,

¹ “As at the modern Orthodox synagogue, an attractive feature of the Hasidic community was that it provided numerous models of caring nuclear families and affirmed the value of family . . . The women expressed enormous admiration for the families they met within the religious community and saw them as prototypes for the families they would like to create” ([25], p. 120).

the individual sits comfortably in a chair or on the floor, with his eyes closed for a period of at least 20 minutes. The practitioner is encouraged to focus on “God’s presence and action within in,” and, like mindfulness practices, to simply watch his thoughts and feelings but not become engaged in them. Sister Nancy was certified to teach classes on Centering Prayer by *Contemplative Outreach*—an international organization founded by Father Thomas Keating—and she regularly used resources (handouts, books, and DVDs) provided by the organization in doing so. Because of my interest in the role of practice in spiritual formation, my fieldwork at Trinity focused primarily on classes and workshops that actively engaged in and discussed the practice of Centering Prayer. This included participation in the “Intern Program” for those who desired to become Spiritual Directors.²

Programs at Trinity ranged in cost from as little as \$10 for a one-time workshop to upwards of \$250 for a year-long series.³ Attendance ranged from as few as five to as many as forty participants. In the programs I attended, participants were almost entirely white. I observed only a handful of racial and ethnic minorities, mostly commonly East Asian, Latino, and black participants, during my fieldwork. The majority of attendees were well-educated and were employed (or formerly employed) in professional jobs, such as teachers or nurses. The overwhelming majority of participants were women, and most appeared between 40 and 70 years of age.

The IYI, or Integral Yoga Institute, is affiliated with the broader Integral Yoga tradition developed by Sri Swami Satchidananda. Satchidananda, a disciple of Swami Sivananda, came to the US from India in the 1960s. He led yoga classes, founded an ashram, and was active in the interfaith movement until his death in 2002. The Institute at which I conducted my research was directed by a disciple of Satchidananda (Aadesh). The IYI offers classes and training programs in many aspects of yogic practice and theory. Hatha Yoga classes, however, are the most common, with 2–4 classes offered each day, seven days a week. The average Integral Yoga Hatha practice includes call-and-response chanting in Sanskrit, a series of *asanas* (physical postures), a deep relaxation called *yoga nidra* (yogic sleep), *pranayama* (breathing practices), *mantra japa* (mantra repetition), and a period of silent meditation. In addition to hatha classes, the studio also offered a weekly Bhagavad Gita (a Hindu scripture) study group, as well as a monthly Raja Yoga and Kirtan classes. My fieldwork at the IYI included participant observation at a broad range of classes and workshops, as well as participation in the 200-hour yoga teacher training program that took place between May and August of 2012.

A monthly membership to the IYI cost \$60–\$70 per month at the time of my fieldwork. A single class or workshop ranged between \$10 and \$25.⁴ Attendance at classes and workshops ranged widely from as few as two to as many as thirty students per class. During my observation period, class participants were predominantly white (approximately two-thirds), with the majority of remaining participants appearing to be of South Asian or East Asian descent. As was the case at Trinity, the gender composition was disproportionately female: Women comprised approximately three-quarters of participants in any given class. Most attendees appeared to be between 30 and 60 years of age.

Data collection for this study included participant observation, review and analysis of assigned texts, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with instructors and practitioners, and a period of participatory immersion. I conducted fieldwork between January 2012 and May 2014. Rather than attending classes at the two organizations simultaneously, I spent 12–15 months focused on each organization in turn. During this period, I spent more than 200 hours in formal classes and training programs at each site, in addition to observing informal interactions among practitioners before and after classes, and at social gatherings in participants’ homes. I was an active participant in all of the

² Spiritual direction is “help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship” ([29], p. 8).

³ The year-long series met once per month for 2–5 hours per session between the months of September and May, for a total of 9–10 sessions. A few classes and workshops were offered “by donation.”

⁴ These prices were significantly below comparable studios in the area. This is due in part to the fact that the IYI was registered as a not-for-profit community organization, while the vast majority of yoga studios are for-profit businesses.

classes I attended. I practiced alongside others, read the assigned material, completed and submitted written assignments, and participated in collective discussions. I was treated by others, including teachers, as a fellow student although I had no affiliation with or involvement in either community prior to or after the period of my fieldwork.⁵ During the yoga teacher training program, I was given permission to audio-record class meetings, resulting in more than 80 hours of recorded interaction. In all other cases, I took notes during classes whenever possible, and wrote more detailed field notes immediately following my time in the field.

