SEMIOTIC SHIFTS: HOW CULTURE SHAPES CHRISTIAN STUDENTS' NAVIGATION OF AN ELITE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT
A central debate in cultural sociology is how culture shapes action. I advance scholarship on this question by theorizing how strategies of action evolve in the face of semiotic shifts, which occur when people enter organizational contexts that offer new ecologies of meanings for their core beliefs. I draw on two years of ethnographic fieldwork and 49 interviews with Protestant students attending an elite, research university to empirically demonstrate how variation in forms of personal religious culture link to divergent strategies. When beliefs are carried as common sense, people *distance* from faith as they engage with new meanings. When beliefs are carried as tradition, people *bridge* secular and religious spaces. Finally, when beliefs are carried as ideology, people *burrow* into Christian subcultures to maintain faith. Bringing cultural and institutional theorizing into dialogue, this paper deepens our understanding of how variation in personal culture shapes strategies as people learn to navigate new organizational contexts.

KEYWORDS: culture, higher education, religion, inhabited institutionalism, ethnography

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Ann Swidler (1986) ushered in a new era for cultural sociology, arguing for a theoretical approach that centers on the strategies that people build out of their cultural toolkits and repertoires. Understanding divergent strategies of action has enabled us to understand, for example, why minority youth engage differently in educational contexts (Carter 2005), why people decide not to use condoms despite health risks (Tavory and Swidler 2009), and why violence persists in urban neighborhoods (Kirk and Papachristos 2011). But cultural scholars have long disagreed about how personal and public culture (and within persons, declarative and nondeclarative culture) intersect to shape peoples' strategies and outcomes (Lizardo 2017; Pugh 2013; Vaisey 2009).

I move forward this debate by examining how people's beliefs and strategies change as they adapt to a new organizational context (an elite American research university). We lack clarity on why some people's beliefs evolve when they enter new contexts and encounter new worldviews, ideologies, and practices, while others double down on their prior belief commitments. Swidler (1986) suggests that culture accounts for continuities in settled lives and change in unsettled lives. But the concept of unsettled lives and times has proven difficult to measure and examine empirically. I propose an alternative concept, *semiotic shifts,* which are the situations where people encounter new ecologies of meanings - semiotic spaces - that diverge from the semiotic spaces they previously inhabited. I then ask: *what do people do when they encounter semiotic shifts in relation to their core beliefs? How do they solve the problems that arise with such a shift?*

Semiotic axes, as put forth by Tavory and Swidler (2009:172), are "dimensions that delineate one array of possible meanings." They argue that objects and symbols "have meaning in reference to a wider code of relationally defined possibilities," which generate semiotic spaces

that consist of multiple axes that exist in relationship to one another. Institutional theorists have long highlighted that organizations both cultivate and exist within semiotic spaces, ceremoniously complying to myths that provide legitimacy and shape organizational structures, sometimes loosely and sometimes tightly (Hallett 2010; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

But as Hallett and Hawbaker (2020) argue, contemporary institutional theory focuses on macro-cultural logics or individuals engaged in institutional entrepreneurship or institutional work. A central question remains unanswered: "how can we account for local activity, agency, and change without reverting to the kind of individual actors that neo-institutionalism was designed to critique?" (Hallett and Hawbaker 2020:3). Likewise, cognitive culturalists have developed sophisticated techniques for measuring personal culture, attitudes, and schemas (Boutyline and Soter 2021; Brońić and Miles 2021; Kiley and Vaisey 2020; Vaisey and Boutyline 2017), but the ability to explain variation in local activity, agency, and change has waned.

Advancing theorizing on this question requires a methodological approach that prioritizes participant observation in settings where people grapple with their beliefs and navigate complex semiotic spaces presented by their institutionalized contexts together (Fine 2021; Tavory 2016). I examine one such case: an evangelical Christian campus fellowship embedded within an elite research university on the West Coast. The members of this group faced a central, practical challenge: how to be followers of Jesus *as* undergraduates at an elite, secular university. But they adopted different strategies of action that linked to divergent religious outcomes, some struggling with religious doubts and changing their beliefs, others doubling down on and intensifying their religious commitments. I develop a typology of three modal strategies of action – *distancing, bridging,* and *burrowing* – and argue that the adoption of these strategies is linked to three ideal-typical forms that faith embodies (as common sense, tradition, and ideology).

The question of how religious beliefs are influenced by participation in secular contexts, and specifically, higher education, has a long history (Berger 2011; Maryl and Uecker 2011; Uecker, Regnerus, and Valler 2007). Likewise, education scholars have studied the process of cultural adaptation within schools and universities, showing how students diverge in the cultural tools they bring to bear and the strategies they employ for navigating academic and peer environments (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Carter 2006; Jack 2019; Khan 2021). While recent work sheds light on how personal religious culture shapes educational outcomes (Horwitz et al. 2021; Uecker and Pearce 2017), less is known about the interactional, cultural processes by which college experiences shape peoples' beliefs and moral commitments (though for an exception regarding political commitments, see Binder and Wood [2013]).

As people navigate commitments to personal beliefs as well as organizational contexts that challenge these beliefs or mark them as outsiders, they face practical challenges: when and whether to reveal rare beliefs, whether and how to engage in institutionalized rituals, and what groups to join if none align easily with one's own commitments and identities. I find that when people carry their religious beliefs as common sense (i.e., a taken-for-granted form of faith that offers flexible answers for how to act), the primary strategy for dealing with semiotic shifts is *distancing* from former beliefs and exploring new practices and meanings. When they carry beliefs as tradition (i.e., an articulated form of faith that offers context-bound answers for how to act), the primary strategy for dealing with semiotic shifts is *bridging* between groups with divergent, and at times contradictory, idiocultures. Finally, when they carry beliefs as ideology (i.e., a highly articulated form of faith that offers holistic, strict answers for how to act), the primary strategy is *burrowing,* making their home within sub-communities where subversive meanings are cultivated.

I make three primary contributions. First, I draw on theorizing on semiotics (Tavory and Swidler 2009) and how institutions are inhabited (Hallett and Ventresca 2006) to develop the concept of semiotic shifts, which provides clarity on one kind of situation where personal culture actively shapes strategies of action. Second, I develop a conceptual framework for three modal cultural forms that beliefs can take (building on Swidler [1986]) and use the case of an evangelical Christian group to illustrate how people vary in the cultural forms their beliefs embody. Finally, I theorize three overarching strategies of action that people deploy in relation to their beliefs as they navigate semiotic shifts. I demonstrate how these strategies link to cultural forms in my empirical case and theorize the broader applicability of this process in the discussion. These findings hold implications for cultural sociology, as well as scholarship on higher education, inhabited institutions, and religion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Divergent perspectives on strategies of action

A longstanding debate in the sociology of culture is how culture shapes action. The intellectual contours of this debate have been well treated elsewhere (Lizardo and Strand 2010; Pugh 2013; Vaisey 2009) and need not be summarized here, beyond the building blocks necessary for the present argument. Swidler (1986) defines strategies of action as "a general way of organizing action...that might allow one to reach several different life goals" (277). While individuals have their own strategies, these are not personal constructions (or, as Swidler says, not built from scratch): "culture influences action through the shape and organization of [prefabricated] links, not by determining the ends to which they are put" (277). But while culture

may provide links, it doesn't push action in a particular direction because people draw on culture like a toolkit, choosing specific tools for help navigating the situations they face.

Vaisey (2009) challenges this argument, drawing on cognitive psychology and practice theory (Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1984) to suggest that toolkit theorists gave people too much deliberative power. He puts forth a dual-process model, which he summarizes with the rider on an elephant metaphor (originally put forth by Haidt [2001; 2005]). The rider represents the discursive, conscious level of talk and deliberation; the elephant represents the deeper, subconscious level of schemas and intuition (Boutyline and Soter 2021; DiMaggio 1997; Martin 2010). Although cognitive culturalists have moved cultural sociology forward in significant ways, key questions remain unanswered. Pugh (2013) argues that one issue is that the role of social context gets lost in the individualism of cognitively oriented models. Institutional scholarship has sought to address this issue by revealing how people and organizations are shaped by their institutional contexts (Meyer and Rowan 1977) but failed to specify the interactive mechanisms that connect people, organizations, and institutional myths (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021).

Overall, cognitive, toolkit, and institutionalist theories are each limited in their capacity to explain how and why people *change* strategies. Cognitive culturalists implicitly assume that a person's cultural apparatus, as well as their strategies of action, are relatively static over time. But this assumption is overly individualistic, not fully considering how evolving group and organizational memberships shape strategy change and continuity. Continuing with Vaisey's metaphor, the question could be framed: under what conditions does the elephant change directions, or shift strategies? One answer to this question is: when the environment changes.

Both elephant and rider are going to adopt a different strategy to cross a river than when moving through a desert. The strategy would change drastically if they ended up in a zoo.

Metaphors take us only so far. My point is that cultural sociologists have much to learn by attending to how people draw on personal culture (both declarative and nondeclarative) in moments of organizational transitions that come with semiotic shifts (Lizardo 2017). Inhabited institutionalist scholars have begun to document how people navigate the institutionalized myths and meanings presented by their organizational contexts (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021; Hallett 2010; Hallett and Ventresca 2006). This work can be brought into dialogue with scholarship on how action is shaped by the culture people carry through the various settings of their lives (Miles 2014; Swidler 2001; Vaisey 2009). Linking these two literatures enables us to better understand how and why people's strategies and beliefs evolve (or stick) as their organizational contexts shift.

Swidler (1986; 2001) hints at this in arguing that culture accounts for continuities in settled lives and for change in unsettled lives. The problem, acknowledged by Swidler and others, is the fuzziness around what constitutes an unsettled time or an unsettled life. She gives general examples that have intuitive appeal: adolescence is more unsettled than mid-life; times of war and political turmoil are more unsettled than times of peace. The challenge is to conceptualize and measure unsettledness, a subjective reality given that what is deeply unsettling for one person or group may not be unsettling at all for another. I propose an alternate concept for the situations when strategies of action may need to be reconsidered, which I call *semiotic shifts.*

Semiotic shifts

I define semiotic shifts as the situations where people encounter ecologies of meaning (e.g., semiotic spaces) that diverge from the semiotic spaces they previously inhabited. Tavory and Swidler (2009:172), in their study of condom use in rural Africa, define semiotic axes as "a dimension that delineates one array of possible meanings—for example, from risky and dangerous to protective and safe—within which condom use is understood." A semiotic axis is not a synonym for meaning but rather conveys key oppositions and equations (Silverman 1983), a shared social code that constitutes possible meanings, independent of what a person wants to signify (Sewell 1999), and the existence of semiotic spaces where multiple axes co-exist and people can "move registers" from one axis to another, shifting the meaning of an interaction (173). Empirically, Tavory and Swidler demonstrate how condoms mean much more than "protection": they exist in a semiotic space marked by axes of trust, love, risk, and commitment. These multiple axes intersect and are pulled from in complex ways in micro-level interactions between lovers.

