

FAITH IN A FOREIGN LAND: ACCULTURATION AND THE RELIGIOUS AND  
SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

by

**Seema Jain**

Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery, 2005

Dr. S.N. Medical College, University of Rajasthan

Jaipur, India

Doctor of Medicine in Radiodiagnosis, 2011

JLN Medical College, Rajasthan University of Health Sciences

Jaipur, India

**A Dissertation**

Submitted to the Faculty of

College Of Education

Texas Christian University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Higher Education Leadership**



**May 2024**

**APPROVAL**

**FAITH IN A FOREIGN LAND: ACCULTURATION AND THE RELIGIOUS AND  
SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

by

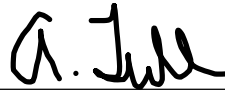
Seema Jain

Dissertation approved:



---

Dr. Taryn Allen



---

Dr. Ashley Tull



---

Dr. Jo Beth Jimerson



---

Dr. Christopher Hightower

---

For the College of Education

Copyright by

Seema Jain

2024

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this dissertation to my sister, Indu. She has faced multiple problems that affected her career and life; however, she always supported me.

I want to remember Ned Grieser and Samira, both of whom I met during my student life. I can still see Ned's smiling face when I travel near Leibrock's Village and Texas Christian University.

I also thank everyone who supported my student life at Texas Christian University. I still remember the day I met John Singleton, and he sent me to meet Dr. Donald Mills. After this meeting, I applied to this program.

I thank all faculty, administrators, staff, and people who have helped me in this journey.

I thank Dr. Taryn Ozuna Allen and Dr. Ashley Tull, who have helped me in the last three years. I also thank Dr. Donald Mills and Dr. Jan Lacina for helping me throughout this journey. I thank Dr. Cornell Thomas for helping me believe in myself.

All faculty helped me in any way they could, especially Dr. Jo Beth Jimerson, Dr. Catherine Wehlburg, Dr. Christopher Hightower, and Dr. Miriam Ezzani. I also remember that my most interesting class was Ethics in Higher Education with Dr. Steffen Palko.

The International Student Office has always helped me. I thank John Singleton, James English, Liz Branch, Joshua Kai, and Paloma Bermudez.

My classmates, especially Karrabi, Kayla, Whitney, and Shaquanda, helped me a lot, especially when I was a new international student.

Leibrock management and staff, especially Nancy Grieser and Erin Houchin, ensured I had an exceptional housing experience. Leibrock students, especially Lamitra and her husband, Tom, also helped me many times and made my stay a very positive one.

I also thank the library staff and the TCU Writing Center, TCU Counseling Center, TCU Career Center, and TCU Religious and Spiritual Life, especially Robyn Reid, Dr. Arch Mayfeild, Dr. Steven Sherwood, Rev. McCracken, Amy Macalik, Melanie Coulson, for their invaluable help and support.

TCU Health Center, Froggie Five-O, TCU Police, and numerous students and people at the University and Fort Worth have helped me thrive. I want to mention the support received from Ruthie Kested and Dr. Jane Torgerson at the TCU Health Center.

Many people, families, doctors, and relatives helped our parents in India so I could be successful in America. Their contribution is the foundation of my career and education.

I thank the support and community of St. Stephen Presbyterian Church, Fort Worth, especially Beth Fultz and her family.

I believe that I have not been able to mention all the names of the people who have helped me, and I thank them for their help and support.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	ii
List of Figures.....	viii
List of Tables.....	ix
Abstract.....	x
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Acculturative Stress in International Students.....	2
Religiosity/Spirituality and International Student Experience.....	7
Purpose.....	12
Guiding Questions.....	13
Definition of Terms.....	13
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	16
Historical Overview of International Student Mobility.....	17
<i>Trends and Statistics</i> .....	20
International Educational Sojourn is Mutually Beneficial.....	24
<i>Financial Benefits</i> .....	24
<i>Internationalization Benefits</i> .....	27
<i>Competition to the United States</i> .....	28
Cultural Shock.....	30
Acculturation.....	31
<i>Models of Acculturation</i> .....	33
<i>Forms of Acculturation</i> .....	35
<i>Factors Affecting Adaptation to a New Country</i> .....	35
<i>Relation of Time to Adaptation in New Country</i> .....	42
Acculturation and Identity.....	44
<i>Psychosocial Model of Identity</i> .....	45
<i>Other Approaches to Study Identity</i> .....	46
<i>Psychosocial Model and Adolescence</i> .....	46
<i>College Student Development</i> .....	48
<i>International Student Development</i> .....	50
Acculturation and Ethnic Identity.....	51
<i>Theories Related to Ethnic Identity</i> .....	51
<i>Acculturation as a Framework for Studying Ethnicity</i> .....	52

Religion and Cross-Cultural Transition .....	54
<i>Acculturation as a Framework to Study Religious Social Identity</i> .....	54
<i>Religion, Culture, and Acculturation</i> .....	55
<i>Religious Social Identity and Acculturation</i> .....	56
<i>Religious Social Identities in the Age of Globalization</i> .....	58
Research on Religion and Wellbeing .....	59
<i>Religion as a Construct</i> .....	60
<i>Religion and Well-being</i> .....	64
Higher Education and Religion .....	67
The Intersection of Religion with International Students' Sojourn.....	68
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS .....	73
Research Design .....	74
<i>Research Site</i> .....	76
<i>Research Population and Sampling</i> .....	77
<i>Participant Selection</i> .....	78
<i>Data Collection</i> .....	79
<i>Data Analysis</i> .....	81
Trustworthiness of this Study.....	82
Researcher's Position and Reflexivity .....	84
Limitations .....	87
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .....	88
First Case: Mia's Narrative .....	88
<i>Religious Background</i> .....	90
<i>Religion and Acculturation</i> .....	91
<i>Suggestions for the University</i> .....	91
<i>Etic Perspective</i> .....	92
Second Case: Kim's Narrative .....	92
<i>Religious Background</i> .....	94
<i>Religion and Acculturation</i> .....	95
<i>Suggestions for the University</i> .....	96
<i>Etic Perspective</i> .....	97
Third Case: Sia's Story .....	97
<i>Religious Background</i> .....	99

<i>Religion and Acculturation</i> .....	101
<i>Suggestions for the University</i> .....	102
<i>Etic Perspective</i> .....	103
Fourth Case: Maria's Narrative .....	103
<i>Religious Background</i> .....	106
<i>Religion and Acculturation</i> .....	107
<i>Suggestions for the University</i> .....	108
<i>Etic Perspective</i> .....	108
Fifth Case: Reeta's Story .....	109
<i>Religious Background</i> .....	111
<i>Religion and Acculturation</i> .....	112
<i>Suggestions for the University</i> .....	113
<i>Etic Perspective</i> .....	114
Sixth Case: Ruth's Narrative .....	114
<i>Religious Background</i> .....	117
<i>Religion and Acculturation</i> .....	117
<i>Suggestions for the University</i> .....	119
<i>Etic Perspective</i> .....	120
Common Themes in the Students' Narratives .....	120
<i>The Hidden Curriculum of Religion</i> .....	120
<i>Religion and Student Life</i> .....	121
<i>Religion During Stress</i> .....	122
<i>Changes in Religious Identity, Beliefs, and Religious Practices</i> .....	123
<i>Using Easily Available Resources</i> .....	124
<i>Celebrating with Family and Friends</i> .....	124
Differences Between the Groups.....	125
Suggestions for the University .....	126
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	128
Main Findings .....	129
<i>Religion and Spirituality are Significant for International Students' Transition</i> .....	129
<i>International Transition Can Affect Religious Identity</i> .....	132
<i>International Transition Affects Minor Religious Beliefs</i> .....	133
<i>International Transition Affects Religious Practice</i> .....	134

<i>Religion/Spirituality Has a Shared as Well as Personal Meaning</i> .....	135
<i>Using the Easily Available Resources for Religious and Spiritual Needs</i> .....	135
<i>Students' Suggestions for the University</i> .....	135
Conclusion.....	136
Suggestions for Future Research.....	137
Limitations .....	138
References.....	139
Appendices.....	157
Appendix A .....	157
Appendix B .....	158

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1</b> .....	43
-----------------------	----

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1</b> .....	80
----------------------	----

## **ABSTRACT**

### **FAITH IN A FOREIGN LAND: ACCULTURATION AND THE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

by

**Seema Jain**

Ed. D. Higher Education Leadership, Texas Christian University

Dr. Taryn Ozuna Allen, Associate Professor

The research on the religious experience of international students is limited. This study explored international undergraduate female students' narratives on the importance of religion and spirituality in their international sojourn. Using a narrative case study, I interviewed six students (three Christian and three Hindu students) to discuss the importance of religion/spirituality in their lives in a new country. I also explored the changes in the student's religious identity, beliefs, and practices after coming to a new country. Finally, I studied the students' suggestions on how American universities can support their religious and spiritual needs.

This study adds to the limited research on this topic. The findings will help universities and university counseling centers better serve international students.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The population of international students has been growing for a long time, not only in the United States but also all over the world (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020a; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Tremblay, 2005; Ward et al., 2015). However, no one knows when exactly the idea of learning beyond the boundaries of one's country originated. Du Bois (1956) gave an apt answer to this question by saying, "The pursuit of learning beyond the boundaries of one's own community, nation, or culture is as old as learning itself" (p. 1).

Human curiosity and a will to learn seem to drive people to become *foreign students* in another continent, country, or region. This experience of being an international student stimulates personal growth and broadens one's perspectives and thinking (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Prazeres, 2017).

Beyond personal growth, international students have various other reasons for choosing to study abroad. Some students want to do research, but their home country does not adequately support research (Altbach, 2004; Trice, 2003). Some want to pursue a professional degree from a world-renowned university for better job prospects (Altbach, 2004; Sandhu, 1994); some just want to have an experience of living independently, while others may want to improve their English (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Du Bois, 1956).

Therefore, international students have a lot to gain from their educational sojourns. However, hosting international students is a mutually beneficial endeavor (Lee & Rice, 2007; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). International students, as well as students from the host country, gain from working with people from different cultures who possess different values and hold diverse opinions (Calleja, 2000; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Wu et al., 2015).

American undergraduate students who frequently interacted with international students expressed better growth in various areas; they reported better leadership, intellectual, and cognitive skills (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). These students also had better intercultural competence (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013) and better critical thinking ability (Pascarella et al., 2014).

Students who regularly worked with international students also reported that they questioned their own values and ways of thinking more often than those who did not frequently interact with international students (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Intuitively, the ability to question one's own values could be a sign of more complex thinking ability and better potential for regarding and considering the opposite view as equally valid (Evans et al., 2010).

Finally, as the world has become more interconnected, attending a university with a substantial number of diverse students adds to the credentials of the host country's students and to the marketability of international students (Calleja, 2000; Tremblay, 2005; Wu et al., 2015).

### **Acculturative Stress in International Students**

Being an international student is rewarding and challenging (Chai et al., 2012; Hsien-Chuan Hsu et al., 2009; Sandhu, 1994). International students receive higher education while learning to adapt to new cultures and places during their sojourn (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Jung et al., 2007).

Being a university student is stressful, even for domestic students (Philip et al., 2019). Also, the transition from being a high school student to being a university student might be extra stressful (Chai et al., 2012; Dalessandro, 2016). However, international students not only face the problems common to all university students but also go through the challenging process of acculturation to a new country and its culture. Many international students face acculturation

stress (Berry, 1980; Chai et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 1993; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Jung et al., 2007; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

Acculturation is a process that starts when people or groups from two different cultures encounter each other (Berry, 2005; Padilla, 1980; Redfield et al., 1936). This contact can be voluntary, as in the case of international students who choose to study abroad. An immigrant who moves to a distant country for better financial opportunities is another example of someone undergoing voluntary acculturation (Berry, 1980, 2008). Acculturation also occurs in involuntary conditions, as of someone who is a refugee.

Theoretically, acculturation occurs not only in the new arrivals but also in the host population. Practically, it happens more in the weaker group. The weaker group is the one with less political power; in most cases, the host population has more political power, and therefore, the host group is the stronger group (Berry, 1980, 2008). For example, in the case of international students, they must adapt to the host country's new culture and manners (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Acculturation involves deep cognitive, behavioral, and affective changes (Ward et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2015). This process of change is emotionally taxing (Schein & Schein, 2017). Therefore, universities can expect international students to have at least some difficulty while adjusting to the new country. Potkar (2013) cited a large body of research relating to international students' acculturation stress.

Research has confirmed that international students face more psychological distress than domestic students in adjusting to college life (Cheng et al., 1993; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Mori, 2000; Philip et al., 2019; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2003). These students also face more sociocultural strain as they have not yet adapted to the new country's social environment. Many students come from a country where the culture is very different from that of

the host country. These students experience more acculturation stress (Chai et al., 2012; Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1994). These sociocultural difficulties add to the challenges experienced by these students.