In order to get a better sense of practitioners' experiences and interpretations, I also conducted in-depth interviews with 60 teachers and students: 35 Centering Prayer and 25 Integral Yoga practitioners. Interviews were open-ended—seeking to elicit stories and narratives—but clearly structured around several key themes. I asked practitioners about their religious and spiritual backgrounds, how they first came to the practice and organization, how their practice has developed over time, as well as their reflections on religion and spirituality, more broadly. The shortest interview was 45-minutes and the longest more than 2 hours. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. In addition, I attempted to maintain each practice (Centering Prayer and Hatha Yoga), respectively, for a period of at least one month. During this time, I kept a detailed log of my practice, as well as notes on my experiences, reflections, and observations.

Located just 35 miles apart, Trinity Prayer House and the IYI are both situated in suburban areas within commuting distance of New York City. Despite being rooted in very different religious traditions (Catholicism and Hinduism, respectively), both organizations are dedicated to facilitating the spiritual formation of their members. At Trinity, the ultimate goal of Centering Prayer was said to be “a transformation of consciousness, perception and attention,” leading ultimately to divine union and “Christ-consciousness.” At the IYI, the goal of practice was said to be “Self-Realization” through the cultivation of “Cosmic Consciousness.” At both sites then spiritual formation was considered akin to a process of divinization: Through dedicated and disciplined practice, practitioners sought to uncover and reveal their truest, most authentic (and divine) self. Through fieldwork and interviews, I found that teachers and texts at both sites transmitted a shared understanding of what characteristics and dispositions marked the “enlightened self” practitioners were seeking to cultivate. Below, I describe and analyze three key features of this idealized spiritual self.

3. Results: The Enlightened Self

Sister Nancy began nearly every program, workshop, and group meeting at Trinity with a short prayer. She would quiet everyone down and then sit, with her eyes closed, and reflect for a few moments on the topics we would cover that day. These statements often explicitly referenced what she assumed were participants' motivations for attending. One day, for example, she told us: “I know what you want. [. . .] You want to find that place within yourself where you and God are one. You strive to never leave the temple and to live from that place.” While the descriptions Sister Nancy offered of participants' motivations and desires were always somewhat different, her statements helped articulate key aspects of the kind of life practitioners were (or ought to be) striving to achieve, illustrating the role that she, Trinity, and these classes play in shaping practitioners' future aspirations. Her reflections suggested, more or less explicitly, that a particular set of motivations

⁵ I began my fieldwork in both organizations with only a very basic understanding of the communities and their requisite beliefs and practices. While I had no prior affiliation with either group, my religious background (I was raised non-religiously), prior experience with the practice of yoga (although not in the IY tradition), and the diversity of religious backgrounds among participants, led me to feel more comfortable with the culture, practices, and discourse at the IYI. At Trinity, I felt more like an “outsider” (the overwhelming majority of participants were Catholic), although this feeling subsided substantially over time. Given my attendance at the majority of classes and workshops, I came to be seen as and treated by many as Sister Nancy's “helper,” giving me a clear role and some degree of status among the participants. At both sites, my identity as a white, middle-class, female meant I was very similar to the “typical” participant. At Trinity, however, my age marked me as somewhat of a novelty. I only encountered a participant younger than myself (I was 27 at the time), on one occasion, and I was sometimes asked to speak on behalf of “young people.”

and goals are universally-applicable, attributing them to all participants, even while making them sound personalized (“I know what you want”). More, these statements simultaneously reflect a shared understanding of what it means to be a “spiritual person.” On another occasion, for example, Sister Nancy explicitly told us: “This is what it really means to be a spiritual person: to live in the moment, to find God in all things [. . .] to really look for God [. . .] to be a person of God all the time.”

Many of the practitioners I spoke with, like Julia quoted above, told me that their participation in training programs, classes, and workshops at these organizations provided them with a clearer sense of who they wanted to be and how they wanted to live. In addition to learning how to practice then participants also acquired a shared vision of the ideal spiritual self, and a common language for describing and articulating these aspirations.⁶ Through fieldwork and interviews, I found that this idealized way of being-in-the-world was marked not by strict behavioral mandates but rather by a set of broad dispositions. In this section, I elucidate three key components of the aspirational identity practitioners were encouraged to cultivate: (1) a sacred gaze; (2) a simultaneous sense of presence and detachment; and finally; (3) a holistic approach to identity management.