An implicit but critical point is that the semiotic space for condoms, or any cultural object, is different in rural Malawi than it is in, say, New York City or Tel Aviv. We can take this a step further. Semiotic axes vary across institutionalized organizations: condoms exist in a different semiotic space in the Catholic Church than they do in Protestant denominations. Historically, and still in many parts of the world, people live in consistent geographic and institutional contexts for the duration of their lives, staying close to the families, communities, and organizations that they grew up in. But as globalization has advanced and mobility has increased, many people participate in diverse and contradictory institutional contexts throughout their life. Thus, when entering new organizations, people sometimes reckon with semiotic shifts,

where they are presented with a new semiotic space that they must learn to navigate in order to participate and, ultimately, belong.

The contours of a new semiotic space are encountered through interactions with individuals, sub-groups within broader organizations, and institutional myths (via rituals, narratives, and rules) (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021). All three kinds of interactions have the potential to cue people to the presence of a shift. In some interactions, such as those between people, meaning can be collectively negotiated (Becker 1953; Garfinkel 1967). In others, especially encounters with institutionalized myths, collective negotiation is less plausible, but countercultural groups often form that reject and resist dominant, taken-for-granted meanings or practices (Hallett 2010; Kellogg 2009), themselves becoming part of the semiotic landscape. When people encounter new semiotic spaces, aspects of their own personal culture that had previously been taken for granted become visible, and new skills and assumptions must be learned (Lizardo 2017). Navigating semiotic shifts often requires updating strategies of action, which have the potential to instigate change in people's beliefs. To understand variation in the strategies that people adopt, I suggest we must look at variation in how elements of personal culture are carried.

Conceptualizing and linking cultural forms and strategies of action

Swidler (1986:279) argues that culture exists on a continuum from ideology to tradition to common sense. Lizardo (2017) develops a related framework, where culture exists in public and personal forms, and within persons, in declarative and nondeclarative modes. Both Swidler (1986) and Lizardo (2017) suggest that beliefs and practices can move from being conscious/declarative to unconscious/nondeclarative and Lizardo argues that knowledge can be redundantly represented in both declarative and nondeclarative forms. Building on these insights,

I develop the idea that one central aspect of personal culture, *beliefs*, can be understood and empirically assessed as primarily taking the form of common sense, tradition, or ideology. Beliefs are a crucial subset of culture, but one that has proved difficult to study (Martin 2002). Martin (2002) theorizes two formal properties of the belief systems of groups: degree of consensus (the degree to which all group members agree) and degree of tightness (the degree to which holding some beliefs implies holding or not holding other beliefs) (see Rawlings and Childress [2019] for a related discussion on consensus and tightness).

Building on these insights, I suggest that there are three dimensions of variation in how beliefs are carried. First, beliefs vary in *level of articulation*: ideological beliefs are highly articulated (e.g., spelled out), traditional beliefs are moderately articulated, and common-sense beliefs are the most taken-for-granted. This dimension of articulation aligns with Lizardo's (2017) distinction between declarative and nondeclarative personal culture, as well as Swidler's discussion of how ideology is held most consciously, and common sense is held least consciously. Second, beliefs vary in *level of coherency*: ideological beliefs offer unified, all-embracing answers for how to act, while traditional beliefs are partial rather than all-embracing, and common-sense beliefs allow for agency and contradiction. This dimension aligns with what Martin (2002) calls tightness. Finally, beliefs vary in *level of context-boundedness*: traditional beliefs distinguish specific contexts where beliefs and action are tightly coupled, while ideological and common-sense beliefs blur this distinction, seeing beliefs as relevant to all aspects of life. This third dimension aligns with what Martin (2002) calls consensus, but rather than consensus across group members, it refers to consensus across the various contexts that people find themselves in.

Because variation exists in more than one dimension, viewing these forms as a typology, when it comes to personal culture, is analytically useful. As ideal types, no beliefs will ever fit perfectly into a single form, but it is possible to empirically assess the primary form that beliefs embody.[1] I summarize these three cultural forms and their application to religion in Table 1.

[insert Table 1 here.]

The forms that beliefs embody are shaped by the former contexts people inhabited, including prior life experiences, the organizations they belonged to, where they lived, and their social networks. As people shift contexts, they bring their beliefs (and related practices) with them, both as personal narratives and expectations about how the surrounding environment will operate and what semiotic axes will be present and take precedence.[2] While modern organizations are diverse, pluralistic, and contradictory entities (Alvesson and Jonsson 2022), because they are also institutionalized, there is usually some consensus around what beliefs and practices take the form of common sense, tradition, and ideology (Meyer and Rowan 1977).[3]

I argue that there are links between cultural forms and the strategies of action adopted in the face of semiotic shifts. A strategy of action is a general way of organizing action to realize

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[1] One minor point is worth underscoring. While ideologies and traditions are entities in themselves, my focus is on how the same overarching belief system can take the form of common sense, tradition, or ideology. I use these three labels as a tribute to Swidler (1986) and because they intuitively capture some of the key features of each form.

[2] A full discussion of how individuals carry culture is beyond the scope of the present article, but two central components are important to mention. First, cultural forms are subjectively held. Individuals craft narratives of their past experiences, relationships, and beliefs, and frame their own beliefs and practices as common sense, tradition, or ideology. Second, individuals come from contexts – their hometowns, organizational memberships, families, etc. – where certain cultural forms were dominant. For example, growing up in a diverse, cosmopolitan city is going to expose people to a wider range of beliefs, practices, and identities than growing up in a homogenous small town. Ideology differs from tradition and common sense in that it is often marked by diverging from what is common sense or tradition in one's context (but that can occur at the levels of family, organizational, and geographic context.) Being part of a family that is a religious minority, such as a Muslim family in America, would constitute and ideological background (e.g., being part of a group that rejects what is common sense in the broader culture) but so is becoming an atheist in a conservative, evangelical family in the South.

[3] This consensus is etic in nature. The point is that, in any given organizational context, some beliefs and practices are taken for granted, while others are contested. For example, the value of "diversity" is taken for granted in many modern organizations, but there is contestation about what kinds of diversity matter (such as the role and limits of ideological diversity) and how diversity should be advanced (such as the role and limits of affirmative action).

life goals in relation to one's beliefs, roles, and practices. Such strategies are not unitary, and not necessarily even complementary (a person's religious strategy of action may seem to contradict their political strategy, which is different still than how they relate to marriage or professional life).[4] I suggest that there are three modal strategies that people take when they encounter a new semiotic space. First, they can *distance* themselves from their former beliefs, entering a time of doubt and reckoning as they engage with new meanings and practices. Second, they can *bridge* between old and new beliefs, living out a dual commitment to groups with divergent, and even contradictory, meanings and practices. The third strategy is to *burrow,* deepening their commitment to their current beliefs, rejecting new meanings and practices, and seeking out a countercultural sub-community (within or outside of their organization) that shares these beliefs.

The setting: Christianity and research universities in the United States

In this section, I link the theory presented thus far to my empirical setting: a community of Protestant Christian students in a campus fellowship that is embedded in an elite American research university. To do so, it is important to (briefly) address how religious traditions and universities are themselves cultural spaces, and the historical context of how these institutions intersect and conflict in modern American society. I begin by outlining how the cultural framework I have developed relates to religion and, specifically, Protestant Christianity.

Religion has long been seen as a strong case for studying how culture works, because religion is marked by elaborate systems of meaning, morality, and rituals. The sociology of religion has recently taken a cultural turn, developing approaches that center on practice (Ammerman 2020), discourse (Bellah et al. 1985), and the sacred (Douglas 1986; 2003;

[4] For an identity-based model of culture in action that addresses why some cultural elements anchor others across contexts, see Miles (2014).

Wuthnow et al. 2013). Scholars are examining how religion operates as an institutional field, how religious tools and symbols shape boundaries and inequalities, and how religion is "lived", though these streams of research have largely persisted along parallel tracks (Edgell 2012). Further, a longstanding body of work examines conversion as a process shaped by relational and organizational contexts (Snow and Phillips 1980). My theoretical framework brings these areas into dialogue by examining how the forms in which people carry their religious beliefs shape how they live religion as they adapt to new organizational contexts.

What does it mean for religious beliefs to take the form of common sense, tradition, or ideology? When religion takes the form of common sense, it is taken for granted and baked into everyday life. In Berger's (2011) terms, the sacred canopy remains intact. For example, imagine a small town in the American South where it is safe to assume that others are Christian, to say "God bless you" to strangers, and where children's birthday parties are never scheduled on Sunday morning (which is church hour).[5] A person for whom religion takes the form of common sense would consider their faith to be important, easily held, and flexible. They would not often be asked to give an account of their beliefs, and they would be comfortable with inconsistent, sometimes even hypocritical, actions (such as gossip). There is little need to articulate why one holds the beliefs they do when beliefs are held as common sense, and thus this skill may be underdeveloped.

When religion takes the form of tradition, it plays an important but bounded role in everyday life. For example, imagine a family that prays every night before dinner, but never prays at other times; or who attends church on Sundays, but rarely discusses religious matters

[5] The examples that I develop here are based in an American context and use a Protestant Christian lens, given my empirical case. But of course, religion is more holistically woven into the cultural fabric of other places, such as many countries in the Middle East, than it is in even the most religious communities in the United States.

outside of church. There is an emphasis on ritual with religion-as-tradition, but rituals are not necessarily tightly coupled with strict belief adherence.

Finally, when religion takes the form of ideology, it is highly articulated and there is a tight coupling between beliefs and behaviors. Religion affects most or all aspects of life, but in a more rigid way than with religion-as-common-sense (which accommodates wiggle room). A person who holds their religion as ideology sees their religion as something they have actively chosen, that is worth sacrificing for, and that is potentially at risk of being lost. Sociologists of religion have noted the ways that evangelical culture has adopted a religion-as-ideology approach as "embattled and thriving" (Smith and Emerson 1998). Likewise, religious fundamentalism, by its nature, is ideological in its reactionary stance towards modernism (Emerson and Hartman 2006).[6]

Most people grow up in families and local contexts where one cultural form of religious (or non-religious) beliefs is dominant. While a match between young people and their localized religious culture is common, some families contain diverse religious beliefs. Further, many adolescents reject their parents' beliefs, becoming secular (or religious), or taking on a different religious form (such as ideology or tradition, instead of common sense).[7]

Those who leave home to attend a residential college experience an environmental shift which creates new possibilities for grappling with personal beliefs and worldviews. Existing

[6] This brings up a broader point regarding the links between denominations and cultural forms. While specific cultural forms are more common in some denominations than others, people, groups, and congregations within denominations vary greatly in terms of how they carry their beliefs. For example, religion as tradition is more common in liturgical denominations. But a Catholic who decides to become a priest or deeply involved in the Catholic worker movement (e.g., a radical, all-encompassing orientation to faith) will carry faith as ideology, while a Catholic who only attends weekly mass will likely carry faith as tradition. Likewise, though evangelical churches generally take a more ideological orientation than mainline Protestant churches, this orientation may be common sense in rural Texas, but deeply ideological in San Francisco. Thus, the form that people's beliefs take cannot simply be determined by the denominations that they belong to.