In short, international students face more problems and stressors than most domestic students (Philip et al., 2019), and sociocultural difficulty in a new country significantly contributes to this stress. Sociocultural adaptation is also a major part of the acculturation process (Anson, 2011; Chai et al., 2012; Sandhu, 1994; Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Common problems that add to psychological distress among international students include language difficulties, financial issues, and academic difficulties (Chai et al., 2012; Philip et al., 2019; Potkar, 2013; Mori, 2000; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Yeh & Inose, 2003). The host country's language might not be the primary language of international students. English is the language of instruction in the United States, while many international students come from countries like India and China (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Li et al., 2010). These students might not have the same skills in English as American domestic students.

Being fluent, or nearly fluent, in speaking and writing English is necessary not only for academic success but also for engaging in everyday social interactions such as buying food, asking for directions, and paying bills (Anson, 2011; Chai et al., 2012; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Knowledge of written and spoken English is critical in the acculturation process.

International students with better English fluency have lower stress levels (Poyrazli, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Ward and Kennedy (1993) found that excellent English skills reduced social difficulties and improved sociocultural adjustment. Better sociocultural adjustment, in turn, led to improved psychological well-being.

Many students struggle academically as the mode of teaching may be different in the host country (Anson, 2011; Li et al., 2010; Mori, 2000; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Turnbull-Reilly, 2015; Zhou et al., 2008). An international student may also have difficulty in understanding new academic rules and procedures (Turnbull-Reilly, 2015). These students may also face a lot of family pressure to succeed academically (Chai et al., 2012; Li et al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Financial difficulties are surprisingly common among international students (Lee & Rice, 2007; Smith, 2016). Many students depend on funding; this funding is not always stable (Lee & Rice, 2007; Philip et al., 2019). Also, since the U.S. government prohibits international students from working outside campus (Lee & Rice, 2007), they might be more worried about future funding options than domestic students.

Homesickness, loneliness, loss of social support, and incidents of discrimination are other significant issues international students face and these issues might predict the severity of acculturation stress (Potkar, 2013; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Yeh and Inose (2003) found that social connectedness and satisfaction with social support reduced acculturation stress.

Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) developed the Acculturative Stress Scale. They found that discrimination and homesickness were the most significant contributors to stress during acculturation. Lee and Rice (2007) noticed that White international students from European countries were less likely to feel discriminated against.

However, several reasons may explain this finding. White European international students often have better English skills than non-European international students. Also, European culture is somewhat like American culture. International students reported several incidents of bias against them. In many cases, faculty and classmates were involved in

perpetuating discrimination. In other instances, the public misbehaved with international students (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Acculturation stress presents itself in different forms. It may increase anxiety and depression among international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Students may have sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, raised blood pressure, and increased susceptibility to illness. Many feel hopeless, depressed, and frustrated (Mori, 2000; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These symptoms could reduce international students' quality of life. Acculturation stress may also affect the academic performance of international students. Therefore, for the sake of colleges and universities, which will be welcoming a growing number of international students in the coming years, scholars need to do more research about the challenges such students face.

Quality research is vital to understanding any problem and subject, including the issues faced by international students. Understanding all aspects of international students' acculturation process may help universities design programs, counseling services, and policies that could reduce the severity of the challenges experienced by international students. Although international students have been present since ancient times, research on them is relatively new. Furnham and Bochner (1986) mention that research on international students started in the 1950s.

However, this research was substandard and used models that focused on the negative aspects of acculturation. There was also a lack of proper research designs; for example, most quantitative studies did not use proper controls (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The literature on international students is now comprehensive and includes both positive and negative aspects of cross-cultural transition (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Potkar, 2013).

A topic that needs more analysis is international students' religious and spiritual experiences. Philips et al. (2019) found no qualitative article on the relationship between religion/spirituality and acculturative stress. Other scholars also note a lack of research on this subject (Osburn, 2005; Potkar, 2013).

Since religion can affect people's behavior, worldview, and choices, it can affect acculturation in various ways (Connor, 2014; Osburn, 2005; Potkar, 2013; Schein & Schein, 2017). This fact makes the religious aspect of acculturation vital to student adaptation; therefore, this is an essential topic of research that should not be overlooked.

### **Religiosity/Spirituality and International Student Experience**

Research on the relationships between religion, health, and well-being has grown during the past few decades (Green & Elliot, 2010). Green and Elliot wrote a comprehensive literature review in which they cited multiple previous studies. Most studies have found a positive relationship between religious experience and mental and physical well-being. Belief in a religious tradition may improve self-esteem (Keyes & Reitzes, 2007) and reduce stress (Connor, 2012). The practice of religion can help lower mortality, improve blood pressure-related problems, and reduce rates of depression and neuroticism (Chai et al., 2012).

The relationship between religiosity/spirituality and well-being becomes especially significant during stressful situations (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015; Green & Elliot, 2010; Hsien-Chuan Hsu et al., 2009; Krause, 2004; Pargament, 1997). Religious coping is helpful in various problems, and belief in God and religious practices can provide attachment figures during loneliness and social exclusion (Aydin et al., 2010). International students often suffer from loneliness (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) and are at higher risk of experiencing mental stress (Chai et al., 2012; Mori, 2000; Philip et al., 2019; Potkar, 2013; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Ward & Kennedy, 1993b; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Increased mental stress can also lead to physical disease (Koenig et al., 2001, as mentioned in Connor, 2012). Both stress and physical ailment can affect the well-being and academic performance of a student. Belief in God, religious practices, and religious coping might help at least a few of the international students.

Hill et al. (2000) reported that many psychologists think that understanding a person's religious and spiritual identity is essential to understanding the whole person. However, university counseling services generally ignore the importance of religion/spirituality while helping students cope with stress (Chai et al., 2012). As mentioned before, few researchers have studied the religious and spiritual experiences of international students, and those who have studied this topic indicated the need for more exploration of this topic.

Philip et al. (2019) found that religion/spirituality influenced international students' emotional, mental, and cognitive health. Potkar (2013) interviewed international students from India. She found that students often used religious practices to reduce stress. Students also reported struggles in maintaining religious/spiritual practices due to a lack of time and resources. Hsien-Chuan Hsu et al. (2009) completed a quantitative study and found that religion/spirituality improved international students' psychological well-being by buffering the adverse effects of stress. Osburn (2005) found that the cross-cultural experience of international sojourn makes many international students reevaluate their religious values.

Furnham and Bochner (1986) said that international students' experience is more similar to that of immigrants than to the experiences of tourists or business sojourners. Relatively fewer studies have focused on the immigrant population's religiosity compared with the domestic population in the United States (Krause, 2004). However, this research on immigrants' religious life is more extensive than research on the religious life of international students.

Moving to a new country is very stressful and might lead to mental and physical ill-health (Connor, 2012; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Connor (2012) found that religious participation enhances immigrants' mental well-being across various countries, such as the United States, Australia, and Western Europe. Religion can help those experiencing a cross-cultural transition at both personal and social levels (Garcia-Muñoz & Neuman, 2013; Green & Elliot, 2010). At a personal level, belief in God and positive religious reframing can help ease the stress of moving to a distant land (Connor, 2012). On a social level, religious community members can provide emotional support. Religious meeting places also offer help in other ways, like help in finding an ethnic food store, writing resumes, and improving English (Garcia-Muñoz & Neuman, 2013).

In their study of Turkish Muslim immigrants, Bulut and Ebaugh (2014) reported a striking difference between the social networks of practicing and non-practicing Muslims. Non-practicing Muslims had many close friends outside the community, and they also socialized more outside the community.

Interactions with the host community tend to increase immigrants' sociocultural adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1994). Berry (1980, 1997) defined four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. In their study, Bulut and Ebaugh (2014) found that religious immigrants seemed to prefer a *separation* strategy (Berry 1980, 1997), while non-practicing Muslims seemed to follow an *integration* strategy. Therefore, religion can also act as a barrier (Garcia-Muñoz & Neuman, 2013) to the integration of an immigrant into the host society.

Faith also changes with the adaptation of immigrants. In Western countries, many Hindu worship centers adopt the protestant congregational model, while Sikh centers use English. The religious attendance and other religious habits of immigrants start to match that of the host country (Connor, 2014; Gracia-Munoz & Neuman, 2013). However, the religious attendance of

Western Europe's Muslim immigrant population remains stable or even increases with time (Vermeer, 2015).

The primary psychological process of acculturation is similar in different groups (Berry, 1997), such as international students and immigrants. International students' experiences resemble immigrants' experiences more closely than those of tourists or business sojourners (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Therefore, this research on immigrant religion supports the need to explore the topic of religiosity/spirituality of international students further.

Religion might have other intersections in the acculturation pathway. Religion and culture are deeply connected (Hill et al., 2000). Both cultures and religions provide underlying assumptions that affect people's worldviews and behavior (Osburn, 2005; Schein & Schein, 2017). Acculturation to a new country requires deep cognitive and behavioral changes (Ward et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2015). These changes might challenge long-held cultural and religious values and be a source of confusion and stress (Schein & Schein, 2017). Some people can easily change their worldviews, while others find the process challenging (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward, 1997). Some people might face severe mental agony in the face of change in cultural expectations and are said to be in *cultural shock* (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Oberg, 1960). Therefore, religious worldviews can be the very source of stress that religion aims to ease.

People generally assume that their culture and religion are norms that apply globally (Leong & Ward, 2000; Schein & Schein, 2017), and some may also think that their culture and religion are superior to other cultures and religions (Schein & Schein, 2017). However, in a new country, international students are expected to adjust to a new culture (Lee & Rice, 2007; Wu et al., 2015). This process might challenge students' identity and self-esteem (Ward et al., 2011).

Therefore, having a different religious worldview can lead to mental conflict during the cross-cultural transition (Osburn, 2005; Ward et al., 2011), but religious identity also provides

mental stability and improves self-esteem (Subica, 2011). Religious practices provide coping skills to overcome the stress of identity clash. A well-developed religious identity provides a sense of coherence (Green & Elliot, 2010) and a clear direction of behavior (Ward et al., 2011). A sense of coherence improves psychological well-being and enhances coping skills (Green & Elliot, 2010). Ward et al. (2011) found that a sense of coherence was negatively related to identity distress and depression.

People with well-developed identities generally feel more favorable toward another group than people who have not achieved a stable identity. Phinney et al. (2007) found that Asian American and Latino first-year students who had well-developed ethnic identities exhibited more positive attitudes toward other ethnic groups than those who did not have ethnic identity achievement. Phinney et al. (2007) also cited a couple of other studies with the same conclusion. However, religious group identity can prevent immigrants from integrating into the host society (Connor, 2014; Garcia-Muñoz & Neuman, 2013).

Religious social identity might also lead the domestic population to dislike immigrants who belong to a different religion (Bloom et al., 2015). One might think that immigrants may be inclined to suppress their religious identity to ward off discrimination. However, Connor (2014) explained that "as the immigrant religious group feels threatened, its religious identity and thus its religious traditions become more, not less important" (p. 58). Connor further added that "hostility towards an immigrant religious group seems to lead to a situation where the immigrant group does not follow the normal path of religious adaptation" (p. 61).

Ethnic identity is critical during acculturation. The term *ethnic* has often been used as a synonym for acculturation. Ethnic identity includes various elements such as religion, culture, language, etc. (Phinney et al., 2001). Therefore, one can easily apply the findings of research on ethnic identity to the construct of religion. However, religion and ethnicity are also slightly

different constructs. Some people give more importance to their ethnicity, while some prefer religious identity (Bulut & Ebaugh, 2014). A stable ethnic identity improves self-confidence and a positive attitude toward other groups (Phinney et al., 2007); this might increase participation in the host society. Religious social identity might act as a barrier to host orientation (Bloom et al., 2015; Bulut & Ebaugh, 2014). This contradictory relation between religion and ethnicity probably points out that religion is a complex and personal variable, and religious people might differ considerably in their acculturation goals.

University life demands the cultivation of critical thinking. Also, as university students move away from their families, their ties with the religious community might weaken. Since university life is a busy one, students could have less time for religious practice (Dalessandro, 2016; Potkar, 2013). A University is also a place where students might meet and work with people from a religion different than their own (Osburn, 2005; Schwadel, 2016). These conditions might lead some students to question the validity and use of their religious beliefs and practices (Osburn, 2005).

To conclude, there are multiple intersections between international students' acculturation experience and their religious and spiritual beliefs and behavior. Understanding international students' religious and spiritual experiences might help universities design better services for international students (Philip et al., 2019). Religion/spirituality can not only shape international students' experiences, but religious/spiritual beliefs and practices might also change due to students' international sojourn (Garcia-Muñoz & Neuman, 2013; Potkar, 2013).