3.1. The Sacred Gaze

“Contemplative prayer . . . is prayer that sees the whole world through incense—a holy place, a place where the sacred dwell . . . [It] leads us to see the world through the eyes of God.” ([30], p. 35).

Maria, a 46-year old Centering Prayer practitioner, told me that as she grows and develops spiritually, she has become “more aware” of God’s presence and action. In addition, and equally important for her, is the fact that she consciously chooses to be more aware, enacting practices that increase her ability to see, feel, and know God’s presence. She links the cultivation of this perceptual and sensual ability to her disciplined practice of Centering Prayer. The practice, she said, helps to bring her to a “place of peace and contemplation” so that when she steps out into the world “the mystery of things and the beauty of things just seem to stand out” more clearly. Maria is motivated to maintain a daily practice, at least in part, by a desire to further develop this awareness: She aspires to notice and appreciate God’s presence more frequently and more deeply.

Teachers and texts in both communities argue that all of life—people, objects, events, experiences—is imbued with spiritual meaning. Participants are told that, through practice, they will develop the ability to see and experience that meaning more clearly. This perceptual ability (or sensibility)—similar to what David Morgan [31] has called the *sacred gaze*—is a key component of the ideal spiritual self. The sacred gaze is “a way of seeing [which] invests an image, a viewer or an act of viewing with spiritual significance” ([31], p. 6). To cultivate the gaze, practitioners must display what Morgan calls visual piety: “the constructive operation of seeing that looks for, makes room for, the transcendent in daily life” ([31], p. 6). The spiritual gaze, therefore, is both a practice (something that people do) and a way of seeing (a socio-mental lens [32]).⁷ As a socially-acquired way of seeing, the gaze includes norms of attention and disattention, as well as habits of interpretation, acquired through a process of (optical) socialization ([33], p. 33). On the one hand, the spiritual gaze affects *what* is perceived as expectations are translated into selective attention [33]. At the same time, these communities transmit frameworks of interpretations and shared meanings that can be deployed in processing various kinds of observances and experiences. As in the metaphor of seeing things

⁶ Of course it is important to acknowledge that practitioners come to these communities with a range of different backgrounds, commitments, and identities. Variables such as gender, race, age, and profession, among others, likely affect how each individual navigates, understands, and engages with the discursive and practical resources offered by these organizations. Due to space constraints, this paper is not able to highlight the diversity of experience across individual practitioners, and focuses instead on the counters of the *enlightened self* as it is outlined in the “official discourse” (that put forward by teachers and texts) of these communities.

⁷ While perception is a bodily process, it is neither universal and objective nor purely individual. Rather, perception is a process that is structured and shaped by cultural context and social interaction [32].

“through incense,” the cultivation of a sacred gaze causes more and more of life to be marked and classified as “spiritually relevant” [34]. Practitioners become more likely to see God’s presence and action in the flow of daily events through modified structures of attention and the acquisition of new interpretive frames. The “filter” through which practitioners come to view the world imbues objects, people and events with spiritual meaning, while also transforming the act of looking, itself, into a spiritual practice.

Becoming a member of these communities then requires training the gaze to focus on and read one’s surroundings in particular, socially-shared ways. Despite a collective discourse that implies the naturalness of this gaze, practitioners were also told that disciplined practice was necessary both for cultivating the habit of looking and for refining their perceptual abilities. Practices like the Daily Examen,⁸ for example, which ask practitioners to give explicit attention to God’s presence and action in the course of their daily lives, help practitioners to realize God’s presence “by asking [them] to notice where God already exists in [their] li[ves].” Practitioners are told they ought to be looking for God constantly. Sister Nancy told participants to ask, “What is God doing here?” and to “let that be your constant focus.” The disciplined practice of Examen helps adherents notice God’s presence more and more frequently. It is assumed that eventually they will; come to recognize that God is active in every moment of every day. Examen, then is both a practice of looking and a process through which practitioners refine their perceptual ability, cultivating the sacred gaze.