[7] If a person chooses to reject the religious tradition of their family and local context, their new beliefs are countercultural and cannot be taken for granted, and thus will not take the form of common sense.

work examining religiosity in college has largely concluded that, while college does not make people lose their faith, it does lead to a decline in participation in institutional and communal forms of religious practice (Uecker et al. 2007). Yet this question continues to be debated. On one hand, exposure to pluralistic perspectives can challenge individuals' plausibility structures, throwing beliefs into question (Berger 2011). On the other hand, secularized cultural contexts can make rare religious commitments more salient through the process of "summoning" (Tavory 2016).[8]

Of course, no university is purely secular nor are universities culturally monolithic entities. But while modern universities contain a plurality of beliefs, tiny publics, and subcultures (Fine 2012), they are nevertheless deeply institutionalized entities. Frank and Meyer (2020) trace the ascendance of universities, arguing that they have become a central cultural linchpin and beacons of globalized, scientized, cosmopolitan modern culture. Universities institutionalize processes, like identity construction, and values, such as openness, tolerance, and diversity, that can conflict with the traditional values of religious communities (Jepperson and Meyer 2021). As Stevens, Armstrong and Arum (2009) suggest, universities act as the "temples" of secular modernity. Thus, in many ways, there are real tensions between competing "religions," with universities tethered tightly to a "religion" rooted in science, cosmopolitan global institutions, and individual actors as the authorized agents of progress (Frank and Meyer 2020; Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

Further, there is a longstanding relationship between higher education and religious institutions in American society, one marked by mutual engagement and struggle over cultural

[8] In his study of an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Hollywood, Tavory shows that living in a secular environment makes faith more salient by providing everyday opportunities to act in light of religious convictions, whether that means averting one's eyes from sexy billboards, brushing off discriminatory comments made by passersby, or making it to the synagogue on the Sabbath without pressing the crosswalk button.

influence (Marsden 1996). The specific group I studied (and most of its members) fall under the broad tent of evangelicalism, a complex, multifaceted religious movement that has become increasingly politicized and fractured in recent decades (Worthen 2013). Because of its association with the Religious Right, evangelical groups may exist in a particularly culturally fraught space on progressive campuses. At the same time, evangelical campus ministries are often chapters of national, parachurch organizations that provide resources and act as institutionalizing forces, not unlike campus political organizations (Binder and Wood 2013). These elements combine to form the broader cultural backdrop for the specific case that I study, creating a context of ideological contestation where students must navigate competing claims for their loyalty from various institutionalized entities on modern campuses.

METHODS

Empirical case

I draw on a two-year ethnography[9] with "Christian Fellowship" (hereafter, CF), one of the largest and most diverse Christian student groups at "Western University" (hereafter, Western), a prestigious, private university on the West Coast. I also draw on interviews that I conducted with 44 CF members, as well as supplementary interviews with Christian students and recent alumni involved in different Christian groups and at different universities (see Table 1 for details on the interview sample).

Western is a highly selective university, with an admit rate of less than 10% and less than 9,000 undergraduates. Over 90% of students live on campus for all four years, and like other prestigious, private universities, Western has a strong organizational culture, rife with myths and rituals (Dacin et al. 2010; Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2009). That said, Western is also

[9] Fieldwork began in September 2019. Regular fieldwork ended in October 2021, though I continued to stay in touch with the group and its members through May 2022.

diverse, with 10-12% international students (representing 50+ countries), 17-20% first generation college students, and a racially and ethnically diverse student population.

CF is a registered student organization and one of several Christian ministries at Western. It is also a chapter of a national organization that has other chapters on over 200 college campuses.[10] In any given year, CF has approximately 70 members and is diverse in terms of members' race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, political orientation, and denominational backgrounds (though most members come from Protestant denominations).[11] This is important for two reasons. First, the multi-faceted diversity of the group means that one cultural form of religious beliefs was not dominant among CF entrants and members. Second, the study of belief evolution in college has been largely separate from the study of how minority students (in terms of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status) navigate elite college contexts. In reality, and in the present study, these identities often intersect, especially in elite universities. Many deeply religious students are underrepresented minorities, first-generation college students, or from lower-income families. They have multiple rare identities that they must navigate simultaneously. Demographic differences are not disconnected from the kinds of religious subcultures students come from. As my findings demonstrate, both pre-college cultural

[10] An analysis of the organizational ecology of parachurch evangelical campus ministries is beyond the scope of the present article, and additional context on the specific theological positions of CF would make it impossible to protect the confidentiality of the group and its students. That said, CF's mission is similar to other evangelical, parachurch organizations – to connect people to Jesus Christ and help them grow in faith through participation in community. In terms of political orientation, CF (both nationally and on campus) does not align itself with the Religious Right or support Christian nationalism. While theologically conservative, the organization contains politically diverse members.

[11] Interviews and observational data both revealed that students usually did not select a campus ministry based on denominational (or even theological) alignment. The few mainline Protestant groups at Western have less than 15 members and are highly progressive, so most students from mainline Protestant backgrounds who wanted to join a Christian group funneled into evangelical groups like CF. While a few students visit many groups before selecting one, the vast majority commit to the first one that they visit or where they first make friends. The randomness in this selection process indicates that while there is some selectivity into CF – and very few Catholic members, for example – CF does contain denominational diversity. In addition, many students funnel in and out of religious groups over their collegiate journeys, some joining later in college and others joining initially then dropping out. While I can capture this variation, my study does not represent the kinds of religious students who never visit or join a campus religious group.

differences and pre-existing familiarity with elite educational institutions are consequential for students' religious strategies and trajectories.

Before outlining my empirical data, it is important to address the extent to which Western is secular. Christianity remains the dominant religion in the United States, though recent trends show an increase in religious nones.[12] At Western, approximately 27-30% of undergraduates identify as Christian (split between Catholics and Protestants), while approximately 50-60% identify as secular and 10% identify with other religions.[13] Given that over 40% of Western students identify with a religion, it is certainly not a fully secular environment. That said, many students that I interviewed experienced Western as deeply secular or opposed to Christian faith, a sentiment that usually stemmed from their (required) participation in institutionalized rituals like "Beyond Sex Ed" where older students share their sexual journeys in college.[14] Overall, Western is culturally pluralistic, and contains a multitude of identity-based groups with their own idiocultures. While focusing on a single group has inherent limitations, this strategy allowed me to develop a deep understanding of how people navigate their beliefs and a shared organizational context interactionally, over time. I believe that the variation in strategies and cultural forms that I observe within CF has applicability to a wider range of beliefs, group memberships, and institutional contexts (and supplementary interviews I conducted provide initial evidence that

[12] According to Pew Research, approximately 70% of Americans identify as Christian (about 25% are Evangelical Protestants, the primary focus group for this study), while 6% identify with other religions (Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.) and 23% identify as non-religious (atheist, agnostic, and "nothing in particular"). Data come from: https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/. See also Hout and Fischer (2002; 2014) on why an increasing subset of the American population has no religious preference.

[13] These statistics come from a separate dataset that longitudinally surveyed a representative sample of Elite U's class of 2017 (about half the class participated in the first survey wave). Western does not provide public information on the religious breakdown of each class, but the Class of 2017 is likely to be fairly similar to the classes represented in this study (who graduated as early as 2019 and will graduate as late as 2024).

[14] Organizational cultures, moreover, do not simply derive from the sum of their members. Both the faculty and staff/administration of Western may be more secular than the student population (Ecklund 2010; Gross 2013), and university administrators play a large role in shaping undergraduate culture (Patel 2018). While Western has religious iconography and symbolism (such as a university chapel), Christian students tend to see these symbols as history and art, not as a signal of vibrant religious life.

this is the case), though future research will be necessary to explore the broader relevance and limitations of my findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collected. During the two years of fieldwork, I spent 4-8 hours a week participating in CF events and building relationships with members, learning about their backgrounds, and observing how they navigated faith at Western over time. In total, I spent over 450 hours with CF and its members during the two-year period. I participated regularly in weekly rhythms including large group (a worship service), weekly life group (a small group bible study), and a variety of other events, such as outreach events, weekend retreats, social events, a "transitions class" for graduating seniors, and leadership team meetings. This participation strategy meant that I engaged with a subset of CF members multiple times per week (especially those in the small groups I participated in) and other members multiple times per month. I wrote field notes after each observation, spent time with group members in informal one-on-one and small group settings, and observed the group's mediated communications (GroupMe, Slack, email listserv, etc.). All fieldwork shifted to an online format in March 2020 given the coronavirus pandemic. I continued attending large group, life group, and other events over zoom, and then shifted to a hybrid format (in tandem with the group) in spring 2021.

I also conducted 49 semi-structured interviews with 44 CF members (some students were interviewed twice), as well as 10 comparative interviews with other Western students, Christian students and recent alumni from an elite university on the East Coast, and campus ministers at Western. Table 2 outlines the interview sample. In-depth interviews allowed me to understand contextual information about students' backgrounds prior to Western, as well as their narratives of their college journeys (and their strategies for navigating religion in college), and the role that

CF played in those journeys. I also learned about their lives beyond my observations in CF (their other commitments, friendships, etc.). While I conducted some interviews before I had built rapport with interviewees, most interviews occurred after I had known interviewees for multiple months and had an established presence in CF.

[insert Table 2 here]

This data collection strategy has multiple advantages. First, my level of rapport and background knowledge was much higher than if I had conducted interviews without fieldwork (Rinaldo and Guhin 2022). Second, my assessments of the predominant cultural form their religious identities embodied prior to college came not only from their responses to interview questions but also how they talked about their backgrounds in a variety of real-life settings. Similarly, my assessment of the strategies they adopted came not only from interviews, but also observing how they participated in CF as well as other aspects of campus culture. This was especially valuable with freshmen (I observed one cohort of freshmen in depth for two years and have observational and interview data with two subsequent cohorts of freshmen). With older students in CF (those who were sophomores, juniors, and seniors when my study began), I sought to capture contemporaneous accounts of prior cultural forms by relying on a variety of data beyond their personal narratives of pre-college religious beliefs: I learned about their family context, hometown context, the type of church and high school they attended not only through interviews, but also through observing and participating in informal conversations in a variety of settings. While I did not see their initial strategies of action firsthand, I rely on their accounts as well as peers' and leaders' accounts. To be sure, my data is not without limitations, especially that the limited time horizon of my observations requires some reliance on retrospective accounts. By drawing on in-depth knowledge of students' lives and religious journeys, gained

through many months of interactions, observations, and trust-building, I seek to mitigate these limitations, but also address the need for future research in the discussion.