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore how undergraduate female international students who self-identified as a member of an organized religious group described the role of religion/spirituality during their adaptation to life in the United States. I also inquired whether

these students' cross-cultural experiences affected their religiosity/spirituality. Lastly, I wanted to know about these international students' recommendations on how American universities can support the religious/spiritual needs of international students during their transition.

### **Guiding Questions**

The questions guiding this work were:

- 1) How do female international undergraduate students discuss the importance of religiosity/spirituality in their lives when describing their adaptation to the new country?
- 2) How do these students narrate any changes they experienced in their religious/spiritual identity, beliefs, and practice during the acculturation phase?
- 3) What are the students' perceptions about the support they received (or would have liked to receive) from the host university for their religious/spiritual needs?

### **Definition of Terms**

In this section, I will define the terms that were used in this dissertation. I will then clarify the research purpose and the questions to explain the scope of this study.

The definitions are similar to those used by Potkar (2013); Potkar completed a successful dissertation on a similar topic.

#### ***International Student***

An international student is someone who is not a citizen or permanent resident of the United States. Such a student is in the United States for higher education.

#### ***Sojourner***

A sojourner is someone who is living in another country temporarily.

#### ***Immigrant***

An immigrant is someone who has moved to a country that is not the immigrant's country of origin. An immigrant plans to settle in this new country.

## ***Religious/Spiritual***

The definitions of religiosity and spirituality often overlap and are subjective (Potkar, 2013). Schulte et al. (2002) advised researchers to use the terms in combination to ensure maximal inclusiveness (Schulte et al., 2002, as mentioned in Potkar, 2013). Therefore, I used this term in combination.

For this dissertation, the perceptions and narratives of international students are vital. I was interested in what these students described. I explored the experiences and changes described by the students in their religious/spiritual beliefs, identity, and practice. This dissertation did not explore in detail whether the personal beliefs of an international student matched the doctrinal dimension of their religion. For example, there could be a Christian student who believes in Karma, and there could be a Hindu student who believes in Jesus. Whether this is permitted in their religion is not the main topic of this dissertation. Also, the validity of religious truth claims was not explored. Therefore, whether there is really a *Krishna* or a Jesus is beyond the scope of this study.

### **Definition of Terms used by Hindu students:**

***Diwali:*** Diwali is the major festival of Hindus, Jain, and Sikhs (“Diwali,” Encyclopedia Britannica).

***Ganesha*** Is an elephant-headed God and is worshipped before starting anything new in life. He is said to bring success and prosperity. ***Ganesh Chaturthi*** celebrated Ganesh’s birth.

(“Ganesha,” Encyclopedia Britannica).

***Homa:*** Ceremonial fire rituals of Hindus (Clothey et al., 2014).

***Mataji:*** Goddess Durga or any of her forms. Hindus believe there is a feminine side to God, the primordial universal feminine force (Kohli, 2014; Malhotra, 2009).

**Navratri:** Navratri is the celebration of various forms of Goddess (“Navratri,” Encyclopedia Britannica)

**Pooja/Puja:** Ritual obeisance before a deity or deities. It may include offering, prayer, ringing bell, and chanting (Clothey et al., 2014).

**Shiva:** One of the most important Gods of Hinduism, Shiva/Siva is a member of the Holy Trinity along with Vishnu and Brahma. Shiva is considered a destroyer and creator (“Shiva,” World History Encyclopedia).

**Vishnu/Krishna:** One of the chief Hindu gods, *Vishnu* is a member of the Holy Trinity, along with *Shiva* and *Brahma*. *Vishnu* is considered the protector. *Vishnu* came down to earth in ten different forms; *Krishna* is one of those forms. *Krishna*’s birth is celebrated as **Janmashtami** (“Vishnu,” World History Encyclopedia).

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

An increase in the number of international students is the result as well as the need of the globalized world (Association of International Educators [NAFSA], n.d.-b; Biene et al., 2014; Calleja, 2000; Kirkwood, 2001; Tremblay, 2005; Wei, 2013; Wu et al., 2015). As the world has become more globalized, many businesses have multiple offices in various countries, and many business teams are multicultural. In such companies, people with multicultural experience and intercultural sensitivity are preferred (Calleja, 2000; Davis, 1997; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Turnbull-Reilly, 2015). International students develop intercultural sensitivity from their international sojourn (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Smith, 2016; Tremblay, 2005). International students also help improve the cross-cultural understanding and intercultural skills of host countries' students (Calleja, 2000; Davis, 1997; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Pascarella et al., 2014; Smith, 2016).

Multiple countries promoted international education after world wars to nurture global peace and understanding (Du Bois, 1956; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Behind this development was the idea that international students' increased intercultural understanding might decrease the clash between various countries and communities (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Tabariasl, 1987). Lee and Rice (2007) mentioned that international students see the host country as their second home and benefactor. These students can act as goodwill ambassadors to reduce tension between the home country and the host country. Some people even think that international students can solve all the world's problems!

International students are projected to increase to eight million in future (Altbach, 2004). Increased and improved transfer of information through the Internet (Calleja, 2000) and better and safer modes of international travel (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Kirkwood, 2001) are a few

of the reasons for the exponential rise in the number of international students. Modern technology and globalization have also led to an increase in international students. It is interesting to note, however, that the concept of being an international student is not a new or modern idea and has existed for a long time (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Du Bois, 1956; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Lee & Rice, 2007; Tabariasl, 1987).

### **Historical Overview of International Student Mobility**

Bevis and Lucas (2007) mentioned that the world's oldest universities were probably situated in one of the oldest civilizations. Tabariasl (1987) clarified that India was the cradle of international education. According to the Archeological Survey of India (n.d.), Nalanda University was situated in Bihar in the 5th century A.D. This monastic university had foreign students from other countries, including China. Singh (2017) opined that Indian knowledge of mathematics, science, and medicine was translated into Chinese, Persian, and Latin.

Studying beyond one's local area in ancient times can be compared to today's international education, as the modes of travel were limited (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). A journey to a different locality or different country must have been very arduous (Singh, 2017). Reaching a different region required walking through dangerous forests while venturing into the other country, which might have involved hazardous sea voyages, taking weeks or months to complete. Despite the dangers, students traveled along with merchants and artisans, braving wild animals, storms, cutthroats, and other hazards (Bevis & Lucas, 2007).

Bevis and Lucas (2007) and Walden (1909) explained that the ancient Greek schools hosted many foreign students as early as the 5th century BCE. The students came from faraway lands to study rhetoric and philosophy. The initial schools did not have a physical location or a building, but classes were held at different places like temples or markets. Slowly, the physical characteristics of today's university began to appear as land was secured by building boundary

walls, and trees were planted for shade. Classes began to take place at such *campuses*. In the Hellenistic period, Athens was a popular center for higher learning (Tabariasl, 1987), and students included foreign nationals. In Roman times, Milan, Naples, and Rome were also centers of learning, which attracted foreign students. As the foreign student population grew, the local government started screening foreign students and regulating their conduct (Bevis & Lucas, 2007).

Lee and Rice (2007) mentioned that the University of Paris opened its doors to students outside France in the 13th century. Bevis and Lucas (2007) stated that this trend existed in other European countries as well, and around the 12th or 13th centuries, many young men traveled across various countries of Europe to obtain training or degrees. These students were generally quite poor. There were reputable universities in Europe, like those in Bologna, Salerno, and Paris, which had international students. German students would often go to France and Italy for higher education. In the cities with these universities, international students from a similar country or locality started collaborating for security. Most of these universities did not help international students find safe places to live (Bevis & Lucas, 2007).

In the sixteenth century, religious upheaval throughout Europe negatively affected the exchange of students across countries. However, the British started traveling across Europe for higher learning opportunities. This practice became so common that Grand Tours started being organized for young English men and women students, with the help of royal support (Bevis & Lucas, 2007).

In the early 1800s, European universities, particularly in Germany and England, were the preferred choice of international students (Akanwa, 2015; Du Bois, 1956; Tabariasl, 1987). American universities improved, and by the mid-1800s, students from countries like India and China started arriving in the U.S. for higher studies (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Nevertheless, even in

the late 19th century and early 20th century, European universities were considered more prestigious (Akanwa, 2015).

Francisco De Miranda, a South American revolutionist, could have been the first international student in American universities (Tabariasl, 1987). However, official records of international students of that time were not very well maintained (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Yung Wing was the first-ever Chinese student to earn a higher education degree from Yale in 1854 (Tabariasl, 1987). He played a significant role in modernizing Chinese education and helped to launch educational exchanges between the two countries. He also contributed to higher education in the United States (Bevis & Lucas, 2007).

In a short span of time, international students from Japan, Canada, and other countries started arriving in the U.S. (Tabariasl, 1987). However, the U.S. immigration policy in 1882 was a setback. It prevented many students, especially Chinese students, from coming to the United States, and this policy also kept foreign nationals from obtaining jobs in America (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; West, 2011).

After World Wars I and II, international education was promoted as a solution for the misunderstandings between the countries (Du Bois, 1956; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Tabariasl, 1987). European countries and organizations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) started promoting the international exchange of students as a means of lasting peace (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Americans started welcoming international students more than before and considered them unofficial American goodwill ambassadors (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Du Bois, 1956). By this time, small church-supported groups and other voluntary groups started making efforts to help international students settle down (Du Bois, 1956).

The Institute of International Education (IIE) was established in 1919 (IIE, 2020c). In the 1940s, more universities started appointing foreign student advisors. Grants worth millions of dollars were given to promote international students in the U.S., and international houses and cosmopolitan clubs started budding in various universities (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Du Bois, 1956). However, it was not until the 1980s that thorough research was conducted about international students' problems in the U.S. (Almurideef, 2016; Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

The Association of International Educators (NAFSA, formerly called The National Association of Foreign Student Advisers) was established in 1948. The purpose of the newly formed organization was to support foreign students in the U.S. after the Second World War. They also aimed to support the professional development of foreign student advisors. The association changed its name twice, in 1964 and 1990, to become the Association of International Educators. The organization retained the old acronym to acknowledge its journey. It now has members in more than 150 countries (NAFSA, n.d.-a).

### ***Trends and Statistics***

Reporting about the total number of international students globally has improved immensely; reporting was not very dependable during the early 20th century (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). In the year 1950, the number of international students globally was 107,589. In the year 1980, this number rose to 869,797 (Tabariasl, 1987).

Bevis and Lucas (2007) mentioned that there were around 3,673 international students in the United States in 1904. In 1921-22, Americans welcomed 6,488 students, and in 1925-26, around 6,961 students gained entry to the United States. Most of these students attended universities in New York or California (Tabariasl, 1987).

This tally rose to 15,000 in 1946. In 1951-52, more than 30,000 international students were welcomed in 1,354 colleges across the country. These students came from 126 different countries (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). These figures indicate that student enrollment doubled in just four years, from 1946 to 1950. In the year 1980, the enrollment of international students was more than 280,000 (Tabariasl, 1987).

The Institute of International Education accumulates elaborate data on international students enrolled in the United States. Its website's enrollment page has exciting charts and data that show that the number of international students has been increasing since 1949, with some periods of negative growth. Bevis and Lucas (2007) pointed out that in 1954-55, there were 34,232 international students in the United States. These students formed only 1.5% of the total higher education students in U.S. universities.

In 2004-5, the U.S. welcomed nearly 575,509 international students, who formed nearly 4.3% of the total university students in the U.S. However, in 2004, there was a dip in the number of international students for the first time after 1971 (Lee & Rice, 2007). Lee and Rice discussed the probable reasons for this reduction and mentioned that one such reason could be increased strictness in issuing student visas after the 9/11 attack on the United States. Some students also postponed plans to come to the U.S. due to fear of retribution after 9/11.

From the years 2007-08 to 2016-17, the number of international students in the United States has increased from 623,805 to 1,078,822. The percentage increase in the number of international students has also swelled every year from 2007 to 2015, after which the annual percentage increase has been reduced every year (IIE, 2020b).

The enrollment of international students crossed the million mark for the first time in 2015 (NCES, 2017). New international student enrollment increased every year from 2013-14 to

2015-16. Since 2016-17, new international student enrollment has been decreasing every year (IIE, 2019).

The number of international students worldwide was nearly 4.6 million in 2016-17 (IIE, 2017). The U.S. has been the preferred destination for such students (Akanwa, 2015), followed by the U.K., Germany, and France (IIE, 2017). The total number of international students in the U.S. was 1,078,822.

Although the United States was home to 28% of global international students during this time, they formed only about 5.3% of the total higher education students. In the U.K., international students constituted nearly 21% of the total number of higher education students. In Australia, international students were more than 23% of the total tertiary-level students.

Around 26% of American higher education international students were in master's or doctoral-level courses, which means that the majority of international students were undergraduates (IIE, Project Atlas, 2017).

