

# **“I Learned More Than I Wanted”: A Phenomenological Investigation of the Experience of Having One’s Beliefs Challenged in an Undergraduate Religion Course**

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**Abstract:** This phenomenological study explored the experience of having pre-existing beliefs challenged in learning. Themes of an environment of challenge, the powerful role of the teacher, and choice stood out against the ground of the learners’ expectations of being challenged in the undergraduate religion class.

## **Introduction**

The challenging of one’s existing ideas has long been acknowledged as an integral component of the learning experience. Since Socrates, it has been postulated that learning is about “knowing that you don’t know”. In the university classroom, challenging and reflecting upon one’s existing ideas is an inherent component of the experience. When challenges address one’s personal beliefs, there is potential for the experience to be unsettling. The current research was driven by my personal experience of teaching undergraduate students in religion courses at a denominationally affiliated college. Throughout twelve years of teaching I have repeatedly witnessed students struggle with questions raised in the course that challenged or questioned their existing beliefs. Some students openly engage the material at hand with gusto, others actively avoid the difficult questions, while others seem to altogether disengage from the material. While many subjects in the liberal arts model have potential for raising questions, religion classes are particularly ripe with potential conflicts with previously held beliefs (Burns, 2006; Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; Simmons, 2006). Parks (1986) states that in these environments “educators introduce appropriate conflict, dissonance, and wonder as to awaken the learner to a serious, disciplined, and vitalizing engagement with reality” (p. 142). Observing these encounters and reflecting on the meaning of the experience led me to wonder what this experience is like for the learner, and led to my research question: what is the experience of adult undergraduate students whose beliefs are challenged in an undergraduate religion class?

## **Literature**

Three strands of literature frame the study. The first area focuses on adult learning and development. From Piaget, to Perry, to Baxter Magolda, to Blenky and associates, theorists have sought to understand the process of epistemological change that occurs as learners develop and take charge of their own learning. The engagement of dissonant ideas has been central to this discussion. The second literature area is spirituality and faith development. In recent years there has been a “wild explosion” of writing focusing on the spiritual dimensions of adult learning (Fenwick & English, 2004). A number of theorists have theorized on the nature of spiritual development and the changes that occur as individuals encounter questions that lead to change (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 1986). Because of the personal nature of the experience and the questions raised, acknowledging the spiritual components of the experience is necessary to adequately interpret experiences. The third area of literature focuses on transformation, and or assumption

change in adult learners. Learning is described as a process of change often initiated by moments of disequilibrium (Piaget, 1972), disjuncture (Jarvis, 2006), disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow & Associates, 2000), or cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Mezirow's emphasis on the disorienting dilemma describes the process of changing one's taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, and open. Critical reflection on assumptions is essential for these transformations. Brookfield (1987) and Kegan (1994) also emphasize the centrality of critical reflection of assumptions. These three strands of literature offer a framework for understanding the experiences of students who encounter challenges to their existing beliefs in an undergraduate religion class.

While there is a significant amount of theoretical literature discussing the adult learning process and how learners encounter dissonance, a detailed search of the literature revealed little research directly related to adult students encountering challenges to their beliefs in university religion classes. Bailey (1996) found that seminary students are affected by the structure and community of the learning environment when they encounter conceptual changes. Wollert (2003) studied transformative experiences of seminary students and found that Biblical Studies courses promoted changes in thinking because of their power to cause discomfort and confusion for the learner. Kofink (1991) looked specifically at conflicting beliefs and student success in courses. While these studies consider issues adjunct to my specific question, there is a need in the literature for personal accounts of experience that can shed light on our knowledge of the learning experience. Lawson (2006) echoed this need in his discussion of the types of empirical research needed in religious education literature. He states, "We are in need of more qualitative research to develop theories worthy of testing. Much can be learned from careful and rigorous case studies, phenomenological studies, and ethnographic research" (p. 161).

### **Method**

Because of its emphasis on investigating particular phenomena in the world and words of those who have experienced them, phenomenology was deemed as best fitting for digging deep into this lived experience. "Existential-phenomenology seeks to be a descriptive science that focuses on the life-world of the individual. Rather than separating and then objectifying aspects of the life-world, the purpose is to describe human experience as it is lived" (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The project was completed using the phenomenological method designed at the University of Tennessee (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Thomas and Pollio contend that if one desires to understand the experience of another person, **ask the person**.