Additional information on my interview recruitment strategy is available in **Appendix A**. I interviewed most actively involved CF members over the two-year period that I conducted this study. As I built relationships with members of the group, I typically invited them to participate in a research interview as part of the process of getting to know them. There were also opportunities for students to volunteer to do an interview even if I did not know them well, and times where I interviewed students after we already had known each other for many months. Interviews were semi-structured, recorded, and transcribed. They ranged from 1-3 hours in length and addressed students' religious and overall background prior to Western, how their faith (and other salient identities) evolved from freshmen year on, how they build relationships and connected with groups throughout college, the role of CF in their lives, their thoughts on Western as an institution, and how they have changed during their college years.

Analytic method. My analysis was abductive: a recursive process of 'double-fitting data and theories' by generating new explanatory hunches to make sense of surprising evidence (Timmermans and Tavory 2012:179). I was intrigued by how students' pathways diverged over their college journeys: some struggled deeply with faith at various points in their college journeys while others became much more religious or held beliefs that seemed largely "untouched" by their college experiences. Likewise, some delved into religious communities and became disengaged from broader campus culture, while others found ways to straddle both religious and secular realms. The longitudinal nature of my observations enabled me to see twists and turns in their strategies from multiple vantage points, both watching strategies evolve in real time (for younger students) and listening to older students recount their college journeys in

interviews. Through observations, it became clear that students' backgrounds, especially the role of religion in their home environments, played an important role in shaping their openness to, and participation in, various aspects of campus life. In light of this realization, I conducted additional interviews and followed up with students I had already interviewed to glean information about religious backgrounds while also categorizing students' general strategies of navigating faith at various points in their college journey. I expanded on this analysis through writing analytic memos and developing coding spreadsheets for first and second order codes. I also had undergraduate research assistants code interview transcripts to confirm interrater reliability and gain outside perspectives on the interview data, which I linked to my field observations (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012; Emerson et al. 2011).

Positionality. I am a White woman and a Christian. My family's socioeconomic status was primarily upper-middle class (though there were periods when my family was middle-class, such as when my mother was a single parent). I never attended an elite or private educational institution until graduate school. My own religious identity is an asset and a limitation in my work – I would undoubtedly see things differently in CF if I were not Christian. Desmond (2007) calls this form of ethnography becoming an "indigenous observer" or "going alien." I was quickly accepted as an "insider" at CF because of my identities as a Christian and a fellow student. These identities allowed me to participate in community rituals and deepened the trust that I was able to build with members (see Park [2013] for a similar approach). I was usually seen as a member of the community who is also doing a research project *on* the community. Students asked me about the research project often, providing opportunities for me to share findings and for them to share about social dynamics in the group they thought that I would find interesting for the study.

FINDINGS

The findings to follow outline how students' strategies are shaped by the ways they carried their religious beliefs when they entered Western. In the face of semiotic shifts, students' own beliefs were often cast in a new light. But semiotic shifts are not universally experienced: the aspects of a semiotic space that are "new" depend on students' cultural context prior to college. Further, even when axes are new, how beliefs are carried shape whether people engage in new practices and grapple with new ways of understanding their faith. Sociologists highlight three key dimensions of religious practice: belief, belonging, and behavior (Marshall 2002; Smidt 2019). I identify three primary strategies for navigating belief and belonging: *distancing* from religious community and reckoning with religious beliefs; *bridging* divergent and contradictory communities and beliefs; and *burrowing* into a religious community and bolstering religious beliefs. In the sections to follow, I discuss how students who carried their religious beliefs as common sense, tradition, and ideology when they entered college differentially interacted with Western as a semiotic space, which led them to adopt different strategies for navigating faith in college.

Beliefs as common sense leads to a distancing strategy

When people carry their beliefs as common sense, they are open to interacting with the new semiotic axes that they encounter through peers, groups, classes, and institutional rituals. Faith is taken-for-granted, which allows it to be loosely held rather than tightly protected. These students expected faith to continue to be easy to maintain in college, but their engagement with new ideas and practices brought unexpected challenges. Amidst these challenges, they often distanced from religious community and struggled with their religious beliefs.

For example, Lola, a Hispanic, first-generation college student, came from a home context (suburban Florida) where both she and her community held faith as common sense. She told me: "I was really involved in youth group, and I had an awesome Christian community." Her closest friends were all part of the large, Pentecostal church that her family attended. She was so involved in the church that her youth pastor once invited her to preach a sermon alongside him for hundreds of congregants.

I first met Lola at CF small group her second week on campus. She and Brad walked in late, laughing, but quickly hushed as they realized that the discussion had already started. As they settled into their chairs, Diego posed the first question: "what do you think grace is? Let's go around so everyone can answer." When her turn came, Lola answered:

> My mom has been on a spiritual journey lately. Recently, she came down the stairs and said, 'I had an epiphany: grace is when you get what you don't deserve, and mercy is when you don't get what you do deserve.' So, grace for me is about the consistency of God.

After everyone had answered, Diego posed the second question. *How do you receive grace?* Lola answered first this time. "I received grace when I was saved when I was six, but receiving grace is also an everyday thing because I mess up every day." Lola came from a family where matters of faith were woven into everyday conversation, and she carried this ease into college. When Diego asked if someone would close the small group with a prayer, Lola was quick to volunteer, highlighting her comfort with praying in front of others.[15]

Later that night, Lola and two other freshmen chatted about their dorms. "I *love* being in an all-frosh dorm," Lola said. I was intrigued, as these dorms are known for parties, hookups, and "transports" (where ambulances transfer students to the hospital for alcohol poisoning).

[15] This example highlights how the "skills" of Christian faith (answering questions in small group, praying in front of others) come naturally to Lola, not requiring conscious deliberation or effort, but instead coming quickly and effortlessly. Her religious beliefs and practices exist primarily in nondeclarative form (Lizardo 2017), a feature of beliefs as common-sense.

Anna, who came from a non-denominational, evangelical church and held faith as common sense, said:

> Yeah, I asked for an all-frosh dorm and Christian roommate, but I got put in a four-class dorm with a roommate who is the exact opposite. I was wondering, 'how is this going to play out?' But my dorm is *hype.* They are partiers, and I am not, but I do like to go to parties and have fun.

Lola nodded excitedly: "Yes! I go to parties and play mom for all my friends. I bring snacks, and I make sure everyone is okay. I am like, 'okay you all need to have a buddy.'" Lola has figured out her strategy for navigating parties, but this is a *new* skill, not one honed prior to college.

Students who carried their Christian beliefs as common sense when they arrived at Western often immersed themselves in the social life of their dorms and other secular, liberal subcultures (Lola, for example, also joined the theater community). Their attitude towards the new ideas and practices they encountered was one of curiosity and openness. Such encounters, though, complicated their relationship to faith, which could no longer be held as common sense.

For some, distancing and reckoning were subtle processes. Lola, for example, told me:

> Faith was a big part of my life. Has always been. College was, I definitely don't think…Freshman year, let's just say, was not the peak of my faith [chuckles]. Because honestly, I got really busy, and was processing things happening at home, but by being busy I was able to ignore them…I just stopped acknowledging the Lord. I was still going to CF, I had a relationship with God, but I really created distance between us, because I felt like I was not doing enough.

She went on to say:

> And I had a lot of non-Christian friends, I allowed them to speak into my life a lot. So, it was kind of this competing mental thing.

As she recounts, and I observed over the course of her first year, her initial strategy of immersing herself in multiple communities on campus and making friends with many people who had different beliefs than her created practical challenges, including "distance" between herself and

God. In her hometown and home church, it was easy to be Christian. But during her first year at Western, faith became challenging as she grappled with competing commitments.

Others who came from families and contexts where Christianity was common sense distanced more holistically from Christian community and reckoned with their faith. For example, Temi, an international student from Zimbabwe whose parents were pastors, told me:

> Coming [to Western], it was this disintegration, almost. Because I was exposed, for the first time, to a lot of people who didn't believe the same thing that I believed. And I had a lot of questions. Where I grew up, in my home church, there wasn't room for navigating those questions without people then judging you. So, I just kind of assumed that because I had those doubts, then that made me not a real Christian.

I met Temi her sophomore year. She was involved with the Center for African Studies, but I never saw her at CF, nor was she friends with CF members who lived in her dorm. Like Lola, Temi was grappling with new semiotic axes offered at Western. But coming from a home environment where Christianity was taken for granted, she began to believe that she was "not a real Christian." She said:

> A lot of my [religious] doubts had to do with my intersectional identities. Just understanding big issues, like why racism exists, why God allowed that. Why colonialism happened. Why am I embracing this colonial religion when religion was used as a tool of oppression for my ancestors?

This way of thinking about religion (e.g., Christianity as a tool of colonization) is familiar to people long embedded in elite, secular institutions, but for Temi, these ideas posed serious challenges. Embracing faith meant embracing a tool that had oppressed her ancestors. But rejecting faith meant distancing from her family and home community, where Christianity is woven into the cultural fabric. In a small group gathering her senior year, Temi described college as a difficult time in terms of faith: "I felt really far from God for my first two years of college" she said. In an interview, she told me that her initial strategy in college was to distance from other Christians:

> I distanced myself from Christian fellowship, that was my process of navigation. Yeah, having conversations with people somewhat, but also just ignoring it…Freshman year was 'Okay, I have questions. But I don't think I can ask them…I decided I was going to navigate more of the stuff away and on my own. Not wanting to be judged for my questions.

Another first year student, Jude, came to CF large group regularly during her first semester, but stopped coming entirely by spring semester. In an interview a month after she started college, she explained to me: "I come from a pretty Christian household; my mom is a very strong religious leader. Even before Admit weekend, she was looking for the Christian clubs, and expected me to continue that in college." She went on: "it's mostly for her, but also for me too, because college is overwhelming." Like Lola and Temi, Jude encountered new ideas at Western that she grappled with. For example, she said, "The use of pronouns is still new to me. Definitely didn't use that back at home or clarify that. But I also see the importance of it." She went on, "in the context of my family, I'm probably the most politically aware of the people that I'm at home with. But on campus, I feel like I'm *definitely* not." Because her faith was "pretty tied with family," rather than "a personal thing," her strategy was to distance from Christian peers in college, as she grappled with Western culture as first-generation college student and focused on dorm friendships instead.

An inhabited institutionalist perspective suggests that people will encounter semiotic axes in their organizational contexts through interpersonal interactions as well as encounters with embedded sub-groups and participation in rituals that present institutional myths. But there is variation in *how* people engage in these interactions that has remained unexplained: whether a person's interactive orientation is open and curious, or closed-off, cynical, and even oppositional. Students who came into college with religion as common sense tended to be in the former category: curious about and open to new ideas and practices. Because their faith often had not

been challenged, they did not expect challenges in their new organizational context. But as they wrestled with new paradigms (such as religion as colonialist enterprise) and practices (especially related to sexuality) their relationship to their faith became more complicated. In the face of cognitive and behavioral dissonance, some, like Temi, isolated themselves from Christian peers and questioned whether their faith was genuine at all. Beyond the cases presented here, many other students in my study whose religion took the form of common sense adopted a distancing strategy, though occasionally these students adopted a burrowing strategy or attempted to bridge, which often led to distancing from faith later in college.