For the year 2018-2019, the total number of international students worldwide was nearly 5.3 million. During this time, the U.S. welcomed 1,095,299 international students (NAFSA, 2019). They comprised 5.5% of total higher education students in the U.S. International students comprised a larger portion of the higher education students in other countries.

In the U.K., they formed more than 20% of the total tertiary students, while in Australia, they formed 28% of the total higher education enrollments. The United States is still the first choice of international students, but around 21% of total international students chose the U.S. compared to 28% in 2016-17. Despite the increase in total international students worldwide, there is a decrease in the percentage of international students who are choosing the U.S. (IIE, 2019).

The IIE website also publishes data on the places of origin of international students who come to the United States. China and India are the countries that send the most students to U.S. universities. Chinese students account for nearly 32.5% of the international students, while the Indian students are 17.3% of the total international students for the years 2016-17.

Although Brazil was one of the top ten countries of origin for international students, its share of international students (percentage of the total international students) plummeted by 32.4% in the period of 2015-2017. The percentage of students from Saudi Arabia also decreased by 14.2% in this period (IIE, 2017).

For the year 2018-19, the top countries of origin of international students in the U.S. were again China and India. Chinese students accounted for nearly 34% of the international students, while Indian students were 18% of the total international students. Brazil and Saudi Arabia were still in the top ten sending countries (IIE, 2019).

For the year 2018-19, the states that attracted the highest number of international students were New York, California, and Texas (IIE, 2020, Fast Facts). These three states have been attracting the maximum number of international students for a long time (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Tabariasl, 1987). New York and California have been the top choices of international students since the early 1900s (Bevis & Lucas, 2007).

The universities hosting the largest number of international students in the year 2018-19 were New York University, the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, and Northeastern University in Boston (IIE, 2020a).

In 2018-19, engineering courses attracted the maximum number of international students. Engineering was followed by mathematics and computer science, and business and management were the most popular subjects chosen by international students (IIE, 2019). Trice (2003)

explained that developing countries need engineers but have limited capacity to train them. This is one of the reasons for the high demand for engineering courses.

In 2014-15, business and management courses were the top choices of international students, followed by engineering, mathematics, and computer science (IIE, 2020b).

Interestingly, even in the early 1900s, engineering was a popular course among international students. During this era, other popular fields of study were education and medicine (Bevis & Lucas, 2007).

### **International Educational Sojourn is Mutually Beneficial**

Being an international student is advantageous for international students (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Akanwa, 2015; Du Bois, 1956; Prazeres, 2017; Sandhu, 1994; Trice, 2003; Ward et al., 2015). Welcoming international students brings multiple benefits to the host country (Calleja, 2000; Lee & Rice, 2007; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Sandhu, 1994; Tremblay, 2005; Wu et al., 2015).

International students are a source of talent and finance (Lee & Rice, 2007; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Pan, 2013; Sandhu, 1994; Trice, 2003). They improve the cross-cultural understanding of domestic students and internationalize their universities to enhance the academic standing (Calleja, 2000; Lee & Rice, 2007; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Smith, 2016; Tremblay, 2005; Wu et al., 2015). That is why fierce competition for the best international students is increasing in various countries (Lee & Rice, 2007; Ngo, 2014; Pan, 2013).

Many countries are developing programs that cater specifically to international students (Ngo, 2014). Courses offered by China are examples of such initiatives. China has developed special strategies and curriculum plans to attract international students (Pan, 2013).

### ***Financial Benefits***

International students are a key source of revenue for many American universities (Lee & Rice, 2007) as well as universities in many other countries (Beine et al., 2014; Pan, 2013). Most international students pay full tuition (Lee & Rice, 2007) or increased tuition (Beine et al., 2014; Calleja, 2000; Ward et al., 2015). Thus, financial benefit of enrolling international students is one of the main reasons for their increased recruitment (Beine et al., 2014; Pan, 2013). Lee and Rice (2007) lamented the fact that international students are increasingly seen as cash sources rather than as cultural ambassadors.

Many developed countries are facing decreasing university enrollment due to demographic shifts (Beine et al., 2014). For these universities, international students are a crucial source of income (Beine et al., 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007). International students also provide a pool of talented graduates and research assistants (Trice, 2003). In some areas of study, such as science and engineering, domestic enrollment might be low (Altbach, 2004; Li et al., 2010; West, 2011). In such departments, international student enrollment provides the much-needed headcount (Lee & Rice, 2007; Li et al., 2010; Trice, 2003; West, 2011). Some fields of study, such as architecture, are considered global. The presence of international students in such departments is necessary to create a cosmopolitan environment (Trice, 2003).

International students bring billions of dollars to the U.S. national economy. Around 50% of this amount is in the form of tuition. International students also spend money on housing, food supplies, and services like haircuts to contribute directly to the local economy in the U.S. (Lee & Rice, 2007; NAFSA, 2018; West, 2011). Even international students who receive a full scholarship can be expected to spend on housing, food, and other local services.

International students contribute to the national economy of host countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States (Calleja, 2000; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Pan, 2013; Tremblay, 2005). Pan (2013) mentioned that "international students now generate some

10% of the entire income of the U.K. higher education system and 15% of all income for national universities in Australia" (p. 251). Pan added that international students and transnational university operations together form the third-largest export industry in Australia.

In 2003, international students contributed 12 billion dollars to the U.S. economy (Lee & Rice, 2007), and in 2014, international students added \$27 billion to the U.S. economy (Smith, 2016, p. 62). NAFSA stated that in the year 2016 international students contributed 36.9 billion dollars to the U.S. economy. This amount increased to more than 40 billion in the year 2018 (NAFSA, 2016). The amount included money spent on tuition, housing, and other living expenses. In 2018, higher education was the sixth-largest export in the services category (NAFSA, 2018). In 2019-20, international students contributed 38.7 billion dollars to the U.S. economy (NAFSA, 2020).

International students also help create jobs in America, as manpower is required to support the various needs of these students. The Association of International Educators (NAFSA) reports that in 2016, international students created 4,50,331 new jobs, and in 2018, this number rose to 4,58,369 (NAFSA, 2016). In 2019-20, international students helped to support jobs for 4,15,996 individuals. For every eight international students, three U.S. jobs are created (NAFSA, 2020). These jobs are created in sectors like dining, student support, housing, transportation, and healthcare. In 2018, three jobs were created for every seven international students (NAFSA, 2018).

In addition to the direct short-term finance brought in by international students, there are multiple long-term financial benefits of hosting international students. Foreign-born people launched more than 25% of the technological start-ups in the U.S. during 1995-2006. They also contributed to nearly 25% of the international patents filed from the United States. Many of these foreign workers had come to the U.S. as international students (West, 2011).

Upon graduation, international students are an important source of skilled labor for many developed countries, including the U.S. (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Beine et al., 2014; Tremblay, 2005). Many OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries have a shortage of skilled labor, and many of these countries have relaxed visa rules to allow skilled labor in areas like science, engineering, and information technology (Tremblay, 2005). International students are not only a source of financing for the universities but are also a reliable source of future skilled labor.

International students fill up jobs where Americans are not available, especially in technological and medical areas, thus working for the American economy and increasing the tax base (West, 2011). West makes it clear that these jobs are not “snatched” from American workers, as companies need to look for American workers first. Only when this search is exhausted are the international students and workers hired.

### ***Internationalization Benefits***

The world has become more globalized, and multicultural business teams are becoming common (Calleja, 2000; Davis, 1997; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Trembley, 2005). In such companies, people who have the ability to work with colleagues from various cultures are preferred (Calleja, 2000; Davis, 1997; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Turnbull-Reilly, 2015). International students not only develop intercultural sensitivity due to their international sojourn (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Smith, 2016; Tremblay, 2005) but also help improve cross-cultural understanding and intercultural skills of host countries' students (Altbach, 2004; Anson, 2011; Calleja, 2000; Davis, 1997; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Pascarella et al., 2014; Smith, 2016).

Therefore, in addition to the direct contributions to the American economy, international students help improve American students' cross-cultural skills (Altbach, 2004; Anson, 2011; Smith, 2016). International students increase the diversity of their campuses. They add their

diverse opinions to enrich discussion in their classes (Lee & Rice, 2007; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Ngo, 2014; Turnbull-Reilly, 2015).

International students may also discuss the problems and strengths of their country (Ngo, 2014). Listening to diverse perspectives and understanding foreign issues might improve the global outlook of American domestic students (Altbach, 2004; Anson, 2011; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Ngo, 2014; Smith, 2016; Wu et al., 2015). Having a sizable international student body also improves the academic standing of that university; this might further boost the job prospects of domestic students in such universities (Calleja, 2000; Lee & Rice, 2007; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Ngo, 2014; Tremblay, 2005; Trice, 2003; Wu et al., 2015).

U.S. undergraduate students who interacted with international students often expressed better growth in various areas, including leadership and intercultural competence (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). These students also had better intellectual and cognitive skills (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013), including better critical thinking ability (Pascarella et al., 2014). Intuitively, improving critical thinking and leadership abilities are key objectives of higher education.

Questioning one's deep-seated assumptions and behaviors is the first step to self-discovery (Ngo, 2014; Prazeres, 2017). Domestic students who regularly worked with international students reported that they questioned their own values and ways of thinking more often than those who did not frequently interact with international students (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Therefore, studying with international classmates has multiple benefits in addition to improved cross-cultural skills.

### ***Competition to the United States***

To conclude, hosting international students is a solution that everyone can benefit from. With increasingly globalized economies, students with intercultural experience will possess a

competitive edge. International students are increasingly seen as a financial resource, and competition for hiring the best international student is increasing (Lee & Rice, 2007; Pan, 2013). The United States has been the first choice of international students for a long time (Akanwa, 2015; Anson, 2011), but the share of international students has been decreasing in recent years (“Project Atlas,” IIE, 2019; NAFSA, 2018; Ngo, 2014). This development calls for introspection and policy change (Altbach, 2004; Anson, 2011; Tremblay, 2005).

Li et al. (2010) informed about the change in policy related to international students in the United Kingdom in 1999. The United Kingdom has improved its policy to be more friendly to international students. The idea behind this change was to reestablish the position of the United Kingdom as a world leader in international education.

Tremblay (2005) has written an informative article about policies regarding international students in various developed countries. Australia and Canada have both adopted policies that ease the future immigration of international students.

To conclude, host nations derive multiple benefits from welcoming international students, and international students also expect considerable gains from their sojourn.

This scholarly journey is not only rewarding but also demanding. International students undergo a long and challenging acculturation process to a new country (Berry, 1997; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Mori, 2000; Osburn, 2005; Potkar, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Many students suffer from acculturation stress during this process (Berry, 1980, 1997; Cheng et al., 1993; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Jung et al., 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2003). It is imperative for a researcher who wants to study international students to know about the process of acculturation and the difficulties and stress it involves.

The research on acculturation is not new. It started in the 1800s. In the initial years, acculturation was mainly studied by anthropologists and sociologists. With time, researchers realized that acculturation not only occurs at the group level but also occurs at the psychological level of each individual (Berry, 1980, 1997, 2005; Padilla, 1980; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Within the literature on acculturation, the idea of cultural shock was very common in the 1960s after the seminal article by Oberg in 1960 (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

### **Cultural Shock**

The concept of cultural shock is a part of the research on cross-cultural contact and acculturation that began in the late nineteenth century (Berry, 1980). The idea that cultural transition is stressful to the level of shock has evolved and changed much since Oberg (1960) wrote this paper. Oberg (1960) described that people who make the cross-cultural transition would suddenly lose all the familiar cues of social interactions (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). They develop anxiety and confusion and may also feel angry at the new country and its people. Slowly, they would accept and learn the new social rules and adapt to the new country and its culture (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Oberg, 1960).

Oberg (1960) believed that the adjustment of a sojourner who has been "suddenly transplanted abroad" (p. 177) occurs in four phases. The first phase is the honeymoon stage, which starts when a sojourner arrives in a new country. The sojourner is attracted to the new country and its sights and experiences a tourist-like mentality. In this phase, there is minimum stress, and some people might feel a sense of relief or happiness. This phase is followed by a phase of difficulty in which sojourners experience many challenges as they are not accustomed to the culture and customs of the new country. They start disliking the host country and missing their home country.

As time passes, sojourners learn the new country's language and manners and try to adjust to the new culture; this is the recovery phase. When the sojourners are fully accustomed to the new country and its culture, they no longer feel the sociocultural strain; this is the adjustment phase.

### **Acculturation**

As the name suggests, cross-cultural contact occurs when people belonging to two different cultural backgrounds come in contact. The process that occurs due to this contact is called acculturation (Berry, 2005; Padilla, 1980; Redfield et al., 1936). The acculturation process can be seen in a wide variety of situations where two cultures come into contact. This process can affect a student who voluntarily comes to a new country or can affect people who are forced to come to a new country, such as a group of asylum seekers (Berry, 1980, 2008). It can also be seen in immigrants who move to foreign countries in search of better financial opportunities. When one country invades the other, acculturation will also result (Berry, 2005; Padilla, 1980; Redfield et al., 1936). The primary psychological patterns of adaptation during the cross-cultural transition are similar in these various kinds of migrants (Berry, 1997).