I found that practitioners at both sites embraced the link between practice and what I’m calling here, the sacred gaze. Many described leaving sessions of Centering Prayer (both collective and private) in a different perceptual and sensual state. Cindy, a Centering Prayer practitioner, for example, told me: “When you come out . . . everything is bright, everything is alive—there is so much life in everything.” This experience, she says, is qualitatively different from her average mode of being. She continued: “I think it’s because all the noise—there’s so much noise in the world” which prevents you from focusing on and seeing the beauty of life. However, she noted, “if you can focus your mind on something for a period of time, then your mind just becomes sharper” and you can see more clearly and more easily. The practice of Centering Prayer facilitates changes in practitioners’ perceptual experience: they notice different (and more) things about their surroundings, and are more likely to interpret what they notice as spiritually-relevant.

Both the practice of looking and the perceptual ability of seeing are considered markers of spiritual personhood in these communities. Because of this, practitioners in both communities aspire and actively work to cultivate the sacred gaze. In my conversation with Mary, for example, she told me that her awareness of God’s presence has “grown considerably.” While she used to compartmentalize everything, she has “slowly begun to let the wall down and realize that God is with me all the time. I just have to *open my eyes* and *see*.” She sets aside time to work on this in her practice of Examen. She tells me: “I’ll look back at the end of the day: Did I see God? Well not quite in everything. Okay, you could have done better there.” Drawing on a logic of progressive attainment [4,5], Mary sees the gaze and its deployment as something that has developed over time, but in which she still has considerable room for further improvement.

The sacred gaze is an important part of what it means to “live contemplatively” for members of this community. When I asked Mary what she thinks it means to be a contemplative person, for example, she told me:

“To be present—to really be present and to notice. To notice. To see, to see. Like behind you, the sunlight on the wall; it’s just so beautiful . . . it’s about experiencing God in everything all the time. You become more and more aware when you live that way—you become more and more aware . . . you get drawn into the miracle of everything.”

⁸ Examen is a Jesuit practice, developed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, which involves prayerful reflection on the day’s events in an effort to identify God’s presence and to discern his will in regards to the practitioners’ life and actions.

Mary's responses clearly ties being a contemplative person to a particular way of seeing and experiencing everyday life. However, Mary's statement also ties the sacred gaze to the cultivation of another important disposition: being simultaneously fully present and relatively detached from the flow of daily experience.

3.2. Presence and Detachment

The ideal spiritual self was also marked by a distinctive subjectivity or relationship to reality: One in which the individual is fully immersed and present in the moment but also somewhat detached, watching themselves and others from the perspective of an external observer. On the one hand, participants were taught the value of being fully present and completely engaged in the flow of everyday life. Being fully present requires not being bogged down by the past (regret, as well as fond recollection) or distracted by worries about the future (anxiety as well as desire). On the other hand, participants were told to cultivate detachment—referred to as “holy indifference” (Trinity) or “non-attachment” (IYI)—a disposition defined by a sense of separation and distance from events and experiences as well as one's thoughts and feelings.

The clearest metaphor for this orientation was described by Ron, an Integral Yoga teacher. During the teacher training program at the IYI, Ron compared this ideal state to the one achieved while watching a really good film. He told the participants:

“Another example . . . Going to a movie and getting so involved in it that you totally feel for the character and will cry and laugh and identify and find that you've lost any sense of separation from what is going on. You're experiencing it fully. And if it's a good movie, you enjoy it even if it makes you sad . . . In the movie theater, it's easy because your mind knows that I'm not there. You are in this witness place and you know you are sitting in the theater. You are immersed and enjoying it but you aren't attached. Our mistake is thinking that we are the movie.”

This metaphor depicts both sides of this idealized disposition: being fully present and relatively detached. Drawing on popular psychological and self-help discourses, the former was described as achieving “flow” [35] or living “in the now” [36]. The latter, referred to as *non-attachment* at the Institute,⁹ did not require the individual to give things up—for example, by getting rid of all one's possessions—but rather captured “a certain consciousness” or a “way of being with things.” Non-attachment and presence were seen as deeply intertwined. As Ron explained, “You can give yourself to things more fully when you are non-attached.” Likewise, being fully present implied a sense of separation from concerns about the past and the future.