It is important to note that most students who experienced religion as common sense had minimal exposure to elite educational institutions prior to college. They were not planning to enter a time of religious doubt, and used words like "shock" and "disintegration" to describe their experience. Undoubtedly, part of the intensity of this experience is multiple layers of unfamiliarity: figuring out how to relate to professors (Jack 2016), peers (Johnson 2019), and parties (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), among other things, is intensified when one is also figuring out how to relate to the core beliefs that one grew up with. We cannot understand these students' religious journeys without considering the broader costs they bear if they are navigating elite institutions without the cultural, social, and material capital that more privileged peers carry (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). I now turn to discussing how two other cultural forms of religion, tradition and ideology, shape students' strategies of action.

Beliefs as tradition leads to a bridging strategy

When beliefs are carried as tradition, people expect these beliefs to guide action in specific contexts (such as religious services, holidays, or major life events), but not in all contexts. In my case, students whose religion took the form of tradition often expected their

participation in religious and academic life on campus to proceed along parallel, disconnected tracks. But when these students joined campus groups like CF, this assumption was challenged.[16] Co-members and leaders pushed these students to take faith more seriously, leading many students to adopt a *bridging* strategy where they worked to integrate faith and the rest of life.

One example of this is Samuel, another first year in the small group I attended. Samuel came to Western from an upper-class family in Colorado, where he had attended a private high school that he described as "aggressively secular." Samuel's family is Lutheran, and faith played a small but consistent role in their lives: "It's definitely a quieter thing. We pray before dinner if we are all eating together, and that is pretty much it." With regards to church he said, "I was certainly kind of a lawn chair Christian, in the sense that I never really went to church except on Christmas and Easter…I couldn't tell you my pastor's name."

When he arrived at Western, he decided to visit a Christian group after seeing a CF flier in his dorm: "So I was like, okay, I will go to that. Because I didn't quite know if I should go to a church or a community [group]." It was a serendipitous decision, and this quote highlights that he was not sure what he was even looking for. In small group, Samuel had a different response than Lola to the question, "what does grace mean to you?" He said:

> I think – and this may seem offensive – that to me, grace is about tolerance. I want it to be about love, but for me it feels that God is just tolerating me even though I keep messing up. Maybe love is the next step, but right now I don't really feel that.

These divergent responses highlight different orientations to religion. Samuel was confused by the intimacy that students like Lola expressed in their relationship with God. Religion had never played a central role in his or his family's life, as it does for others in the group who carried

[16] Of course, some students with a traditional orientation to religion do not join groups like CF, instead joining groups that share their traditional approach, or de-prioritizing involvement in a religious community altogether. In those cases, students are unlikely to encounter a semiotic shift, and their strategy of compartmentalization is likely to remain consistent and go unchallenged. But as noted in the methods section, because evangelical groups at Western are larger, more diverse, and better equipped to foster community through their structural and substantive foundations (Vaisey 2007), many Christian students who carry faith as tradition do join groups like CF.

religion as common sense or ideology. Unlike Lola, Samuel would not have been comfortable closing the group in prayer, an uncomfortable exercise that would require conscious effort.

As I got to know Samuel over the course of his first year, it became clear that he found Western easier to navigate than many other freshmen, especially academically. He was selected as a Teaching Assistant for the flagship introductory Computer Science course his second quarter on campus after excelling in it his first quarter, and he joined the Consulting Club for his career goals. In contrast, *CF* was unsettling. This was particularly pertinent with different semiotic axes for career orientation:

> CF seems less career oriented to me. People don't really have four-year plans in CF, that is kind of a foreign thing to hear from freshmen. I don't really struggle with reconciling my spiritual life with my career life. God has given me these talents and he wants me to use them, right...But CF definitely seems to think that a bit less. It's not necessarily been uncomfortable for me, but it definitely feels different - having very specific career ambitions whereas that doesn't seem like something a lot of CF students have.

He explained how this shaped the way he sought advice from friends: "I think my dorm friends have a little bit more understanding of my Western problems than CF does, due to that career ambition disconnect." He went on:

> CF people kind of Christianize a lot of my problems. There are times where I don't need you as a Christian friend, I need you as a friend friend. It's helpful to hear "oh God is on your side for finding internships and for carving out that path." But it's also helpful to hear practical advice, like "bro, you just got to cut this company out of your life." If I isolate myself away from my dorm friends, it would be hard for me to get that realistic push - which is not to say that faith is unrealistic, but…(he trails off).

Samuel was perplexed by the way his peers in CF "Christianized" his problems and deprioritized career. For him, being career-oriented is common sense, as is the case for most students who come from socioeconomically privileged families (Horwitz et al. 2022).

In line with the context-bound nature of religion-as-tradition, Samuel tried to traverse different social worlds on campus - not seeking to unite them, but to belong to both. With his

Christian friends, he discussed spiritual matters. But he did not let go of his secular career goals: he sought out different friends who had those ambitions. Practically, he tried to be involved with CF without being "all in": he attended small group and worship regularly but skipped if he had too much to do. He did not attend fall retreat his first year, and he did not become a small group leader his sophomore year, which would have been too much to manage with other responsibilities. This approach links to one of the key characteristics of tradition as a cultural form: comfort with compartmentalization.

However, Samuel's CF co-members challenged this strategy, pushing him to consider new definitions of faith as "relevant to all aspects of life" and "worth sacrificing for." The proposal of these new meanings presented Samuel with a new way of thinking about the intersection of career and faith. As Samuel continued participation in this group, where the dominant axis for faith and career was one of integration, he adopted a bridging strategy where he sought to connect different aspects of life, merging previously parallel tracks. For example, during small group prayer requests one week, Samuel shared about family issues and an upcoming internship interview. Foundin, one of the leaders of the group, nudged him to go deeper: "But what about you? What are *your* spiritual needs?" Samuel deflected: "I am not sure...I'd have to think more about that" (field note 4-8-21). Another week, one of the leaders asked a standard opening question: "Is there anything God has been doing in your life this week?" Alejandro looked pointedly at Samuel. In response, Samuel said: "After a series of crushing rejections, I finally got an offer from [tech firm]...God was really with me for that one" (field note 2-4-21). Through his involvement with CF, Samuel began to talk about and see his faith and career pursuits as intertwined, integrating rather than compartmentalizing the two. He began to Christianize his own problems (and their solutions).

Another freshman in small group, Alejandro, also came from a wealthy family where religion took the form of tradition. Freshman year, Alejandro regularly came to small group, but almost always left early to meet his dorm friends. “Sorry to leave early again,” he interrupted sheepishly while glancing at his phone, “but I gotta get to this basketball game” (field note 10-18-19). Like Lola and Anna, Alejandro went to parties; but unlike them, he was comfortable drinking and sometimes “drank too much” (he reflected to me in an interview the summer after his freshman year). Once a quarter, CF does an outreach event called “Pancakes and Prayer” where they serve free pancakes to drunk students and others who are traversing campus late at night. While some freshmen involved with CF came to serve pancakes, Alejandro walked by with his dorm friends. While he greeted his CF peers, he did not acknowledge his membership in CF. From the vantage point of flipping pancakes, I sensed that this collision of social worlds was potentially awkward for him (field note 10-25-19).

But Alejandro, like Samuel, deepened his commitment to faith as time went on. After students were sent home during the coronavirus pandemic, he told me, “I realized that the dorm is not a lasting community” whereas CF “is a community that lasts beyond years.” Through a series of events beyond the scope of the present paper, Alejandro became one of the leaders in CF and it became his core community. Even so, Alejandro maintained close friendships with non-Christian peers, launching a start-up with two friends and living with former dormmates on Long Island for a quarter during the pandemic. His strategy shifted from compartmentalization to bridging, and he often discussed in small group his efforts to talk about faith with the non-Christians he lived with.

Another student who adopted and maintained a bridging strategy was Flavia. When I met her at fall retreat her junior year, she rattled off wide-ranging commitments (including varsity

athletics and campus politics, in addition to religious life). One of the few outspoken conservative women I had met, I asked whether it was difficult to be conservative at Western. She shrugged casually and said, "I am used to it. I was one of the only conservatives in my high school" (a prestigious, all-girls boarding school in Northern Virginia). While her political views remained untouched by Western, her involvement with CF challenged her understanding and practice of faith. She described her religious background as follows:

> My family is super political, and basically boycotted church because the Episcopal Church became too left-wing. Never found another church. They don't like the inter-class aspect of Christianity that much. It sounds really bad when I say it, but they were uncomfortable. The Episcopal Church in DC is very much an upper-class social club, and they weren't able to find an upper-class social club church that actually believes in the Bible - the eternal problem...So I was raised around a lot of Christian culture. My dad's parents are really religious. I was raised adamantly Lutheran, around a lot of Protestant culture. But I was not raised in a very faith-y background per se. It wasn't focused on faith; it was focused on tradition.[17]

Flavia explicitly identifies her religious background as oriented around "tradition" rather than faith. She was unsettled by the beliefs and practices she encountered in CF. She told me:

> I realized very quickly when I arrived at CF that it was not actually the kind of Christian that I was...but I thought that it would be good for my growth. Because there are a lot of kinds of Christianity besides what I was raised with, and it's important for me to push myself. I thought it would be challenging, which it is.

Flavia stuck with CF despite these challenges, but she did not give up other social commitments or her broader ambitions. One way this created tension was with regards to managing time:

> If you wanted to do something with CF, you could do something every day. It's insane…Most Western students would never sign up for that. They are like, "I don't have that kind of time." But CF somehow manages to have well attended events pretty much every day of the week.

[17] Is it possible that Flavia would have described her religious background differently before she attended Western? Perhaps somewhat. That said, religion-as-tradition is very common in Episcopalian and Lutheran churches, which are highly liturgical and oriented around ritual, and in Washington DC, a place where political commitments tend to trump religious ones. Further, Flavia recounted how she first recognized her family background as oriented in tradition in high school when she joined a Presbyterian youth group, suggesting this is not a post-hoc characterization driven by semiotic shifts in college.

Flavia came from a cultural context where religion existed comfortably on the periphery of life, not asking much of its adherents. Like Samuel and Alejandro, she encounters, in CF, people for whom religion is central and all-encompassing. By joining a close-knit community of Christians who embody different religious practices (such as prophesy or speaking in tongues), Flavia was pushed to reckon with her own (taken-for-granted) assumptions about how faith is practiced. While those who experienced religion as common sense were challenged to reckon with faith and often distanced from faith-based community, those who experienced beliefs as tradition were challenged to *deepen* faith commitments and found ways to bridge between contradictory sub-cultures.