Redfield et al. (1936) defined the concept of acculturation. They explained that "acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (p. 149). Thus, the contact of people from at least two different cultural backgrounds is necessary for acculturation (Berry, 2005).

In theory, the process of acculturation affects both cultural groups, but practically, one cultural group changes more than the other. The dominant group is the one with more political power (Redfield et al., 1936). The dominant culture has more culture flow to the weaker/non-dominant group (Berry, 1980, 2008). For example, in the case of international students arriving

in America, these students learn to adapt to live successfully in a new country. Therefore, the host country's culture is the dominant culture in this situation.

The process of acculturation was initially studied mainly by sociologists and anthropologists (Berry, 1980, 2005; Padilla, 1980). Acculturation was mainly considered a group phenomenon whereby a group of people undergoes cultural change.

Researchers soon noted the presence of intra-group differences in attitudes and levels of stress during acculturation. This phenomenon prompted them to acknowledge the importance of the psychological aspect of the acculturation process (Berry, 2005; Padilla, 1980; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

The above finding does not mean that the ethnic group culture of an immigrant or an international student does not matter. However, people differ much in the degree of psychological stress they face during the cross-cultural transition (Berry, 1997; Du Bois, 1956; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhou et al., 2008).

Some people treat this situation as an opportunity, and they quickly learn the behavioral changes needed to adjust to a new country. Some people face acculturation stress due to the change but learn to cope with it. Few people are unable to adapt, and they face severe stress comparable to Oberg's "cultural shock" description (1960).

Initial disruption due to migration generally causes some stress to most migrants (Berry, 1997; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The cultural differences between the home country and the host country also result in some degree of mental conflict. Many people are not able to navigate social interactions in a new place because the rules of social exchange differ in various cultures (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

People develop strategies to reduce conflict and achieve long-term adaptation. This adaptation is not always in a positive sense, and long-term adaptation can include negative

strategies and solutions. Therefore, long-term adaptation can be positive and result in improved mental health, or it can be negative and can increase stress (Berry, 1997).

### ***Models of Acculturation***

Acculturation was initially considered a unidimensional concept. According to this concept, immigrants would become increasingly acculturated into the host culture with time and shed their original culture (Nguyen et al., 2017; Padilla, 1980; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). With further research, Berry and colleagues proposed a bidimensional model. This model has been widely studied (Nguyen et al., 2017; Padilla, 1980; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

The host society is the dominant group in the case of most immigrants. It can affect acculturation in various ways. Sometimes, the dominant group celebrates the differences between cultures, and this results in a multicultural society. Canadian society is an example of a multicultural society (Berry, 1980, 2005).

In other cases, the dominant society can enforce the assimilation of the immigrant group. Similarly, the dominant society can force separatist policy, resulting in segregation/exclusion of the weaker group (Berry, 1980, 2005; Redfield et al., 1936).

Immigrants can also have different attitudes toward the acculturation process. The two dimensions of the acculturation attitude of sojourners/immigrants stem from two questions. The first question is whether they value and want to preserve their original culture. The second question is whether they value relations with the host culture. Some immigrants, for example, value the host culture more. This strategy is called the *assimilation* attitude (Berry, 1980; Nguyen et al., 2017; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

Some immigrants prefer the values of their original culture, and they distance themselves from the host culture and values and avoid interaction with the people of the host society. This attitude has been called a *separatist* strategy (Berry, 1980, 2005; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Some

immigrants preserve their cultural identity as well as value participating in the present society by using *integration* as their approach (Berry, 1980, 2005). Such immigrants have a bicultural identity and are generally bilingual. Lastly, if an immigrant does not value the original culture as well as the host culture, he/she has a *marginalist* attitude (Berry, 1997, 2005; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

The integration attitude is considered the most successful acculturation attitude and is associated with the best psychological and sociocultural outcomes (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Berry et al. (2006) completed research on a population of immigrant youth from 26 different cultural backgrounds who had settled in 13 host countries. They found that *integration* strategy is associated with the best psychological and sociocultural outcomes. Nguyen et al. (2017) conducted a study on Vietnamese migrants in Germany and found that immigrants who use an *integration* strategy report less severe depression.

Phinney et al. (2001) pointed out that the integration strategy best suits multicultural countries. For example, if a host country forces assimilation, integration might not result in the best psychological health. Therefore, the best acculturation strategy depends on the context of the host society.

Berry's model stated that ethnic and national (of the host nation) identities are independent, and integration strategy is the best strategy for psychological well-being. However, Phinney et al. (2001) mentioned that the two identities can be independent but can also have negative or positive correlations. Although Berry's bidimensional model is widely accepted, some domains of acculturation might be unidimensional.

Valentine (2006) mentioned various studies that found that stereotypes against working women decrease with increased acculturation and self-esteem in Hispanic immigrants. This finding does not mean that all Hispanics will acculturate in the same direction or have the same

degree of biases. Therefore, cultural and group values and individual factors shape the acculturation of a person.

### ***Forms of Acculturation***

Searle and Ward (1990) further defined the concept of acculturation and adaptation, adding to the foundation provided by Berry and colleagues. Searle and Ward proposed that adaptation during cross-cultural transition has two different forms: psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. Their study found empirical evidence of two related but distinct dimensions of acculturation. A third dimension has been added to the literature on adaptation and acculturation, and this aspect is an economic adaptation (Berry, 1997).

Sociocultural adaptation tends to improve with the length of stay in the new country (Searle & Ward, 1990). Ward and Kennedy (1993a) found that sociocultural adjustment was related to cultural distance, language ability, satisfaction with host national contact, cultural distance, and psychological adaptation. Searle and Ward (1990) revealed that sociocultural adaptation was related to expected difficulty, cultural distance, and psychological adjustment. Sojourners with strong host national identification had fewer sociocultural difficulties (Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

Psychological adaptation varies with personality factors, life changes, sociocultural difficulties, and homesickness (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a). Ward and Kennedy (1993b) completed research on international students in New Zealand and found social support to be related to psychological adjustment. Better social support enhances the sojourners' adaptation. Sociocultural adaptation is thought to improve with time (Berry, 2005; Searle & Ward, 1990). Berry (2005) opined that psychological problems are thought to increase immediately on arrival and improve after some time.

### ***Factors Affecting Adaptation to a New Country***

Some researchers study the factors affecting acculturation stress by analyzing how variables contribute to acculturation stress (e.g., Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Other researchers study how variables contribute to psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; 1994). Factors that improve adaptation to a new country are expected to reduce acculturation stress, while the factors that decrease sociocultural or psychological adaptation might increase acculturation stress (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Geeraert & Demoulin, 2013).

Many factors can affect the adaptation process of immigrants and international students. These include personality factors, the cultural background of the home country, and situational factors in the host country (Berry, 1997; Potkar, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhou et al., 2008). Locus of control and extraversion are two of the personality-related variables often cited in the literature as significant factors affecting acculturation stress (Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Extraversion was found to improve the psychological well-being of international students (Searle & Ward, 1990). However, in another study, extraversion was related to increased depression (Armes & Ward, 1989). Ward and Kennedy (1993b) pointed out that a personality dimension proper in one host country might not be helpful in another. In other words, the context of the host country is as important as a personality variable.

Locus of control is another personality trait related to psychological adaptation. People who have an external locus of control believe that life outcomes are determined by external forces. As a result, these people have passive orientation and impaired coping skills (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Ward and Kennedy (1993a) found that the external locus of control was related to more mood disturbances in international students. Furnham and Bochner (1986) also cited a study involving Chinese immigrants in the United States. This study revealed a strong

relationship between locus of control and psychological distress (Kuo et al., 1976, as mentioned in Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

Kashima and Loh (2006) researched international students in Australia and found that a high need for cognitive closure (NCC) was related to increased psychological and sociocultural difficulties. People who have a high need for cognitive closure tend to dislike uncertainty. Since some degree of unpredictability is part of international sojourn, people with high NCC are expected to feel more stressed.

Demes and Geeraert (2015) mentioned that they found contradictory literature on how empathy might affect the acculturation process. They cited studies that inferred a negative relationship between empathy and acculturation stress and literature that found that empathy could increase stress during the cultural transition.

Perceived discrimination and feelings of exclusion increase stress and negatively affect adaptation (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Geeraert & Demoulin, 2013). Discrimination increases psychological stress and depression and decreases perceived social support (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011). It is notable that social support has been shown to decrease acculturation stress (Potkar, 2013; Ward & Kennedy, 1993b; Yeh & Inose, 2003). This finding suggests that factors affecting acculturation might have a complex interaction with each other. Similarly, Ward et al. (2011) probed both international students and immigrants in their study and found that discrimination reduces self and group esteem. Self-esteem is known to improve stress adaptability (Rector & Roger, 1997). This finding again explains the complex interaction between factors affecting acculturation stress.

Ward and Kennedy (1993b) found that social support improves the adaptation of international students by improving psychological acculturation. Yeh and Inose (2003) observed that higher satisfaction with social support predicted low acculturation stress in Asian and

European students. Social support can mitigate stress directly and act as a buffer against other stressful factors (Berry, 1997; Potkar, 2013; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

The nature and the number of contacts in the host country might also affect psychological and sociocultural adaptation in a new country. Kashima and Loh (2006) stated that previous literature divided the social ties of international students into three types. Contact with co-nationals who belong to the same country as the international student is known as the *monocultural network*. Ties with domestic students and other people of the host country are grouped under the *bicultural network*, while friendships with international students who are not from the same country as the international student are classified as the *multicultural network*.

Ward and Kennedy (1993b) probed the adaptation of Malaysian international students studying in Singapore. In these students, frequent contact with host nationals was related to increased mood issues and worse psychological adaptation. Ward and Kennedy also found that for international students in New Zealand, satisfaction with co-national contacts improved psychological adaptation, while satisfaction with the host national relation did not affect psychological adaptation. On the other hand, Kashima and Loh (2006) found that psychological adjustment was not affected by co-national ties, while both bicultural and international networks improved psychological adjustment. Kashima and Loh also found that sociocultural adaptation was not related to any of the three networks, while Ward and Kennedy (1993b) found that the frequency of interaction with host nationals improved sociocultural adaptation.

Social connectedness is a subjective evaluation of being closely connected to one's social world (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011). Yeh & Inose (2003) mentioned findings from previous research that found people with low social connectedness tended to have low self-esteem. Such people were more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression. Yeh and Inose (2003) completed a study involving Asian and European international students in the United States. In this study, social

connectedness was found to reduce acculturation stress in Asian as well as European international students. Duru and Poyrazli (2011) studied Turkish international students in the United States and came to the same conclusion.

Kashima and Abu-Rayya (2014) completed a longitudinal study of acculturation stress in immigrants and revealed that more income was related to decreased stress. The level of education increased stress; age and marital status did not affect stress. Males had lower stress than females. Duru and Poyrazli (2011) did not find any relation between adaptation difficulties and age. Duru and Poyrazli also mentioned that many articles they examined did not find any relation between acculturative stress and age or sex. Yeh and Inose (2003) studied international students in the United States and included students who come from different parts of the world, including Asia and Europe. Yeh and Inose reported that age and sex did not contribute significantly to the variance in acculturation stress.

Ward and Kennedy (1993a) found that sociocultural adjustment was related to cultural distance, language ability, satisfaction with host national contact, and psychological adaptation. Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) found that cultural differences were among the five major factors contributing to international students' acculturation stress. The cultural distance was measured by a self-rated scale. This points out that perceived cultural differences matter more than the actual difference between the cultures of the home country and the host country.

Language ability refers to the ability to use the language of the host country. Duru and Poyrazli (2011) studied Turkish international students in the United States and confirmed that students who had higher English competence had lesser adjustment difficulties. Kashima and Loh (2006) studied international students in Australia and reached the same conclusion. Yeh and Inose (2003) studied international students in the United States; these students came from

various regions of the world. Yeh and Inose found that fluency in English decreased acculturation stress.

Kashima and Abu-Rayya (2014) studied acculturation stress in immigrants living in Australia; these immigrants came from more than forty countries. Kashima and Abu-Rayya found that those immigrants with better English skills had poorer adaptation initially; however, in the long term, better English knowledge was related to decreased stress. Duru and Poyrazli (2011) declared that language is the primary variable predicting acculturation stress, and it affects academic adaptation as well as psychological and sociocultural acculturation.