At the prayer house, Sister Nancy sometimes described this approach using a proverb she attributed to Buddhist teachings. She told us that we should “look upon our favorite cup as if it is already broken.” This proverb encourages both presence and detachment. On the one hand, if we recognize and acknowledge that the things we love will not be around forever, Sister Nancy explains, we are encouraged to be fully present with and enjoy them in the moment. At the same time, recognizing and acknowledging impermanence as an inherent part of human life allows us to avoid devastation when the things (or people) we love break (or leave). Detachment, or what was called “holy indifference” at Trinity, means having only “a light grasp” on our possessions, relationships, and desires. Christ-like persons, practitioners learned, were not bogged down by attachments to roles, places, or even people, but were instead ready and willing to do and go wherever in response to God's will. In fact, Sister Nancy suggested that the cultivation of detachment was correlated with a decline in

⁹ Non-attachment is defined in Sutra 15 of the Yoga Sutras: “The consciousness of self-mastery in one who is free from craving for objects seen or heard about” ([37], p. 20).

the number and variety of things we think we “need” to be happy. At the same time, the number of things that are likely to cause us agitation or “set you off” also shrinks.

Practitioners learned about, practiced, and cultivated this orientation in and through their personal practices of hatha yoga and Centering Prayer, respectively. Yoga practitioners, for example, were instructed to approach the *asanas* (or physical postures) as a “moving meditation.” When asked what that meant, Ron explained: “Whatever asana you are doing, that is what your mind is engaged in. Your mind is just fully engaged in doing that posture. That is the meditation . . . it is being present with every single action that you are doing.” On the other hand, there was a simultaneous emphasis on maintaining a position of relative detachment during practice as well, especially from one’s feelings and thoughts. Sister Nancy, for example, suggested that practitioners should imagine themselves sitting on a river bank, watching the different ships and boats (i.e., thoughts and sensations) pass them by. Sometimes, she said, we might find that you have “jumped on a boat and started heading down stream” (i.e., become engaged in a thought). When we realize this has happened, she continued, we should simply acknowledge it, get off boat, and return to our place on the shore, once again observing the ships as they pass. In this analogy, the practitioner clearly takes the position of an observer, envisioning the self (on the bank) as wholly distinct from the movements and fluctuations of the mind (the ships on the river).

The goal of spiritual formation, however, was to embody this orientation not only during practice, but also outside of it: what yogi’s referred to as taking their practice “off the mat.” When I asked participants how, if at all, they felt the practice had changed them, the cultivation of detachment was the most commonly cited form of progress. Practitioners at both organizations described important changes in how they reacted to and handled the frequent annoyances of everyday life, from traffic jams to unpleasant interactions with colleagues at work. Irene, for example, told me that, in general, things bother her less than they used to. She used “to fly off the handle pretty easily about so many kinds of things,” she explains, but “that’s the kind of stuff that . . . doesn’t faze me anymore.” Vibha, an Integral Yoga practitioner, described a similar change. She told me that she is “much calmer in the way I deal with things.” Before yoga, she said, “I used to be very impatient with many things,” but “now I notice that my responses are calm and I don’t fly off the handle.” Irene and Vibha were both motivated by these results; in fact, a desire to further cultivate this change in demeanor was one of the reasons they cited for maintaining the practices. In classes and interviews at both sites, I heard a broad range of stories that illustrated practitioners’ growing ability to remain calm in the face of stressful situations.

At the same time, participants also emphasized their ability to be present. During classes and workshops at Trinity, for example, Sister Nancy often asked participants to share their reflections on the “fruits” (or benefits) of their practice. Participants’ responses not only emphasized detachment—being less reactive—but also presence. Sharon, for example, shared that the practice helps her “be more present.” Adding that she is “better able to see and feel the movements of the spirit” and feels “more in tune with them,” linking presence to the spiritual gaze described above. Likewise, Donna told the group that practicing Centering Prayer made her realize “how not present I am in my daily interactions,” and helped her become “more present on average.” Similar sentiments were shared at the yoga studio, as well, where participants drew on the language of “being in the flow” to describe an experience of increasingly focused engagement during their daily lives. The ability to be fully present, then, was described as something practitioners *hoped* to embody more often and more fully, translating presence from an in-the-moment experience into an aspirational way of being-in-the-world. Like the sacred gaze, described above, both presence and detachment were arenas in which practitioners said they noticed improvements, but also areas in which they desired additional growth and development.