Flavia, more than most others, brought separate social worlds together. Greg, CF's campus minister, told me that Flavia is a "phenomenal inviter" and single-handedly brought in at least half of the non-Christian guests that visited CF that year. At the pancakes outreach mentioned earlier, Flavia brought two friends from her varsity sports team (field note 10-25-19). She brought non-religious friends, not to eat pancakes but to serve them alongside her at an outreach event. She once brought me to a meeting for the contrarian publication she wrote for, where the other members thought I was a spy, which Flavia reported to me, with laughter, weeks later.

For some students, bridging involves a more extreme strategy shift where faith becomes central and competing commitments are sacrificed. For example, Mara came from a family that attended church, but where she attended a predominantly secular high school and did not have Christian friends:

> I went to a very secular high school. I was just really tired of that, and I was like I don't really want another four years of people bashing my beliefs and encouraging me to be really promiscuous and…I don't know, other stuff like that.

While she initially engaged in bridging, CF eventually became her core community. She said: “I have other friends and communities. But I wouldn't say that any of them come close to...none of them can come close to as important as CF is to me.” Regarding faith at Western, she reflected:

> Freshmen are confronted with this choice when they come here - their faith has to become their own, like they have to make their faith their own. And if they don't do it, they just kind of lose it, because it's not going to be thrown at them like it used to. And so, I definitely experienced that - having to make my faith my own.

Mara fully embraced the new meanings that CF offered, and her faith deepened substantially in college. Students like Flavia, Samuel, and Alejandro sought dual citizenship in social contexts marked by different topographies of meaning. But rather than keep these worlds separate, compartmentalizing faith, their membership in CF pushed them to integrate these worlds, talking about religion with secular peers and “secular” pursuits in religious settings.

Existing research highlights that bridging is interactionally complex work, often leading to dissonance and disruption by challenging unspoken interactional norms (Tavory and Fine 2020). For example, Tavory (2016) shows how Orthodox Jewish men often feigned distance from secular work peers in home and family life. What, then, makes bridging possible? In my observations, the students who engaged in bridging with the most ease were the ones who came from privileged families and were familiar with how to navigate elite educational institutions. We know that cultural capital makes academic pursuits easier (Jack 2019), which may free up space to focus on identity pursuits. Further, Khan (2021) argues that privileged youth are taught to be culturally omnivorous, which may apply to moral commitments as well. That said, in the present case, co-religious peers regularly challenged moral omnivorous-ness as inauthentic or hypocritical, and there is more to bridging than privilege. My findings suggest that the ability to bridge also seems to be rooted in comfort with paradox, contradiction, and complexity (which

link to the features of tradition as a cultural form), and to former religious and political diversity in personal networks.

Beliefs as ideology leads to burrowing

When religious beliefs are carried as ideology, its holders have interrogated and reflected upon what they believe and why they believe it. Further, significant attention is dedicated to achieving a tight coupling between beliefs and actions. Notably, many students who held faith as ideology were eager to engage with peers who had different beliefs than them and expected to pursue a bridging strategy in college. However, the semiotic space of Western proved more difficult to navigate than expected, and they often burrowed into subgroups where others shared their beliefs.

Rebecca was the first student that I met in small group. I introduced myself as "studying religious life." As we waited for others to join, Rebecca said to me, "what exactly about religious life are you studying?" She kept an eye on me throughout the evening, making sure I knew how to find the verses that we were reading. In the conversation about dorm parties, Rebecca listened to Lola and Anna, then said, "I would not be comfortable taking care of someone when they are drunk. I am really relieved that my roommate does not drink" (field note 10-4-19). Rebecca had chosen a four-class dorm on the opposite side of campus that is known to be a haven for students uninterested in partying.

When I interviewed Rebecca during her first semester on campus, she told me that her parents had worked in ministry with college students, and how she had watched YouTube videos to learn about faith-based arguments for difficult questions before coming to college. When she first arrived on campus, she explained that she was uncomfortable with aspects of her dorm, such as her hall being themed around LGBTQ history. She said: "it does not bother me, because I

know that I have my views and other people have their views. But it is a bit in your face sometimes, I guess. And I know I cannot say my views, or some people won't be friends with me." Unlike the freshmen highlighted in previous sections, Rebecca struggled to make friends in her dorm. Instead, she sought to form friendships through CF:

> I am focusing on putting more of my time into CF…To be around people who share my values is nice, because it's really easy. And I do not feel like I need to, not hide but dampen my [trails off]. I can say my thoughts without being judged. So, I am putting my energy into those things.

Another student whose religion took the form of ideology was James, a White, first-generation college student from Southern California. I first met James at CF's super bowl party, as he sat reading a textbook on logic. He explained to me: "Here at Western, a lot of classes unfortunately assume an atheistic starting place. So, I do a lot of reading and supplementing on my own, as I am doing now." Later James told me how he was able to pinpoint the day that he started "taking faith seriously," which was "the beginning of a search to engage [his] intellect with God." One of the core markers of culture taking the form of ideology is articulation. Students like James are well-versed in the intellectual and theological aspects of their faith. While some, like Rebecca, come from families where religion is held as ideology, others, like James, described a shift prior to college where they made faith "their own," becoming more religious than their families.

James told me: "I knew Western was going to be thoroughly secular. I spent the summer [before college] preparing for that...studying apologetics for four hours a day." Just as James carries faith as ideology, he also views Western as an ideological space. He expects that his faith is going to be challenged, that he is entering an ideologically contested terrain. The semiotic shift is pre-determined by the narrative he enters college with, and he is not open to grappling with new meanings or practices. As an evangelical organization embedded in a progressive research

university, CF aligns with faith-as-ideology, rather than faith as tradition or common sense. To some extent, the university context requires that CF regularly articulates its beliefs and practices as an organization – very little can be taken for granted. But more broadly, CF exists in dialogue with the campus, constantly differentiating itself from Western's taken-for-granted and articulated stances on things ranging from hook-up culture, to diversity, to the pursuit of wealth and prestige. As such, groups like CF are, in many ways, a natural home for students like James.

Seth came from a different context than James, but his home environment also led him to view religion *and* Western through ideological lenses and to adopt a burrowing strategy. Seth's parents were overseas missionaries, so he was used to holding a rare religious identity. Seth's recounting of how he decided to attend Western highlights his ideological orientation:

> I didn't know that Western existed until my junior year in high school. I had originally applied to Wheaton and other schools, and I got into Wheaton and I thought I was going to go there. And then when I got into Western, I was like, 'okay, hold up. I want to pray about this. I don't want to go to Western because it's a big-name school. I want to really make sure that that's where God wants to take me.' So, after a week of prayer, I decided that God is sending me to Western, just as much as a missionary as a student.

Seth planned to go to an evangelical college where others would share his faith. Instead, he felt God was calling him to Western as a witness for his beliefs. Like James and Rebecca, Seth *planned* to adopt a bridging strategy. But regarding his initial weeks on campus, he said: "I knew it was going to be very secular. But I didn't realize how sheltered I had been…from raw West Coast culture. So, new student orientation - definitely a shock." He went on: "I realized very quickly that my faith is going to be a sink or swim deal. And it was clear to me that I wanted to swim, and I wanted to learn to swim well."

Seth found CF before classes began. He saw CF tabling and struck up a conversation with Greg, the campus minister. "I asked him all sorts of theological questions - what they believe about the Bible. About the Holy Spirit. Hot topics, like women in ministry or LGBTQ issues. I

did not agree with him on everything, but he answered very biblically, in my opinion." This approach differs from most students I talked to. Students with common-sense faith visited CF because it felt familiar and reminded them of home (or because their parents told them to, as was the case with Jude). Students with traditional faith visited CF serendipitously, because their friends went, or because they wanted to push themselves to explore their religious identities in college (as was the case with Samuel and Flavia). By contrast, students like Seth intentionally sought out groups that aligned with their theological positions, seeking consistency rather than new meaning and practices.

Seth told me that his "closest friends are all people in CF." By senior year, he was serving as CF's student president. Seth's intended strategy, to share faith with others, did not play out. Greg told me about a meeting he had with Seth halfway through his first quarter on campus. Seth told him: "I am really discouraged. I have been sharing my faith with so many people and I have not seen anyone come to faith." Greg laughed and explained to Seth that ministry looks different at Western than it does in a country where people may have never heard of Christianity. Seth shifted his approach: "my ministry at Western became much more discipleship geared. In raising up already believers and making them stronger believers, teaching them spiritual habits and disciplines." College was a time of continuation and deepening faith, as was the case for James and Rebecca. Each of these three became core members of CF by the end of their freshmen year and continued as leaders in the group throughout college. Most students in this study whose religion took the form of ideology burrowed into CF, but a few attempted to bridge instead. This strategy proved difficult to maintain, and these students usually fell to one side or the other by their second year of college, some disengaging from faith entirely and others doubling down on a burrowing strategy.

Existing cultural theory leads us to expect that those who held religion as ideology might be most unsettled by becoming immersed in a context like Western, given that these students' beliefs are most different from the dominant culture on campus (Swidler 1986; Vaisey 2009). But when we consider the existence of tempered radical groups (Meyerson and Scully 2005) and counter publics (Fraser 1990) within organizational contexts, it makes sense how a commitment to religion (or politics [Binder and Kidder 2022; Binder and Wood 2013]) as ideology may *deepen* in a context like Western through involvement in a group like CF. It is possible to avoid interacting with new meanings and practices, almost entirely, if oppositional subcultures are available. Burrowing, though, is still noteworthy in that it is not the strategy that we might expect considering how culture-as-ideology is viewed as "worth fighting for" (and importantly, students themselves did not plan to adopt a burrowing strategy). Interacting with new semiotic axes is the first step to challenging these axes, but without shared meanings to draw upon, such interactions become untenable, and burrowing occurs instead.

DISCUSSION

My goal in this article is to advance theorizing on how personal culture shapes strategies of action as people enter new organizational contexts that come with semiotic shifts. Existing cultural theories have not accounted for when and why people change strategies, and why some people's beliefs evolve as they shift contexts while others double down on their current beliefs in the face of alternative meanings and practices. The practical relevance of this theoretical puzzle is evident, as we are in a time marked by extreme political polarization where civil societies are fracturing. Bridging has become increasingly rare; burrowing has become the norm.