Many factors affecting acculturation stress are expected to be the same in international students and immigrants. However, students might have some other issues that immigrants rarely face. Berry (1997) spoke of three categories of acculturation, namely psychological, sociocultural, and economic acculturation. Nevertheless, international students also need to adapt to the new academic environment (Birman & Trickett, 2001; Duru & Poyrazli, 2011). Language problems, financial issues, discrimination, academic difficulties, adaption to a new culture, and homesickness are the most frequently reported problems of international students (Church, 1982; Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Ezeofar, 2016; Ghebrekidan, 2018; Mori, 2000; Potkar, 2013; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Financial difficulties are surprisingly common among international students (Mori, 2000; Potkar, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Trice, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003). International students often pay an increased fee (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). A majority of international students in the U.S. are funded from sources outside America (Tremblay, 2005; Wu et al., 2015). These sources include self-funding, family funding, and funds from the foreign government. A large percentage (nearly 30%) also rely on funding from American universities and these funding sources might not always be stable (Lee & Rice, 2007; Philip et al., 2019; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These

students often worry about high tuition costs and future financing (Yeh & Inose, 2003). As international students cannot work off-campus (Lee & Rice, 2007), they may be more concerned about future funding than domestic students.

Academic difficulties are a common source of stress for international students, and these difficulties are often mentioned in the literature along with language and financial difficulties (Anson, 2011; Chai et al., 2012; Philip et al., 2019; Potkar, 2013; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Yeh & Inose, 2003). American academic culture might differ from that of international students' home countries (Anson, 2011; Mori, 2000). Interactive teaching might be uncomfortable for international students belonging to Asian, African, and Middle Eastern countries as these students are used to passive chalk-and-talk lectures (Anson, 2011; Mori, 2000).

International students' learning styles also might differ. Students from some countries (Li et al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011) prefer rote learning styles. However, American higher education emphasizes critical thinking abilities (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This difference might cause at least some initial discomfort to international students. International students might not be cognizant of the host country's academic rules and procedures (Lee & Rice, 2007), such as enrollment, academic credits, and using library services (Anson, 2011).

Language difficulties complicate academic difficulties (Anson, 2011; Mori, 2000; Potkar, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Turnbull-Reilly, 2015). Difficulty in English might affect the ability to understand a lecture and impact the ability to participate in classroom discussions. Low English skills might also affect the quality of writing assignments and papers (Anson, 2011; Li et al., 2010; Mori, 2000). These factors might lower academic achievement. International students are more sensitive towards their academic performance, and their family expectations pressure

them to succeed academically (Li et al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This strain can further impact academic performance.

### ***Relation of Time to Adaptation in New Country***

Acculturation stress has been thought to follow a “U” shaped curve (Demes & Geeraert, 2015; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The idea of a U-shaped curve of adjustment became popular after Lysgaard published a study of Fulbright students in the United States (Lysgaard, 1955, as mentioned in Furnham & Bochner, 1986). According to this model, sojourners experience an initial phase of euphoria followed by a period of difficulty, mental stress, and cultural problems. This second phase is followed by the third phase of recovery and adjustment to the new country and culture. The reverse U curve is the same as the U curve of adjustment, as one graph measures mood while the other measures stress in relation to time.

However, this model has been questioned as many researchers found that their data did not always support the U-shaped curve of adjustment. For example, previous research also showed that acculturation stress reduces with time spent in the host country (Kashima & Loh, 2006); however, some studies showed that stress increases with time (Taušová et al., 2019).

Kim (2011) studied acculturative stress in international students and pointed out that acculturation stress increased with time initially and started decreasing only after 5 to 7 years in the United States. Duru and Poyrazli (2011) studied international students. Their study revealed that adaptation problems decreased with time spent in the host country. Kashima and Loh (2006) studied international students in Australia and found that acculturation stress decreased with time spent in the host country.

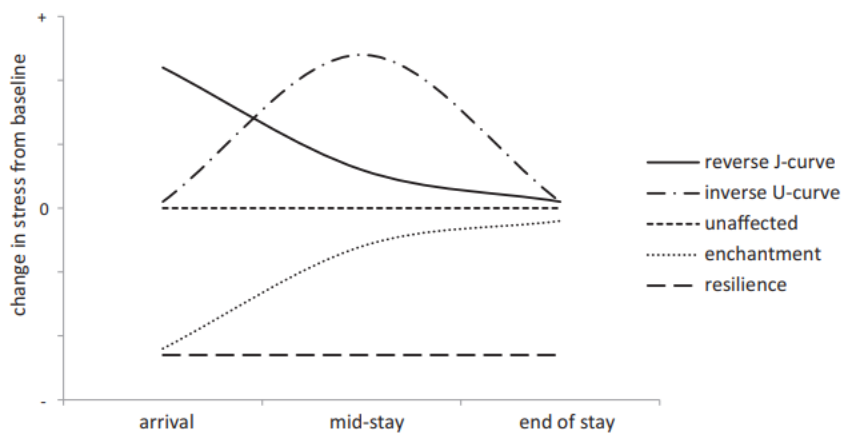
Kashima and Abu-Rayya (2014) found that the psychological well-being of migrants followed different temporal paths. They measured well-being at four months, 16 months, and 3.5

years after the first arrival. Some migrants exhibited increased stress, while others exhibited a U-shaped pattern; some even exhibited decreased stress.

Demes and Geeraert (2015) completed a very detailed longitudinal study involving international students from 50 different countries. This study had a longitudinal research design and used proper controls to compare student stress in students who were not moving to another country. Demes and Geeraert found that acculturation stress did not follow a similar temporal pattern in all students. In some international students, the classic reverse U pattern was seen. However, in other students, a “J” pattern was noticed. Therefore, the relation of stress with time spent in the host country does not always follow the classical curve. The following figure by Demes and Geeraert (2015, p.322) depicts various models of acculturation stress mentioned in the literature.

**Figure 1**

*Proposed Patterns Depicting Correlation of Stress with Time*



*Figure 1.* Hypothesized stress trajectories showing five different predicted patterns of change in stress over the exchange relative to baseline stress (anchored at 0 on the y-axis). Note: Above 0 on the y-axis indicates an increase in stress relative to baseline and below 0 on the y-axis indicates a decrease in stress relative to baseline.

*Note: From Demes and Geeraert (2015, p.322)*

## **Acculturation and Identity**

Although the idea that acculturation leads to the breaking of a person's identity is not a new one, identity issues were not the central topic of earlier research. Furnham and Bochner (1986) have cited research from the 1970s and 1980s, in which identity issues were mentioned as a significant source of stress for international students. Berry (1980) and Padilla (1980) also discussed that the process of acculturation involves profound cognitive and psychological changes, and this process might erode a person's identity. Padilla (1980) mentioned that adolescents belonging to immigrant families suffered role confusion and were more likely to resort to drug abuse.

Ward and Kennedy (1994) also confirmed the importance of cultural identity and role confusion in defining the acculturation attitudes of people experiencing cross-cultural transition. The topic of identity and identity conflict during cross-cultural transition has become a key area of research in recent decades (e.g., Kashima & Loh, 2006; Phinney et al., 2007; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000; Ward et al., 2011).

Identity becomes especially significant during life transitions, such as transitioning into adulthood and retirement (Keyes & Reitzes, 2007). Similarly, traveling to a new country is a remarkable and stressful life transition (Connor, 2012; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Geeraert & Demoulin, 2013; Padilla, 1980). This transition might erode a person's identity, including ethnic and religious identity (Phinney et al., 2007; Prazeres, 2017; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000; Ward et al., 2011). Yeh and Inose (2003) reiterated the same idea by saying that international students struggle with interpersonal relations.

Acculturation involves profound affective, behavioral, and cognitive changes (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward, 1997). Cognitive changes are central to a person's identity. Emotional and behavioral changes also affect identity (Ward et al., 2011). Therefore, it is expected to engender

identity conflicts in ethnic identity and personal identity. In more recent research on the religious and spiritual experiences of international students by Philip et al. (2019), issues of identity were raised by international students. Students explained that the process of acculturation has affected their social and identity, as well as questioned their self-concept.

Various researchers have described the relationship of ethnic identity and religious identity to the acculturation experience (Bloom et al., 2015; Bulut & Ebaugh, 2014; Phinney et al., 2007; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000; Ward et al., 2011). Religion is often an essential part of ethnic identity. However, some people give more importance to their ethnic culture, and other immigrants think that religion is more important to them (Bulut & Ebaugh, 2014). It is necessary to know about identity before discussing ethnic and religious identities and their importance in the process of acculturation.

Identity is the answer to the question, "Who am I?" It is the sense of self, attitude towards oneself, assessment of self-worth, and questions about oneself (Kroger, 2007). The exact definition of individual identity is elusive. Society plays a vital role in shaping identities; conversely, society is also affected by people's identities. Individual identity is the definition people have for themselves (Baumeister, 2011).

Pargament cites Eric Erikson as saying that identity is both psychological and social. Identity is the feeling of sameness of a person across many changes and across time. This feeling of "persistent sameness with oneself...and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others" is the identity that is both personal and shared with others (Erikson, 1980, as cited in Pargament, 1997, p. 53).

### ***Psychosocial Model of Identity***

Erikson's model of ego identity has made a tremendous contribution to developing the scholarship on identity (Evans et al., 2010; Kayanan, 2017; Kroger, 2007). Erickson gave an

eight-stage model of development and made it clear that identity develops and changes beyond childhood (Kayanan, 2017). This model is based on psychosocial theory, which states that a person's identity is the result of the interaction of his biological and psychological characteristics with the existing social environment (Kroger, 2007). Marcia expanded and validated the concept of ego-identity given by Erikson (Kroger, 2007; Marcia, 1966) and proposed four stages of identity development of adolescents and youth: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion.

### ***Other Approaches to Study Identity***

Kroger (2007) listed other approaches that define and study identity formation in addition to the psychosocial model. These frameworks are as follows: historical approach, structural stage model, sociocultural framework, and narrative approach.

The historical approach proposed that identity changes according to historical developments. This approach, however, could not explain the individual differences in identity. The narrative framework is based on the notion that each person is different, and language can be a medium to define individual identities. Qualitative interviews are used in this approach (Kroger, 2007).

While the historical approach looks very restrictive, the narrative approach is too diffuse and cannot be generalized. The psychosocial approach is the most accepted approach used in research. Marcia's model has been used extensively in the literature (Evans et al., 2010; Kroger, 2007; Phinney et al., 2007). Chickering's integrative theory of college student development is also based on Erikson's psychosocial framework (Kayanan, 2017).

### ***Psychosocial Model and Adolescence***

An adolescent is in *an identity versus role confusion* stage and achieving a stable sense of identity is a formidable task. As an adolescent prepares to be an independent adult, they must

come out from parental shadows and think about their own beliefs, values, and commitments. However, identity evolves throughout life (Kroger, 2007).

Marcia defined four states of identity development: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and identity diffusion. In identity achievement status, an adolescent has made commitments to values that define his identity after a period of active exploration (Marcia, 1966). A foreclosed identity is one in which an adolescent makes an identity commitment without much exploration. Moratorium is the state of active exploration in which an adolescent actively searches for meaning and values that can resolve his identity confusion. Identity diffusion state is one in which there is neither identity commitment nor identity exploration (Marcia, 1966; Phinney et al., 2007).

In early adolescence, the questions about *self* are mainly about changing biology. This period includes cognitive development along with intrapsychic disorganization. This situation may lead to anxiety and confusion, and often, peer groups provide mental refuge to such teenagers (Kroger, 2007).

In mid-adolescence, changing biology becomes less critical, and serious exploration about making identity-related commitments begins. Achieving the integration of one's sexual identity is vital during this phase (Kroger, 2007). Achieving an autonomous sense of self is essential in late adolescence as a person prepares to establish themselves as a young adult.

Kroger (2007) described the main challenges during the identity development process in late adulthood. These challenges are integrating sexual identity, making vocational decisions, and committing to life philosophies, including religious and social group membership. Issues of intimacy are also crucial at this stage, but sincere intimacy can only be achieved after establishing a secure sense of self.

Adolescents are expected to move from identity diffusion status to moratorium and then to identity achievement status. However, this is not always the case. In foreclosure identity status, no active search for identity-related issues (moratorium) occurs; therefore, the person does not reach the identity achieved stage. Some people are in an identity diffusion state even in adulthood. Some adults remain in a moratorium state, and they are not able to achieve identity commitment even after exploration (Evans et al., 2010).

Evans et al. (2010) mentioned research conducted by Josselson (1987, 1996) on female college students. This research used a longitudinal research design, making it methodologically sound. Josselson found that many college students do not achieve identity many years after completing college.

### ***College Student Development***

Universities aim to develop students with complex thinking abilities, respect for diverse views and cultures, high levels of morality, and self-control (Kayanan, 2017). The society also expects college students to have proper knowledge and abilities in their subjects, along with leadership abilities, high civil engagement (Johnson, 2017), and responsible behavior. It is essential that the staff and faculty of these universities understand the students' identity development process.