3.3. Integration

“I don’t try to differentiate between the religious, the spiritual and the day-to-day. I think it’s all the same”

—Rohit, Integral Yoga teacher and practitioner

“The goal is to live life in awareness of God: to be a person of God all the time.”

—Sister Nancy

Early on in the intern program for aspiring spiritual directors, Sister Nancy made it very clear that serving as a spiritual director for others required participants to live their spirituality “twenty-four seven.” On the very first day of class, for example, Sister Nancy told us that “spiritual direction is a way of life.” This became somewhat of a catch phrase during the program, and by the third meeting when Sister Nancy would begin (“Spiritual Direction is a . . . ”), the students would complete her sentence (“ . . . a way of life”). Throughout the course, Sister Nancy made it clear that being a spiritual director is “not a role or identity that you can put on and take off like a hat”; instead, “you really have to *be* that.”

While it was especially true for those training to be spiritual directors and yoga teachers, I found that all practitioners, at both sites, were encouraged to view and enact their spirituality as a *holistic identity*. I use this concept to capture an ideal typical style of identity management [38], one in which spirituality is central and highly salient [39] but simultaneously integrated with other roles and obligations. A holistic approach to identity management therefore falls in between two extremes: (1) identities enacted as social roles and therefore tied to particular times, places, or interaction partners; and (2) identities enacted as a master status [40] or master identity [41], in which one identity monopolizes the self-concept, overshadowing and even seeking to displace other sources of self-understanding. A holistic identity, however, resembles the steady hum of background noise: it shapes thought and action in subtle but important ways across many different contexts and social roles.

The spiritual ideal is defined in these communities by “a consistent, fully integrated life of piety, such that one’s practice of spirituality is indistinguishable from the rest of one’s life” ([42], p. 198). According to texts and teachers, the spiritual identity should be activated not only when the practitioner is on the mat or in the chair, but should be “turned on” throughout their daily lives. Spirituality was described as a way of being, one which not only transcends time and space, but which should ideally filter down and shape how practitioners enact other identities and social roles as well. Treating spirituality as a “way of life” (rather than a bounded social role, for example) implies that all obligations, experiences and other identities are encompassed within and given meaning through their relationship to the project of spiritual formation. The enactment of one’s role as a lawyer or mother, for example, was described and experienced as an arena in which to both express and cultivate the ideal spiritual self. This can be seen, for example, in how one reacts to the petty annoyances of co-workers or children: a situation that is transformed from a mundane experience into an opportunity to enact (or fail to enact) the spiritual ideal of presence and detachment. At the same time, the individual’s understanding of what it means to be a good mother (or lawyer) may be modified in relation to the spiritual ideal. This “identity spread” ([28], pp. 50–55), or the reevaluation of other identities and social roles in light of their spiritual commitments, was explicitly encouraged in both communities.

To accomplish this goal, it was suggested that practitioners implement structures, disciplines, and routines that could provide the necessary scaffolding for living out their aspirations. Yoga practitioners, for example, were told that they could repeat a mantra, chant Sanskrit verses, or practice pranayama (breathing techniques) while doing daily activities like washing the dishes or driving to work. Doing so, it was argued, would help practitioners activate and maintain the idealized way of seeing and of relating to reality described above. Many practitioners followed this advice, and implemented regular schedules of prayer and practice throughout the day. Barbara, a participant at Trinity, for example, uses prayers written by Margaret Guenther [43] to transform daily activities like showering, getting dressed, ironing, and making coffee into spiritual practices. She recalled being encouraged to make a daily schedule of prayer where “morning prayer is ‘Thank you God for another day. Help me to live it according to your will.’ And noontime is a recollection time: ‘How am I doing?’ And then nighttime is for a review of the day.” And that, she continued, is that “pattern I try to keep in the back of my mind.”

Through these practices, individuals continuously “prime”¹⁰ their spiritual identities, encouraging thoughts and actions in line with their ideals.