I bring insights from toolkit, cognitive, and institutionalist theories into dialogue to theorize how variation in personal culture shapes strategies of action in the face of semiotic shifts. I build on a distinction originally made by Swidler (1986) regarding the modal forms that that culture takes and connect this to more recent theorizing on the distinction between declarative and nondeclarative personal culture (Lizardo 2017). I argue that beliefs (as one key element of personal culture) vary in terms of whether they are held primarily as common sense, tradition, or ideology. I develop three dimensions of these cultural forms: level of articulation, coherency, and context-boundedness (see Table 1). I then theorize three modal strategies of action for how people relate to their beliefs amidst institutional transitions. Finally, I argue that carrying beliefs as common sense leads to a *distancing* strategy, carrying beliefs as tradition leads to a *bridging* strategy, and carrying beliefs as ideology leads to a *burrowing* strategy. This process model is summarized in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

I applied this theory to an ethnographic case where I sought to understand why people adopted divergent strategies of action: a community of Protestant Christian students navigating faith in a progressive, elite research university on the West Coast. Those who entered college with *common sense* Christian beliefs were open to the new semiotic axes they encountered in classes, dorms, and student groups. Engaging with these semiotic axes led students to distance from religious communities and reckon with their beliefs. Though many of them ultimately maintained or returned to faith, such faith is held on the other side of reckoning with tough issues, no longer taken for granted. Those who carried Christian beliefs as *tradition* were also challenged by new semiotic axes. But unsettling interactions came from their encounters with Christian peers more often than the dominant culture of Western. They were pushed to make

faith more central to their lives, to "Christianize" their problems (and ultimately, their lives), as Samuel aptly put it. Instead of traversing separate secular and religious spaces, they engaged in bridging, finding ways to integrate the two. Finally, those who carried their Christian beliefs as *ideology* burrowed into Christian subcultures, and their religious commitments remained largely untouched by their new context. Though they intended to engage in multiple spheres of campus life, dialoguing with others who hold different beliefs, this proved challenging. They lacked clarity on how to engage with the norms and practices they observed, from hookup culture (Hirsch and Khan 2020) to the unquestioned pursuit of high-status careers (Binder et al. 2016) and made their home in Christian Fellowship instead.

These findings advance theorizing on how culture shapes action in two ways. First, I deepen existing dialogues between cultural and organizational theories by highlighting the central role that organizational context plays in shaping how people navigate their own personal culture. The cognitivist turn in cultural sociology has helped us understand large scale trends in beliefs and attitudes (Kiley and Vaisey 2020; Brońić and Miles 2021), but lost sight of the interactional and organizational situations that lead to belief change and continuity. Second, the typologies that I develop for how people carry their beliefs and their strategies for navigating beliefs in moments of transition are applicable to other kinds of beliefs (especially political beliefs), and potentially to understanding variation in ideological communities as well (Martin 2002).

A few limitations are important to note. First, further research is needed to elaborate the mechanisms explaining the links between cultural forms and strategies of action, though my findings offer initial insights. The link between ideology and burrowing is perhaps most intuitive. Because ideologies are strict and all-encompassing, there is little room for dissent or

grappling with new meanings. Burrowing is often necessary to keep rigid belief systems intact. But why does common sense lead to distancing? Common sense beliefs are more loosely held because they were taken for granted. Such beliefs often have not withstood challenges. Students like Lola and Temi were not afraid to immerse themselves in contexts that presented new semiotic axes, but these contexts led to questions that complicated faith. Why might tradition lead to a bridging strategy? Culture as tradition embraces context-boundedness. This allows its holders to adopt chameleon-like, "when in Rome" strategies that enable participation in multiple social worlds. However, peers who do not hold culture as tradition challenge this strategy as hypocritical and contradictory, pushing for bridging rather than bifurcation.

Second, I focus here on *initial* strategies that were enacted, but as individuals become accustomed to such contexts, secondary (and tertiary) shifts occur. Indeed, the students in my study often engaged in multiple strategies over the course of their time at Western. A systematic examination of these secondary shifts is beyond the scope of the present paper, but worthy of examination. It is possible that different mechanisms might be at work as individuals enter new temporal windows and their strategies of action shift again.[18] Theorizing the key temporal moments for semiotic shifts is an important area for future research.

This brings up another important limitation: I cannot fully address endogeneity concerns, given that I did not observe or interview students prior to their entrance into Western. For many of the students highlighted, I met them in their first weeks on campus and interacted with them regularly for their first two years of college. While I conducted formal interviews at different moments in their college journeys, spending time with them week after week allowed me to track

[18] Mara, for example, began college with beliefs as tradition, but after spending most of college very involved with CF, left more in line with a view of her religious beliefs as ideology. A few students who began with ideology eventually experienced crises of faith, and many with common sense faith who initially distanced returned to their religious roots later in college.

how their religious identities and relational strategies evolved over time and gain insight on their pre-college context in many ways beyond formal interviews. For others, I met them later in college. Thus, I rely on retrospective accounts of how their first years on campus unfolded. That said, I built rapport with these students over months of fieldwork, allowing me to establish a high degree of trust prior to interviews. For older students, I gained insight on their initial strategies of action, not only through their narratives of their college journeys, but also through the perspectives of others (their friends and mentors in CF).

In **Appendix B**, I provide additional information about how I assessed what religious cultural form students entered college with. I draw on narrative accounts of religious journeys prior to college as well as information about background context that is unlikely to be shaped by retrospective reconstruction (such as how often their family attended church, pre-college religious denomination, the type of high school they attended, and religious demographics in hometowns).[19] But I cannot fully address concerns of reverse causality: it is possible that how their faith journeys evolved in college shaped their narratives of religious identity upon entering college. Future work ought to expand the temporal window to examine cultural forms before people enter new institutional contexts that bring about semiotic shifts.

Finally, my ethnographic focus on a specific group, Christian Fellowship, brings inherent limitations. CF is not a culturally neutral entity, and the students who join CF are not representative of religious, or even Christian students at Western. My analysis thus highlights the interaction between personal culture and encounters with new ideas and practices through both embedded groups (like CF) and broader organizational contexts (like Western). My goal is not to

[19] Appendix B shows that both denominational affiliations and demographic characteristics are correlated with how religion is carried. But neither are proxies for cultural forms because cultural forms depend on the interaction of multiple factors (such as (mis)alignment between family, denomination, and hometown) as well as students' life experiences, such as whether they underwent a significant religious change or attended a prestigious secular high school prior to college.

develop a generalizable theory about religious change in college (which would require a different sampling strategy) but to advance cultural theory using the case of a religious community. CF is a site of cultural contestation, where people face the practical challenge of how to navigate rare beliefs that are deeply important to them (Magolda and Ebben Gross 2009). Thus, I expect the theory put forth here to be relevant in other sites of cultural contestation where people seek to maintain rare beliefs, identities, or commitments.

Western, likewise, provides a strong empirical context for the present analysis, but it is not representative of higher education institutions more broadly. As a residential university where most students live on campus for all four years, Western is more "total" than most universities (Goffman 1961). As a private, well-resourced organization, it can deploy significant resources for socialization activities that present myths and values through shared rituals. And as a relatively small school (less than 9,000 undergraduates), members experience more pressure to grapple with new meanings and practices than they would in larger universities with weaker organizational cultures. I turn now to considering the additional theoretical implications of these findings for scholarship on education, inhabited institutions, and religion.

Contributions to the sociology of education. I am not the first to examine how culture shapes action in higher education settings. Sociologists of education have examined the challenges that minority groups face in navigating elite educational environments (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Stevens et al. 2008). For highly privileged students, college is often a continuation of the cultural tools they have long honed. As Jack (2019) highlights, even among less advantaged students, some can draw on cultural tools they developed while attending wealthy high schools (see also Khan 2021), while those who come from less-resourced schools are doubly disadvantaged. In terms of strategies, scholars such as Carter (2006) and Johnson

(2019) have shown how low-income Black and Latinx youth navigate the boundaries between school and peer contexts, identifying strategies that have resonance with the ones offered here.

My findings complement and extend this work by showing how strategies are shaped by cultural forms and matter, not only for academic performance, but also identity work. Scholars of higher education have long recognized that residential colleges are a crucible for identity formation (Baxter Magolda 2007; Chickering and Reisser 1993; Mullen 2010). We know that much of the identity work that happens in college occurs outside the classroom (Chambliss and Takacs 2014). But to date, the question of how students decide what identity groups to join has remained unanswered, limiting our ability to understand divergent identity trajectories that occur in college. The three strategies that I discuss – distancing, burrowing, and bridging – are applicable to multiple kinds of identities, as is the process of encountering semiotic shifts in educational institutions.

These strategies are not neutral in their implications for students' lives. Higher education institutions tend to promote, and even promise, bridging*:* that students will gain new ideas, skills, and networks without losing their former identities, commitments, and social ties. But in my study, the students who successfully adopted bridging strategies came from privileged families and had prior experiences with elite, secular educational environments. By contrast, those who distanced (and many of those who burrowed) came from less privileged backgrounds and had multiple minority identities they simultaneously navigated during their college experience. Scholars and practitioners in higher education ought to be attuned to the possibility of distancing and burrowing, not only in terms of how students relate to their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic identities, but also to their core beliefs.

Further, sociologists of education often fail to consider how religion intersects with other identities in ways that shape educational outcomes (Horwitz et al. 2022). Religion plays a central role in the lives of many underrepresented students. In this study, the students who were most unsettled (and who came from the most deeply religious communities) were lower-income students of color. Considering religious identity as an additional layer of intersectionality (and the ways it interacts with other intersectional identities [Crenshaw 2017]) is critical for fully understanding students' experiences and addressing inequality within university environments.

Contributions to institutional theory. Central to my argument is that debates in cultural sociology can be fruitfully advanced by attending to the ways that organizational contexts bring about semiotic shifts. Indeed, encounters with new and unsettling semiotic axes can be expected in any culturally complex and organizationally heterogeneous society where people are crossing boundaries. Theoretically, I borrow insights from institutional theorists, but the idea of semiotic shifts also contributes to existing scholarship on how institutions are inhabited and how tempered radical groups operate.

The process of grappling with semiotic axes is fundamentally interactional, which aligns with inhabited institutionalism (or II) (Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Hallett and Hawbaker 2019). II aims at addressing how institutions change, which is different from my focus here on how people change (more specifically, how their strategies of action evolve based on the interaction between the culture they carry and the organizations they inhabit). II is “a mesosociological framework for examining the recursive relationships among institutions, interactions, and organizations,” where scholars “shift their gaze away from individuals and toward social interactions” (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021:3). For examining institutional change, this shift in gaze may be essential. But for deepening our understanding of how culture shapes people’s

strategies of action, any dichotomy between individuals and interactions becomes unproductive. My gaze is on how individuals are shaped by the range of interactions they participate in (and do not participate in) during college. Individuals' identities are constituted through their ongoing interactions and dialogue with their significant others (Taylor 1992). These significant others may not only be individuals, but also organizations and institutions. Culture matters because it guides people in deciding what interactions to participate in, what semiotic axes to dance with.