To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, the study was conducted at a medium-sized university in the southeast with a long-standing affiliation with a Baptist denomination. Baptist University (pseudonym) requires that all students complete two courses in religious studies as part of the general education requirement. The purposeful sample of individuals who participated in the study was based on the following self-identified criteria: enrolled in the non-traditional learners program, completed at least one religion course, and experienced a challenge to one of their beliefs in the course. An email was sent to all students enrolled in the non-traditional learners program at Baptist University describing the study and calling for potential volunteers. Potential participants who responded to the email were provided with a further description of the study and the criteria for participation. The search yielded eight participants, ranging in age from 27 – 55 years; three were male and five female; two were African American and six were European American.

Interviews were conducted using a non-structured interview process that began with the following query: “tell me about an experience where you had one of your beliefs challenged or questioned in your university religion class”. Using the phenomenological interviewing method described by Thomas and Pollio (2002), I assumed a listening tone, allowing the participants to guide the discussion toward what stood out for them in their own experience. Follow-up questions were used to keep the focus on the participants’ experiences, and to attain detailed descriptions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted both individually and with the assistance of an interpretive group. Thomas and Pollio (2002) recommend that researchers “share the burden of interpretation” (p. 35). The group helps the researcher deal with the large amount of data, maintain a focus on the words of the participants, and also holds the researcher accountable to continuously bracket his/her own experience. Transcripts were read aloud with frequent pauses to discuss the meaning of the experience. Of the eight transcriptions, six underwent group analysis. Idhe’s (1986) two essential operational rules for analysis were followed in the interpretive process: “attain to the phenomena of experience as they appear”, and “describe, don’t explain” (p. 34).

After working with the group, all of the individual transcriptions were read repeatedly with a focus on descriptions of experience and metaphors. Representative quotes were collected together in Word documents and arranged by subject areas until themes began to emerge. In the next step the individual documents were cross-compared to search for “transposable” themes true to the experience of the group of participants (Ihde, 1986). Representative quotations were arranged and gathered together in a Word document and became the source of the larger thematic structure. It was at this point that the interpretive group was re-engaged to test the larger thematic structure. Four themes were presented to the group, and a lively discussion ensued until the group came to consensus. The structure was then edited and returned to the group again for final confirmation. The final structure was then sent to the participants via email to see if the description rang true to their own experience. Three participants quickly responded with detailed comments, each confirming the thematic structure with comments like “I feel you were right on track with the summary” and “your summarization rings very true to me”.

### **Thematic Structure**

#### *Ground of the Experience - Expectation: Surprise/Anticipation*

Rubin’s (1925) concept of figure/ground serves as a conceptual framework for phenomenological data interpretation. Themes that emerge as figural do so against a common ground of experience. The participants’ experiences of having a belief challenged stood out against the ground of their expectation of being challenged in the learning process: how would the class be run and the material presented? Participants came to the classroom with different levels of expectation; some were surprised in their encounters, while others anticipated challenges. The most powerful experiences occurred for students who were more surprised in their encounters. Darla depicted this when she said, “I think the part that really offended me was that I didn’t expect that here”. Cathy stated that “it was an eye-opening experience that I didn’t expect...it just came at me when I walked through the door.” Some participants “expected to be challenged”. Gabriella related that she was “aware that it would definitely happen...if it did not, I’d be afraid.” Prior expectation did not inoculate the students from strong reactions, but the language used by surprised students was noticeably different from those who had a higher level of expectation. Expectation originated from students’ religious communities, families, friends,

and their personal experiences. Some described being warned by their pastors or friends about professors who would attempt to undermine or destroy their faith. Three themes emerged against the ground of expectation. Each will be outlined below, represented by statements in the participants' words.

### *“An Environment Where You are Challenged”*

Participants described the classroom as an environment ripe with powerful and varied challenges to their previously held beliefs. As a researcher, I entered the study with an assumption that participants would repeatedly describe challenges to their theological beliefs, but was taken aback by the varied nature of the challenges outlined. Five participants did describe theological challenges, but other experiences focused on beliefs about how other students would receive them, the beliefs of other students, racial and religious perceptions of others, how learning occurs, and assumptions about how classes would be taught. Challenges came through teacher's comments, readings, encounters with other students, and experiences in different religious contexts.

Participants used powerful language to describe the challenges they encountered. Some of the terminology possesses an even violent feel, with participants using expressions like “attack”, “hits you in the face”, blown out with a shotgun”, “my beliefs were jumped”, and “my beliefs were pulled out from under me”. Barry, who had a particularly traumatic experience, said he was “dumb-founded, all of the sudden everything that I held on to be true wasn't, you know, or at least it was being told to me that it wasn't”. Henry's words express the power of the classroom experience:

Sometimes I'll hear something and my adrenaline will just start pumping and my heart races and uh, now I'm seriously thinking, “Okay, do I – what do I?” I get nervous because I'm like, “Do I need to say something here or do I need to let it go?”