On the other hand, while all-encompassing, the spiritual identity is not greedy [44]: It does not seek to displace or eclipse other social roles or personal interests. Unlike monastics or clergy who seek to live spiritually-centered lives by giving up all or many of their other commitments (interpreted as potential distractions), these communities do not require that practitioners abandon relationships, give up social roles, or sacrifice their other obligations. At the yoga studio, the teachers often quoted the following Zen proverb in explaining the goal of practice: “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.” In our discussions, it was clear what this proverb was meant to convey: it is not activities or social roles that change in the process of seeking enlightenment but the intention and approach to those activities that are ultimately transformed. The goal then is integration and transformation, not displacement. According to texts and teachers, living a spiritual life did not require withdrawal from social life; rather, practitioners were asked to identify and embrace the spiritual impulse *within* their everyday lives [42].

Holistic identities therefore clearly differ from concepts such as “master status” [40] or “identity lifestyle” [38], terms that have been used to suggest that, in some cases, multidimensionality and balance across identity commitments is either impossible or undesirable. In these cases, the identity in question is not only highly salient but also “determines one’s auxiliary characteristics,” pushing aside other roles and interests in the process ([38], p. 213). Take for example, the graduate student whose academic obligations and commitments prevent her from participating in previously important hobbies and activities. She may even discover that, over time, as her preferences and identities have shift, she no longer enjoys these activities to the same extent. The spiritual identity, very much like the academic identity, is often enacted as the “essential core” of practitioners’ self-understanding: “a way of being and living, and an encompassing meaning of their whole identity, rather than a single aspect within the self” ([38], p. 34). However, with encouragement from others in the community, practitioners strive to maintain their pre-existing roles, relationships, and hobbies, often translating them into tools or arenas for spiritual development in the process.

While many practitioners felt that the ideal of holism would be easier to embody if they lived in a monastery, most felt they could and should actively strive to cultivate this approach in the course of their daily lives. During my conversations with practitioners, many noted evidence of progress in this area as a source of pride and distinction. Irene, for example, told me, “I just find myself automatically thinking about God. Thinking about my interactions with God . . . [I feel] like God is more present for me at this point than I ever have. Before, I would have to stop and say, okay, I’ll think about God. But now it sometimes just happens—and frequently during the course of the day . . . it’s more integrated. I don’t necessarily have to stop what I’m doing in order for that to happen.” Through immersion in these communities, spirituality comes to shape their actions throughout the day, and progress in terms of integration is considered a marker of spiritual growth. While practitioners like Irene felt they had made progress in this arena, they all simultaneously aspired to achieve a point when the spiritual and the everyday were more fully integrated.

4. Discussion: The Enlightened Self as an Aspirational Identity

“We have a direction, not a destination. We are going East, but you can’t get East. You can only go East.”¹¹

¹⁰ Priming is the implicit memory effect in which exposure to a stimulus influences response to a later stimulus. Psychologists often use priming experimentally to train a person’s memory both in positive and negative ways. It has also been argued, however, that contexts, people, and objects can “prime” or make salient different identities. More, identity salience has been linked to stronger correlations between identity and behavior [39].

¹¹ Ramdas, Integral Yoga instructor.

The “enlightened self” was considered by members of these communities to be perpetually out of reach even for the most experienced practitioners [4,5]. This was most clearly conveyed in practitioners’ reflections regarding their progress and development. For each of the facets described above, the practitioners I spoke with, regardless of their level of experience, described themselves as simultaneously having undergone meaningful development, yet still a long way away from their final goal. In these communities, the “enlightened self” is something both novice and the most experienced members (including teachers) are striving to achieve. Rather than extant members serving as living models of the community’s ideals—people who project the identity, in all its elements—newcomers learn that the full embodiment of the enlightened self is unattainable: something they, and all others, must continuously strive for but will likely never achieve. While it was certainly the case that some practitioners (especially teachers) were thought to more closely embody the ideal than others, no practitioners felt they had achieved it.

This finding suggests the need for an analytical distinction between being a “yogi” (or “Contemplative Catholic”) and embodying the “enlightened self.” The former is an identity that most practitioners felt they had achieved (and used to describe the self in the present), the latter is an identity that remains perpetually out of reach: a highly desirable yet elusive *aspirational identity* [3]. The enlightened self is never described by practitioners as something they have achieved [20], but only in terms of an ongoing process of becoming. In fact, I found that enacting practices and narratives that convey this sense of continuous striving is an important part of how members construct and perform their identities as “yogi’s” and “Contemplative Catholics.” In other words, being a “yogi” or a “Catholic” implies positioning oneself as an aspirant: someone “earnestly desirous of becoming a certain kind of person, and consciously and continuously in pursuit of that goal” ([3], p. 355). Yogi’s are not those who embody the “enlightened self” but those who exert continuous and concerted efforts to cultivate this way of being-in-the-world.