For inhabited institutionalists, my findings suggest that a gaze toward interactions may be enhanced, rather than diluted, by attending more closely to the interlocutors themselves. It is a simple but important point that the same interaction takes on very different meanings based on who is having it, and how a particular interaction is situated in the broader temporal context of a relationship (whether that relationship is between individuals, organizations, institutional myths, or any combination of the three). To fully understand how interactions shape institutional continuity and change, institutionalists may need to more closely consider the interactors involved, and the personal culture they carry, both consciously and unconsciously (Lizardo 2017).

A religious student group within a university is a peculiar context for organizational scholars, so I briefly consider how semiotic shifts might apply in other settings. Meyerson and Scully (1995) developed the concept of tempered radicals for individuals embedded within organizations that they are both committed to and hope to change. Tempered radicals, which can be both individuals and groups, can be seen as challenging the dominant semiotic axes their nesting organizations offer, and putting forth new axes from *within* these institutions. In other words, semiotic shifts are not only experienced: they are also intentionally brought about by micro-level social movements within organizations (Kellogg 2009). Likewise, Sarah Soule

(2009) and colleagues (King 2016; McDonnell, King and Soule 2015) have examined anti-corporate activism, which occurs both within corporations and outside them. Here, too, we see a rejection of dominant semiotic axes that corporations have long relied upon to guide what can be taken for granted, as activists challenge corporate common sense and push for things like corporate social responsibility and anti-racism. Further, in civic organizations, groups grapple with new semiotic axes and work together to establish common meanings that can be collectively held in their civic endeavors (Fine 2021; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014; Lichterman 2008). By understanding when people hold certain beliefs as common sense, tradition, or ideology, we can better understand their strategies for navigating different kinds of organizations, as well as collective efforts to change organizations and institutions.

Contributions to the sociology of religion. My findings also have implications for the sociology of religion, where scholars have long examined when and why individuals undergo religious change (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Phillips 1980). Specifically, semiotic shifts can help explain the divergent theoretical intuitions on whether secular institutional contexts help or hinder religious beliefs (Berger 2011; Tavory 2016). Both, I argue, are possible depending on the extent to which the institutional environment offers new semiotic axes and the extent to which people engage with religious sub-communities within secular institutions. It is well-established that the kinds of community individuals embed themselves in – or distance themselves from – matter for deepening and loosening religious commitments. But this paper suggests that an underlying mechanism for why community matters is that participation in groups changes people's semiotic landscapes. This links to Tavory and Swidler's (2009) findings: couples were constantly negotiating and challenging the meaning of condoms; for example, trying to convince partners that condom use is not incompatible with love and trust.

When it comes to religion, interactions can bring about semiotic shifts in two ways. First, they can shift the universe of discourse. Temi's reckoning in college around religion's role in colonization fundamentally shifted how she understood Christianity. Second, encountering new kinds of religious people can generate semiotic shifts. For example, if one believed that evangelicals were bigoted, conservative, and simple-minded but met evangelicals in college who were liberal, kind, and intellectually rigorous, that could shift a person's perceptions of Christianity more broadly. The opposite is also true: if one encountered judgmental or racist religious peers, this could raise religious doubts. Even if people do not change their beliefs, new semiotic environments often require that once taken-for-granted beliefs must be defended and articulated. This process often leads to religious change, sometimes deepened religious commitments through learned articulation, and other times, deconstruction through reckoning with difficult issues. Future work is needed to consider how the concept of semiotic shifts applies in other institutional settings, with different religious groups, and in different life stages where beliefs and strategies may be less susceptible to change.

Conclusion. Overall, this paper extends existing scholarship on how culture shapes action by revealing the ways that strategies change when individuals encounter new institutional contexts. In the face of semiotic shifts, one's own personal culture is laid bare and drawn upon in order to decide how to move forward and what interactions to pursue and sustain. I expect that the links between common sense and distancing, tradition and bridging, and ideology and burrowing will apply in many settings. But future work is needed to test this expectation with different kinds of beliefs, institutional contexts, and semiotic shifts. Ultimately, understanding these links has the potential to help us address a significant challenge we face in modern times:

how to build cohesive institutions and ultimately, societies that contain a wide plurality of beliefs, meanings, and values.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1. Process model of how cultural forms shape strategies of action.

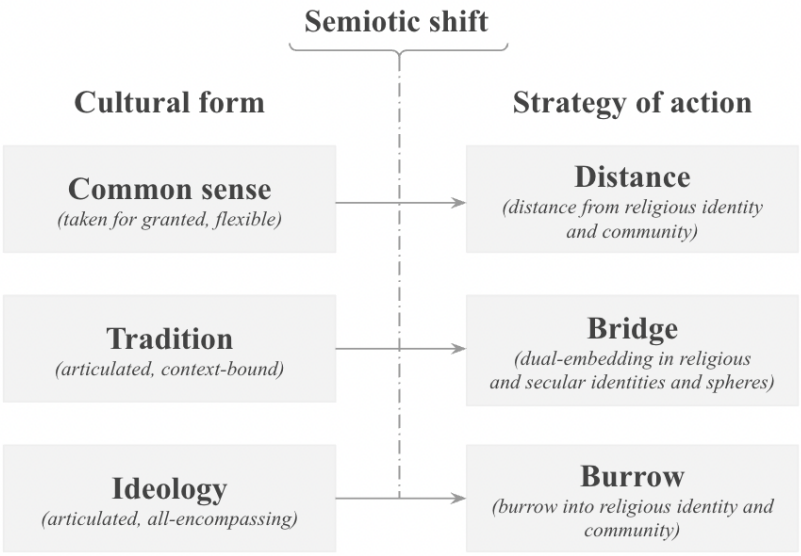

Table 1. Conceptualizing three ideal-typical forms of culture.

Cultural form	**Definition (adapted from Swidler 1986)**	**Level of articulation**	**Level of coherency**	**Level of context boundedness**	**Application to religion**
Ideology	Highly articulated belief systems, offering unified answers to problems of social action	High	High	Low	Religious beliefs are highly articulated and offer strict, holistic answers for how to act
Tradition	Semi-articulated belief systems, offering bounded answers to problems of social action	Medium	Medium	High	Religious beliefs are articulated and offer context-bound answers for how to act in some settings
Common sense	Taken for granted belief systems, offering flexible answers to problems of social action	Low	Low	Low	Religious beliefs are taken-for-granted (as "how the world works") and offer flexible, holistic answers for how to act

Table 2. Overview of interview sample.

Interview type	**N**	**%**
Western University Christian	44	73 %
Western University non-Christian	3	5%
"Ivy" Christian	3	7%
Campus minister / religious life staff	4	7%
Follow up interviews	5	8%
Demographic categories (n=50, excludes campus ministers)		
Gender		
Man	25	50 %
Woman	25	50 %
Race/ethnicity		
Asian	17	34 %
Black	7	14 %
Latinx	3	6%
Native American	3	6%
White	16	32 %
Mixed/other	4	8%
International student		
Yes	6	12 %
No	44	88 %

Identify as FLI (first-generation and/or low income)		
Yes	12	24 %
No	38	76 %
Empirical categories (n=47, excludes Western non-Christians)		
Cultural form of religious practice		
Common sense	10	21 %
Tradition	21	45 %
Ideology	11	23 %
Hybrid	5	11%
Initial strategy of action		
Distance	10	21 %
Bridge	18	38 %
Burrow	14	30 %
Hybrid	5	11%

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Interview recruitment strategy and guide

In recruiting students for interviews, I first announced the opportunity to do an interview with me for a research project at CF's large group gathering three weeks into fall semester in

2019. Twenty-five students expressed interest, and I was able to schedule and conduct interviews with fifteen of these students. After that initial wave of interviews, as I became more embedded in the field site, I began reaching out to individuals directly to do interviews. I interviewed every regular member of the small groups that I observed during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic year, the majority of CF's "core" members, and many periphery members. I interviewed students who joined CF later in college as well as those who joined their freshmen year, and added new interviewees in the 2020-21 academic year when a new cohort of freshmen came in. I conducted formal longitudinal interviews with seven students, and informal "catch-up" conversations with eight students that I interviewed. Interviews ranged from 1-3 hours in length and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The baseline interview guide is included below, though interviews were semi-structured, and I prioritized follow-up questions on interview topics that were important to students over asking every question. That said, some questions were asked in all interviews which are bolded below. In terms of comparative interviews, I used snowball sampling to recruit non-Christian students at Western and a small subset of Christian alumni from a different elite university (some of whom were involved with CF's local chapter at that university). I also interviewed campus ministers at Western (who led the other main evangelical groups on campus) and leaders of CF chapters at different campuses (who I was connected to by Greg, CF's campus minister) to gain a broad set of perspectives on the trends I observed and additional context on the culture of Western.

Appendix B. Background context for pre-college cultural forms of religion (includes respondents featured in text as well as additional examples for each cultural form)

Pseudonym	**Cultural form of religion**	**Rural / Suburban / Urban hometown**	**Geographic region of hometown**	**Denomination**	**Family religiosity**	**Predominantly secular high school**	**Distinguished own / family faith prior to college**	**Social Class**
Foundin	Common sense	Rural	Midwest	Non-denominational	High	No	No	Lower class

Lola	Common sense	Suburban	South	Pentecostal	High	No	No	Lower class
Abisola	Common sense	Rural	International	Pentecostal	High	No	No	Lower class
Hope	Common sense	Suburban	Midwest	Non-denominational	High	No	No	Lower class
Jude	Common sense	Suburban	West	Non-denominational	High	No	No	Lower class
Temi	Common sense	Rural	International	Pentecostal	High	No	No	Lower class
Aria	Common sense	Suburban	South	Black Protestant	High	No	No	Middle class
Tara	Tradition	Urban	Southwest	Non-denominational	High	No	No	Upper class
Brad	Tradition	Suburban	South	Episcopalian	Medium	Yes	Yes	Upper class
Samuel	Tradition	Urban	West	Lutheran	Low	Yes	No	Upper class
Alejandro	Tradition	Urban	Southwest	Non-denominational	Medium	Yes	No	Upper class
Mara	Tradition	Urban	West	Non-denominational	Medium	Yes	No	Upper middle class
Flavia	Tradition	Urban	Mid-Atlantic	Episcopalian	Low	Yes	No	Upper class
Anna	Tradition	Urban	West	Chinese Evangelical	Medium	Yes	No	Middle class
Matt	Ideology	Rural	Northeast	Non-denominational	High	No	Yes	Upper class
Rebecca	Ideology	Suburban	West	Non-denominational	High	No	Yes	Middle class
Finny	Ideology	Urban	International	Non-denominational	High	Yes	Yes	Middle class
Seth	Ideology	Urban	International	Lutheran	High	Yes	Yes	Middle class
Tim	Ideology	Suburban	West	Chinese evangelical	High	Yes	Yes	Upper middle class
James	Ideology	Suburban	West	Non-denominational	Medium	Yes	Yes	Lower class
David	Ideology	Suburban	Midwest	Non-denominational	Medium	Yes	Yes	Upper middle class