Identity development is a significant development issue for college students. Chickering proposed seven vectors to identify the effects of the college environment on a student's intellectual, emotional, social, and physical development (Evans et al., 2010; Kayanan, 2017). These vectors are (a) developing competence, (b) managing emotions, (c) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (d) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (e) establishing identity, (f) developing purpose, and (g) developing integrity. It is important to note that the first four vectors need to be developed in order to establish identity. This means that

before establishing a mature, flexible identity, a student must develop the first four vectors (Evans et al., 2010; Kayanan, 2017).

The first vector includes developing intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competence; this vector includes leadership and communication development. The second vector of development is managing emotions. The college student learns to express and control his emotions. College students also need to develop in the third vector before establishing a mature identity. Students must develop self-direction and a sense of independence (Evans et al., 2010; Kayanan, 2017).

At a later stage, students also understand the interconnectedness of a person with a larger society. Mature interpersonal relationship development requires students to appreciate and respect different points of view. Identity establishment also requires students to develop a stable sexual orientation. They should also be comfortable with their bodily appearance. A clear idea of sociocultural heritage and values is also needed for proper identity development (Evans et al., 2010).

Longitudinal research has shown that nearly 50% of late adolescents have not achieved a mature identity status (Kroger, 2007). Traditional college students are in late adolescence or early adulthood. Therefore, many college students do not have the identity-achieved status. Those who have achieved a stable sense of identity have more self-esteem, improved sense of self-control, better decision-making ability (Kayanan, 2017), and better psychological health (Evans et al., 2010).

Evans et al. (2010) mentioned Josselson's (1986, 1997) research with women. In this research, Josselson interviewed women when they were college seniors. Josselson interviewed these women again during their thirties and forties and found many women in foreclosure and identity diffusion statuses. Some of the women were also in the extended moratorium stage

(Evans et al., 2010). Thus, many female college students do not reach an identity-achieved state even in their forties.

### ***International Student Development***

Immigrants undergo a stressful period of acculturation in a new country (Berry, 1997). International college students also face acculturation stress. College students are also on the path to finding their identity (Evans et al., 2010). Searching for one's identity is often a formidable task. Identity exploration often induces anxiety and confusion (Kroger, 2007). The stress of acculturation and identity exploration can make the college developmental process more challenging for international students.

International students, like other immigrants, may face discrimination. Perceived discrimination leads to an increase in identity conflict. Identity conflict can cause a reduction in mental well-being and life satisfaction. It can also increase sociocultural difficulties (Ward et al., 2011). The acculturation process itself can challenge a person's self-worth and core identity. When people face conflict, they assert ethnic and religious identity even more (Connor, 2014; Leong & Ward, 2000; Subica, 2011). Therefore, ethnic identity exploration is expected to be more critical for the individual identity of an international student.

Researchers have found significant correlations between acculturation, ethnic identity, and mental health (Subica, 2011). Phinney et al. (1997) found positive relations between ethnic identity and global self-esteem in American high school students. A person with high self-esteem is also known to adapt well to stressful situations and use the available resources better for coping with stress (Rector & Roger, 1997); therefore, an international student with a well-developed ethnic identity may feel less stressed during the acculturation process.

Phinney et al. (2007) found out that Asian American and Latino freshmen who had a well-developed ethnic identity exhibited more positive attitudes toward other ethnic groups than

the students who did not have ethnic identity achievement. This means that an international student with a secure ethnic identity will have positive attitudes toward diverse students, including students from the host country.

### **Acculturation and Ethnic Identity**

Ethnicity is a unique culture that differentiates a group of people from other groups. Physical characteristics also differentiate a few subgroups and, as such, are included in the definition of ethnicity. Scholars have struggled to find a single definition of this construct; they generally include cultural, racial, and symbolic variables in the definition of ethnic identity (Subica, 2011).

Phinney (1990) reviewed seventy articles on ethnic identity and found that it has been defined in many ways in literature. Some definitions consider ethnic identity to be a very individualized construct, while others consider it to be a social construct that involves individual preferences as well as interactions with other people in their ethnic group (Subica, 2011).

Few writers think self-identification is the crucial aspect of someone's ethnic identity, while other researchers consider belongingness and commitment to be the essential ingredients of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). Also, according to some social scientists, ethnic identity refers to the pride that people have in their cultural heritage (Subica, 2011), while other social scientists believe that people who self-identify as belonging to a specific ethnic group may have negative, mixed, or positive feelings for their own group (Phinney, 1990).

### ***Theories Related to Ethnic Identity***

Phinney and Ong (2007) stated that a sizable part of research on ethnic identity was based on the Social Identity Theory of Tajfel and Turner. Subica (2011) identified three main perspectives used in the research of ethnic identity: social identity theory, cognitive-developmental theory, and the framework of acculturation. Social Identity Theory states that

people have a propensity to belong to a group as well as to see their group as better than other groups. This theory also proposed that when people of a minority cultural group perceive discrimination in society, they generally assert their ethnicity even more (Subica, 2011).

Developmental theories on ethnic identity include Phinney's cognitive-developmental theory. This theory is an extension of Marcia's ego-identity model (Phinney et al., 2007; Subica, 2011). Phinney initially developed a three-staged ethnic developmental model (Phinney, 1993), which was expanded to a four-staged theory by Phinney et al. (2007). According to this theory, people who have neither explored their ethnic identity nor committed to an ethnic identity belong to the *diffuse* status. People who have decided their ethnic identity without much exploration belong to the *foreclosed* status. People who have started exploring their ethnic identity are in the *moratorium* group, and people who have committed to an ethnic group after exploration are in the *identity achieved* group.

People who have achieved ethnic identity after exploration generally show flexible and positive intergroup attitudes (Phinney et al., 2007). Ethnic identity confusion and re-exploration can begin even after adolescence (Phinney et al., 2007). Ethno-cultural identity conflict generally affects immigrants and sojourners (Ward et al., 2011).

### ***Acculturation as a Framework for Studying Ethnicity***

During the cross-cultural transition, the differences between cultures become more evident; thus, acculturation has been used as a framework to study ethnic identity (Subica, 2011). Ward et al. (2011) mention that the process of acculturation is challenging. This process challenges the core values, behavior, and core identity of a person. Researchers had previously also considered identity conflict as a significant challenge during acculturation (Berry, 2005; Padilla, 1980; Redfield et al., 1936). Research on ethnocultural identity conflict is becoming increasingly important (Ward et al., 2011).

Research shows that ethnocultural identity conflict leads to problems such as depression and problems in sociocultural adaptations (Berry, 1980; Ward et al., 2011). Self-concept clarity improves mental health and self-esteem and reduces the identity conflict of immigrants (Ward et al., 2011). Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) developed a scale to measure the acculturation stress of international students. Cultural change and cultural shock are among the essential components of this scale. Cultural identity issues were included in many other components of this scale, in addition to the cultural shock components, reflecting the importance of culture and cultural identity-related issues in the development and severity of acculturation stress in people experiencing cross-cultural contact.

Phinney (1990) mentioned that many social scientists believe that ethnic identity is crucial to self-concept and may affect individuals' psychological well-being, self-esteem, and functioning. Pride in one's ethnicity has been thought to increase self-esteem. However, research has found a positive relationship between ethnic pride and self-esteem in some cases, while it failed to find a relationship between strong ethnic identity and self-esteem in other instances (Phinney, 1990; Taušová et al., 2019). Subica (2011) stated that researchers have found significant correlations between acculturation, ethnic identity, and mental health. Phinney et al., (1997) found positive relations between ethnic identity and global self-esteem in American high school students. A person with high self-esteem is also known to adapt well to stressful situations and use the available resources better for coping with stress (Rector & Roger, 1997). Since acculturation is inherently stressful (Berry, 1980; Connor, 2012; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), a person with a well-developed ethnic identity may feel less stressed during the acculturation process.

Phinney et al. (2007) found out that Asian American and Latino freshmen who had a well-developed ethnic identity exhibited more positive attitudes toward other ethnic groups than

the students who did not have ethnic identity achievement. Thus, a strong ethnic identity does not interfere with considering other cultural groups positively.

This is in line with previous research stating that the immigrants or sojourners who use *integration* strategy face the least identity conflict and, therefore, have better life satisfaction and better psychological and sociocultural adaptation, including less depression. Perceived discrimination is related to an increase in identity conflict and, therefore, a reduction in mental well-being and life satisfaction and an increase in sociocultural difficulties (Ward et al., 2011). To conclude, issues of ethnic identity pervade the acculturation process. However, the two terms are different and should not be used as synonyms (Phinney, 1990).

### **Religion and Cross-Cultural Transition**

Religious identity is both personal and social. Social and personal identity often affect each other (Peek, 2005; Subica, 2011). Both religion and identity affect people's behavior and outlook (Osburn, 2005). Therefore, religion and religious identity might affect the course of acculturation and the degree of adaptation to the new country.

### ***Acculturation as a Framework to Study Religious Social Identity***

Religious identity and ethnic identity are parts of a person's personal identity as well as group identity. A person derives self-esteem from their group membership and endorses the shared values of the group; therefore, personal and social identities are interrelated (Peek, 2005; Subica, 2011). Cultural identity can be studied through the lens of acculturation, as culture becomes more visible when people belonging to two or more dissimilar cultures interact (Subica, 2011). Similarly, the social aspects of religion become more salient during the process of acculturation (Peek, 2005).

The process of moving away from home also affects people's self-esteem and identity. As a result, ethnic identity becomes more important for minority immigrant groups; similarly,

religious group identity also becomes more attractive to these minorities (Garcia-Munoz & Neuman, 2013; Peek, 2005; Subica, 2011; Vermeer, 2015). Therefore, using acculturation as a framework to study the ethnic and religious identities (and changes that occur in these identities) can be useful to understand the social aspects of these constructs. Researchers have found significant correlations between acculturation, group identity, and mental health (Subica, 2011).

### ***Religion, Culture, and Acculturation***

Both religion and culture affect people's worldviews and behavior (Osburn, 2005). Religion is often the means of intergenerational transfer of traditions, values, and culture (Connor, 2014; Peek, 2005). Religion is a prosocial construct that has historically helped communities survive hardships and inter-group conflict (Norenzayan, 2013). Religious groups have better intra-group cooperation and have survived better than non-religious groups (Bloom et al., 2015; Norenzayan, 2013). In this way, the culture of more religious groups survived historically.

Thus, religion preserves the culture of its group. Many immigrant children learn the ethnic language at temples or churches; they meet peers and explore their religious identity with them. Therefore, religious centers and communities help preserve the ethnic cultures and traditions of immigrants (Connor, 2014; Peek, 2005; Sen & Knottnerus, 2016).

However, the connection between culture and religion is not always linear and positive. Often, religion is an integral part of ethnic culture, but this is not always the case. Immigrant communities differ considerably in how much importance religion has in defining their group identity. Some communities value their ethnic identity more and use religion to preserve culture, while for other groups, religious sentiments matter more than ethnicity (Peek, 2005).

For example, in the case of immigrant groups coming from a homogenous Muslim country, religion and culture might considerably overlap (Bloom et al., 2015; Bulut & Ebaugh,

2014). Hindu and Muslim migrants from India may share many cultural values; at the same time, their religious identities and beliefs may differ considerably (Connor, 2014; Peek, 2005).

There can also be intragroup differences in how people from the same community view their cultural and religious identities and which one of these identities is more relevant to them. In a study with Turkish immigrants, Bulut and Ebaugh (2014) interviewed practicing and non-practicing Muslims. In these interviews, non-practicing Muslims talked about being Turkish without mentioning the religion. However, for practicing Muslims, religion seemed to be central to their ethnic identity.

### ***Religious Social Identity and Acculturation***

Initial disruption due to migration generally causes some stress to most migrants (Berry, 1997). Cultural differences also result in some degree of mental conflict. People are not able to navigate social interactions in a new place because the rules of social exchange differ in various cultures (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Some people can adapt to this change without much discomfort. Others face acculturation stress due to the change but learn to cope with it. Few people are not able to adapt, and they face severe stress comparable to the cultural shock described by Oberg (1960).

Because many migrants face hardships and stress, such immigrants look for groups that share the same values for comfort and bonding (Garcia-Munoz & Neuman, 2013). Therefore, religion may help immigrants survive the stress of moving to a new place (Connor, 2014). Immigrants who attend religious services have better mental health (Connor, 2014); therefore, they have better psychological adaptation in a new country.

Religious communities can help immigrants adjust to a new country and culture as well as provide relief from the stress of acculturation (Connor, 2014). Temples, churches, and mosques often provide immigrants with the resources needed for assimilation and adaptation to a

new country. Many religious centers offer classes to help immigrants with their language skills. These centers also help in various other ways, such as building a network and writing resumes. Thus, religious communities help new immigrants adapt to the new country. This aspect of religious participation, which promotes the integration of immigrants into the receiving society, has been called a bridge (Connor & Koenig, 2013; Garcia-Munoz & Neuman, 2013).