5. Conclusions

While Bauman [2] has suggested that modern individuals lack a sense of destination, my research in these two communities of practice suggests otherwise. I found that practitioners did in fact have a sense of direction, one shaped by the image of the “enlightened self” depicted by teachers, texts, and fellow practitioners. Above, I demonstrated how this identity was defined not by birth, belief, or practice, but by the embodiment of certain perceptual, affective, and somatic ideals: a sacred gaze, a simultaneous sense of presence and detachment, and a holistic style of identity management. I argued that these communities, in articulating the characteristics and dispositions associated with “enlightenment,” transmit a highly desirable but elusive *aspirational identity*. This shared ideal serves as a kind of potentiality: A description of the life practitioners could and ought to lead, a ready-made template for who and what they could be ([45], p. 97).

Aspirational identities are an important component of individuals’ self-stories, and can have far-reaching consequences in the present [46–48]. In the case of these communities, the process of *divinization*—or becoming “like God”—structures and gives meaning to the past and present, as well as projecting forward into the future. The past is given meaning in relation to the ongoing process of spiritual formation, tying together disparate experiences with a unifying logic of progressive attainment [4,5]. In the present, the image of the “enlightened self” serves as a kind of compass, motivating and constraining behavior. Practitioners are motivated to undertake lines of action that they believe will move them towards their aspirations. The enlightened self also provides a framework and basis for evaluating the current self [46]. Aspirational identities, therefore, can have important influences on affect and self-esteem: discrepancies between one’s ideal self and one’s actual self can lead to anxiety, dejection, and low self-esteem [47].

It is important to note that aspirational identities are not the only type of future-oriented identity that may be transmitted in religious communities. Recent psychological research suggests that the *future self*, like the current self, is comprised of many different, and sometimes seemingly contradictory,

possible identities: the “positive and negative identities one might hold in the future” ([9], p. 117).¹² These imagined future identities include the selves we desire to become [41,47], the identities or roles we think we should or ought to become [27], as well as the people we fear becoming [9,46]. From this perspective then each individual has a “repertoire of possible selves that can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motivations, fears and threats” ([46], p. 954). Research on religious identity should consider the content and consequences of individual’s future self-concepts, the dynamics through which possible identities (both desired and feared) are constructed and transmitted, as well as when, where, and why these imagined futures are brought to bear in deciding on lines of action in the present.

For one, future research can investigate the content of adherents’ future-self-concepts and the process through which they are transmitted, identifying similarities and differences within and between communities.¹³ Doing so would reveal the situated and contextual nature of religious identities and aspirations, and expand our understanding of how religious communities shape individual identity, experience, and action in the present. Future work might also consider differences in the valence of various possible identities across communities. Religious communities may not only influence what possible identities are available to people, but may also dictate the moral valence, or attractiveness, of the possible identities that are available in the broader cultural milieu. Are the same kinds of identities considered desirable (or negative) across different religious groups? How has the valence of different identities changed over time within the same community? Finally, religious communities would be strategic locations for investigating when and why future self-concepts are brought to bear in deciding on lines of action in the present [9]. When do adherents act in ways that align with their aspirations? When do they fail to do so, and why? Future research on content, structure, and consequences of possible identities, both desired and feared, across religious communities seems promising both as a question of interest in and of itself and as a potential mechanism underlying the impact of religiosity and religious identity on a range of other variables.

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Abbreviations

IYI Integral Yoga Institute

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¹² Existing research uses a range of different terms to refer to the components of the future self-concept, including: possible identities [4]; possible selves [8], ideal or ought selves [27], and preferred selves/identities [3].

¹³ The study of aspirational (and other possible) identities can be studied from a variety of different angles and methodological approaches. This analysis starts with organizations, and seeks to elucidate and analyze and content and structure of the aspirational identities they transmit. Future work might also start with individuals in order to examine the content of their future self-concepts, before identifying where their various possible identities are rooted, which are most influential, and why. Both approaches can contribute unique insights to our understanding of the sources and consequences of various possible identities. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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