The environment of challenge was established quickly in the classroom process. Participants described it as occurring “quickly”, “up front”, “when I walked through the door”, and “right now”. Cathy reported that it “happened probably the first 15 minutes of the class”. When relating a particularly powerful experience she called a “crisis of belief”, Francis stated,

I went into it and from the very first class meeting, and again not having taken a religion class in a long time, I wasn't sure how it was going to be administered by the professor but it was made very clear...“here in this classroom we are going to do it on an academic level and look at the history, talk about the implications of how the Bible is relevant now.” You know, how people say it is relevant now and differing opinions on it. So to have that said in the very first class caused me in a lot of ways, to have a crisis of belief.

### *“The Professor Set the Tone”*

A second theme that stood out in the experience of participants was the powerful and figural role played by professors in the process. They “set a tone” that allowed for the open engagement of beliefs. Elaine described her professor being “up front” in his manner, when he stated that his “job” was to get students “to think about what you believe and why you believe it and to be able to discuss intelligently why you believe and what you believe”. Gabriella perceived her professor as a welcomed guide into “uncomfortable” territory who “made it clear” that learners “will be challenged. If you are not comfortable, don't do it, but this is what we are going to do...”

Professors also set the tone by modeling openness in their own classroom manner. Cathy described the professor in her World Religions class as always being tolerant of the opinions of

others. If students didn't enter the class with an open mind, "the professor instilled that in us by his actions, by his gentleness, by his openness". Elaine, who related entering the class on the defensive with "her guns up", was surprised when her professor challenged what she believed, "but he didn't put down what I believed".

Classroom leaders were sometimes perceived as undermining the learning process of the participants. They were perceived as "radical", "distracting", or were relegated to a less threatening position: "just professors". Barry, a returning student who had dropped out of college for 20+ years after a negative experience with a professor challenging his belief in God, described his first professor as purposefully attempting to "undermine" his faith. Henry described his perception of professors as being influenced by the process of disagreement: "it kind of gave me a new opinion of the authority of a professor and to not solely trust what a professor would say".

*"I had to Make a Choice": Choosing to "Expand My Mindset" Or "Not Allow My Beliefs to be Corroded"*

The third theme surrounds the issue of choice: what would the learners do with the challenges they encountered? The experience of choice was described as a "fight" and a "struggle". Anthony stated that the environment of challenge put him in a position "where I had to make a choice" between what he was "comfortable with" and that which challenged his comfort. Elaine described her challenge of being put in a position where she had to deal with people with differing beliefs: "I'm going to accept this and see what I can experience or see what I can learn from it, or am I going to reject it and not get my money's worth of this whole experience...get what I'm here for?"

Some participants described having their mindset "broadened". Anthony, who initially resisted new ideas ("you are not going to change...mess up my mind") said that the experience "opened me up" and that he "ended up learning more than I wanted to. It put me into the position where I was opened up and saw things in a different light." Francis described her challenge as going down a "path I didn't pick" that has "tumbled open" for her and become a "new path" of openness to new ideas and experiences. These responses to challenge were described as "victories" or "invigorating... like stepping out of the shower".

Other students chose to not allow the challenges to change their beliefs. Darla said that she "took everything else he said in the class with a grain of salt", and that "nothing basically was going to change what I already knew and what I believed". Henry, who described having the "breath knocked out of him", decided to "stick to my guns". "This is what scripture says to me no matter what the professor says. I still hold that this is the truth".

### **Conclusions**

The findings in this study are consistent with the importance placed on challenges in the adult learning process (Brookfield, 1987; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). One's beliefs are highly personal and closely tied to one's identity (Fowler, 1981). Situations that challenge learners' beliefs have the potential to create a significant level of angst. Teachers that are aware of this possibility have the opportunity to assist learners through this process (Schrader, 2004). Recognizing that the level of expectation served as ground for this experience should challenge adult educators to be more aware of the beliefs and assumptions that adult learners bring to the learning experience. My own surprise at the sheer variety of challenges learners experienced should call educators to check their own assumptions about what learners are bringing to the classroom. The findings reiterate the importance of acknowledging the array

of life experiences learners bring to learning experiences (Knowles, 1980). The study also revealed that it was experience, more than age that enabled learners to more successfully engage challenges. The participants in this study reveal that educators are in an important position to assist learners as they navigate the treacherous waters of challenges to their existing beliefs.

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