

# Investigation of the Dimensions of Spirituality at the Center for Mind and Culture

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Application Contact Information

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# (Student Name)

Portland, Oregon • (email) • She/They

Dear Undergraduate Awards Committee,

Over the course of the last year I have enjoyed digging into higher level courses in religious studies, and working with my professors and peers to dive into more complex thought and specifics in religions of interest. I am eager to continue my work in religious studies this summer. While I found quite a few compelling opportunities in research that focus on historical aspects of religion, I had trouble finding work that related to my own interests within the discipline: namely, work that focuses on living members of religious communities, and how spiritual and religious meaning is changing in the 21st century.

Through Google Scholar, I searched a variety of key terms with hopes of discovering how religious communities were coping with and practicing their faith during the pandemic. I ended up finding an article published by Dr. Wesley Wildman about religion during the COVID-19 pandemic that looked specifically at how communities should make decisions about whether to meet or not. This work was so timely, and I was excited to engage with a professor interested in contemporary applications of religion. I reached out to Dr. Wildman, who works at the Boston University School of Theology, and he was kind enough to set up a Zoom call with me. He explained that he had multiple potential projects going on, and pointed me in the direction of the Dimensions of Spirituality Project, at the Center for Mind and Culture in Boston. In this lab, Dr. Wildman and his team developed a tool to trace and record 'spirituality' through an individual, narrative approach. They identified several different dimensions on which the concept of spirituality can be mapped and measured.

My favorite classes at Reed have been religion courses that focus on the mystical element of religion -- experiences that cannot fully be described or measured due to their uniqueness. That ineffable quality entrances me, and I imagine my thesis will focus on this in part. With this in mind, Dr. Wildman's Center for Mind and Culture lab appeals to me because I will get to work with data that allows me to more concretely track and quantify differences in experience, and better understand how individuals are perceiving their own religious experiences. During my summer project, I will work with undergraduate students and postdoctoral researchers to discuss and analyze survey results for the Dimensions of Spirituality Inventory (DSI), a 50-item survey designed to measure 21 dimensions of spirituality and a semi-structured life-history interview, which focused on moments of big change, including the role of religion and spirituality in those changes. In analyzing these surveys, I will conduct quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and will gain experience in both methods. Our task is to ask big questions about how background and culture informs ideas of 'spirituality'. This work will allow us to better understand the ways individuals, as well as communities, construct their meaning with or without religion.

Through religion, psychology, and political science courses at Reed, I have developed a good understanding and skill set to bring to Dr. Wildman's lab. I feel confident in methods of data analysis, as well as theory, relating to larger questions about the meaning of religion. I am knowledgeable about the idea of 'religious experiences', though it cannot be categorized as one

thing or one phenomena. I am equipped to know what questions to ask of the narratives I will be presented with from the surveys. We will work in a “conference style research method” as Dr. Wildman describes it. Much like my junior seminar at Reed, I will receive data from the survey, and work with a team to construct hypotheses. Specifically, I will evaluate individuals by looking to their answers and backgrounds, and map them on a gender, race, or sexuality axis. For example, Dr. Wildman mentioned that their preliminary results show women being much more spiritual than men on every measurement except for the kinesthetic one. My work might be to consider and design hypotheses as to why might men show more spirituality through their bodily movements. Because this lab is just beginning their work, the plans and implications of the data are yet to be fully determined, but I am extraordinarily excited to see what we can do with our findings. These sorts of questions invite my religion studies background, as well as the work I’ve done in political science, psychology, and theater.

The work I am hoping to embark on over ten weeks this summer is incredibly novel to the field of religious studies and to me. I am humbled that I have been offered the opportunity to participate in this research. I will have a lot of freedom in exploring and constructing different hypotheses, and working with a unique and diverse team with similar research interests to my own. Although I have not yet decided on my immediate plans in continuing my education beyond Reed, I am always thinking about how meaning is constructed, specifically through religion. This experience will most certainly aid me in my thesis exploration as well as preparations for determining which path of graduate school I plan to embark on. This experience will allow me to learn more about how religion research is conducted and to gain a better understanding of how a collaborative lab composed of undergraduates, graduate students, and post docs operates. I am equally excited about the methods and research processes I will get to explore as well as the content of the research. This will be especially helpful for me as I consider pursuing a path that includes graduate school. I hope to return to Reed at the end of the summer with a better understanding of spirituality as it relates to individual understanding and social constructs.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my project, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

(student name)