Religion and religious-social identity may facilitate or delay the integration of immigrants into the host culture (Connor & Koenig, 2013). Religious-social identity may act as a boundary preventing the assimilation of immigrants into the receiving society (Connor & Koenig, 2013; Garcia-Munoz & Neuman, 2013).

In research with Turkish Muslims, Bulut and Ebaugh (2014) reported a striking difference between the social networks of practicing and non-practicing Muslims. Non-practicing Muslims had many close friends outside the community, and they also socialized more outside the community. Interactions with the host community increased the sociocultural adaptation of immigrants (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Ward & Kennedy, 1993b; 1994). Berry (1980, 1997) defined four acculturation strategies. In the research completed by Bulut and Ebaugh (2014), religious immigrants seemed to prefer the *separation* strategy (Berry 1980, 1997), while non-practicing Muslims seemed to follow the *integration* strategy. In turn, the acculturation strategy affects the mental health of an immigrant/sojourner (Berry et al., 2006).

Faith also changes with the adaptation of the immigrants. In Western countries, many Hindu worship centers adopt the protestant congregational model; Sikh centers use English. The religious attendance and other religious habits of immigrants start to match that of the public of the host country (Connor, 2014; Gracia-Munoz & Neuman, 2013). However, religious attendance of the Muslim immigrant population of Western Europe remains stable or even increases with time (Vermeer, 2015).

Research comparing immigrants' mental health found that religiously active immigrants had better mental health in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe; this was true for Christian as well as non-Christian immigrants (Connor, 2014).

Immigrants may also face discrimination because of their faith (Garcia-Munoz & Neuman, 2013; Peek, 2005). Perceived discrimination increases identity conflict in immigrants (Leong & Ward, 2000) and lowers their self-esteem (Ghaffari & Çiftçi, 2010). When immigrants perceive discrimination, they may distance themselves from the host society, and they are also likely to suffer from poorer psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Berry et al., 2006). When people face conflict, they assert their ethnic and religious identity even more (Connor, 2014; Leong & Ward, 2000; Subica, 2011).

Therefore, perceived discrimination may intensify group identities among immigrants and prevent their healthy integration into the host society. Ghaffari and Ciftci (2010) found a positive relationship between discrimination and religiosity in Muslim immigrants in the United States.

### ***Religious Social Identities in the Age of Globalization***

With globalization and increased human movement, the number of immigrants has grown to over 250 million. The United States is the first choice of these immigrants. Most of the immigrants go to Asian, North American, or European countries (United Nations, 2017). Religious minorities, e.g., Hindus from Bhutan, have sought refugee status in the United States after facing persecution. Some people immigrate with the purpose of spreading their religion in distant countries. Many immigrants report increasing attendance in religious services after immigrating to the United States (Connor, 2014).

Connor (2014) mentioned that Western Europeans have more negative attitudes towards immigrants and religious minorities than Americans. It is important to note that Western

Europeans are less religious than Americans (Connor, 2014). Religion often functions as a bridge for new immigrants and improves their adjustment in the United States, while in Western European countries, religion often hinders the acculturation of new immigrants. One of the reasons for this situation is that European people are secular and might feel uncomfortable with the public display of religiosity by immigrant groups (Connor, 2014; Vermeer, 2015).

Religious group identity may increase xenophobia and dislike for immigrants; conversely, religiosity also increases compassion for immigrants (Bloom et al., 2015; Norenzayan, 2013). Previous research has shown that people have more negative attitudes towards immigrants who are from a different ethnic group. Research also shows that people have more negative feelings towards immigrants who belong to a different religion. This dislike for *otherness* was more prominent when an immigrant had a different religion than when he had a different ethnicity. Also, people who exhibited more xenophobia had a stronger religious-social identity (Bloom et al., 2015).

Religion may play a role in how immigrants interact with the host society and in how and to what degree they adapt to the host society (Connor, 2014); conversely, the religiosity of the immigrants may also change because of adaptation to a new country.

Immigrant religion is becoming an important topic of inquiry in social science (Connor, 2014; Garcia-Munoz & Neuman, 2013). Religious minorities are increasing in many countries due to globalization. People in these countries must use religious resources for cooperation instead of conflict. Therefore, research on the religious experiences of minorities is critical.

### **Research on Religion and Wellbeing**

Religion has been a neglected topic; it has been overlooked by psychologists and academics (Ano & Vasconcelos, 2005; Ellison et al., 2001; Hill et al., 2000; Osburn, 2005). Allport (1950/1961) lamented the lack of interest of intellectuals in the subject of religion

throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Although academia has often overlooked the topic of religion (Ellison et al., 2001), research on religion is not new. Connor (2012) mentioned the famous research by Durkheim (1897). Durkheim found that Catholic countries had lower suicide rates than Protestant countries. Durkheim thought that this might be due to the fact that Catholic religious practices were more socially oriented than Protestant religious practices (Durkheim, 1897, as mentioned in Connor, 2012).

Pargament (1997) and Hill et al. (2000) stated that one of the reasons psychologists do not take an interest in religious research is that most psychologists are not very religious. Religion, however, has many similarities with psychology. Allport (1950/1961), in his famous book, commented, "Psychiatry and religion both see man as far from perfect being" (p. 75). Pargament (1997) mentioned that many prominent psychologists had strong opinions related to religion. Some considered religion as largely good (James, 1902, as mentioned in Pargament, 1997), while others regarded religion as mainly bad (Freud 1927/1961; Leuba, 1925, as mentioned in Pargament, 2002). Hill et al. (2000) and Pargament (2002) mentioned that many eminent psychologists believe that religion and spirituality are essential aspects of a person. Understanding this aspect is necessary to know the whole person.

### ***Religion as a Construct***

Research on religion has shown that religious people have better mental and physical health than those who are not religious (Connor, 2012; Ellison et al., 2001; Green & Elliot, 2010; Hsu et al., 2009; Keyes & Reitzes, 2007; Osburn, 2005). However, defining religion and measuring religiosity have not been very easy tasks. Social scientists have tried to define religion using different perspectives, such as functional and biological perspectives (Osburn, 2005). Functionalists believe that religion exists because it serves different purposes. For example, religious ceremonies and rituals promote social order; belief in God might have a stress-

buffering function. Those who support the biological perspective think religion is the product of evolutionary adaptation.

Smart (1996) divided religion into seven dimensions: (a) ritual/practical, (b) doctrinal/philosophical, (c) mythical/narrative, (d) emotional/experiential, (e) ethical/legal/, (f) social/organizational, and (g) material/artistic. The ritual dimension referred to activities such as worship, meditation, and sacrifice. The doctrinal dimension included the set of beliefs that build the foundation of faith. Smart gave the example of the doctrine of impermanence, which is central to the Buddhist tradition. The mythical dimension consisted of stories and folklore related to religion.

The ethical aspect of religion referred to the code of conduct and other rules of ideal behavior admonished by a religion. The social dimension is the hierarchical manifestation of religion in society. It is the prescribed way to organize church and society. The materialistic dimension includes the places of worship and the artistic expression of religion.

The most critical dimension is the experiential dimension because this is the emotional aspect of religion. It is the essence of an individual's feelings about his religion. Smart also talked about two aspects of the experiential dimension of religion and talked about the sense of *numinous*, which refers to experiences in relation to a personal God. This aspect includes feelings such as devotion and fear.

Another aspect of religious experience is mystical or contemplative experiences and episodes. These experiences do not require a personal God. The numinous and contemplative experience can coexist. Smart gave an example of a Buddhist who feels devotion towards and respect for Buddha and meditates to have a pure contemplative realization of consciousness. Smart (1996) questioned whether the experiences invoked by different religious worldviews are

entirely different and believed that there could be some common threads to various religious experiences, as humans are similar psychologically and physiologically.

Smart (1996) reiterated that his definition of religious dimensions is not absolute, and researchers were free to divide religion into their own dimensions. Osburn (2005) mentioned Glock and Stark (1965), who divided religiosity into five dimensions: (a) ideological, (b) intellectual, (c) ritual, (d) experiential, and (e) consequential. As per Glock and Stark, the intellectual dimension refers to a person's knowledge about his religion. The ideological dimension reflects the religious beliefs of that person. Bloom et al. (2015) mentioned three aspects of religiosity: belief, behavior, and belonging. Belonging defines the social aspect of religion that binds religious communities together.

Therefore, religion is a complex multidimensional construct, and researchers' views on various dimensions of religion differ from each other. Krause (2004) gave an example of how researchers pursuing quantitative methods to study religion have found it hard to deconstruct religion into meaningful key dimensions. These researchers wanted to study the relationship between religiosity and health. Various researchers have used different scales and dimensions for their research (Krause, 2004). Even after developing elaborate measures of religiosity for quantitative research, exact definitions of a dimension are complicated and might have confounding variables, reducing their accuracy (Krause, 2004).

Hill et al. (2000) defined religion and spirituality as multidimensional variables and mentioned that the separation of the two concepts is only recent. Hill and Pargament (2003) opined against fixed definitions of religion and spirituality. Although spirituality has been called a more personal experience, both religious and spiritual experiences occur within a social context (Hill et al., 2000). Hill et al. believed that sacredness is a common denominator to both

religiosity and spirituality. *Sacred* can be either a divine being, a divine object, or a universal truth.

Hill and Pargament (2003) stated that experiencing religion at a personal level is “first-hand” and the institutional aspect of religion is a “secondhand” form of religion (p. 64). Religion and spirituality are not independent concepts; they overlap to a lesser or greater level, depending on personal belief and experience. In short, religion and spirituality are very flexible variables at personal and experiential levels; any division into dimensions for research will be a limited approach.

Allport (1950/1961), in his eminent book, discussed the common threads in the origin of religion. He also wondered about the existence of a common basis for religious experience. He cited many famous writers to list possible roots of religion, such as fear, gratitude, negative feelings about oneself, etc. For defining common religious sentiments, Allport listed feelings such as dependence, security, and longing. Allport ends the section by claiming:

Just as there is no standard pattern of content in subjective religious experience, so too there is no common point of origin. To deny the existence of a single religious *instinct* entails no heresy in modern psychology, for it would be difficult to find any writer who makes a case for such an instinct. (p. 6)

Taking the discussion one step further, Smart (1996) did not see a religious worldview as necessarily different from other worldviews. He argued that "there are sufficient affinities between religious and secular worldviews" (p. 2) and that Marxism functioned much as a religion at a certain point in time. Nationalism, with its myths, stories, and emotions, is comparable with religious worldviews. Smart also pointed out that atheism is not always "unspiritual" (p. 27), and religion does not have to be theistic; for example, Buddhists and Jains do not believe in God. Mahayana has some alternatives to God; Theravada is strictly atheistic.

Smart added that the secular worldview has rituals comparable to religious ones. From the president's oath ceremony to the celebration of a new school year, specific patterns followed each time, just like religious rituals.

### ***Religion and Well-being***

Research on religion has gained the importance it deserves in the past few decades. Green and Elliott (2010) mentioned that the research on relationships between religion, health, and mental well-being has been growing for the past few decades. Religious coping is one of the most researched topics in this area; researchers have worked with a wide variety of samples spanning from college students in the Gulf War to parents facing infant death (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Cornish et al., 2017). Researchers have also studied various aspects of religiosity, such as frequency of religious attendance, frequency of prayer, and strength of religious belief (Green & Elliott, 2010; Keyes & Reitzes, 2007).

Previous research has highlighted the positive effects of religion/spirituality on mental well-being (Connor, 2012; Ellison et al., 2001; Green & Elliot, 2010; Hsu et al., 2009; Koenig et al., 2001). Ellison et al. (2001) found that the frequency of religious attendance and belief in eternal life were related to better mental well-being. Keyes and Reitzes (2007) found that religious identity predicted better psychological health, lower depression, and higher self-esteem. Keyes and Reitzes did not find a positive correlation between mental health and religious attendance.

Green and Elliot (2010) found that religious identity was related to more happiness. They also found that religious fundamentalism was related to greater happiness and explained that it was probably due to more optimism. A strict worldview with a clear definition of right and wrong might make it easier to make life choices; this could lead to better mental well-being (Pargament, 2002). Religious people also stay away from alcohol, drugs, and sexual promiscuity

(Ellison et al., 2001; Keyes & Reitzes, 2007; Pargament, 1997). Therefore, fundamental religious identity might lead to better lifestyle choices and might also contribute to the happiness factor. On the other hand, Nooney and Woodrum (2002) found that people who were from more fundamentalist churches suffered more depression (Nooney & Woodrum, 2002, as mentioned in Green and Elliot, 2010)

Researchers have also studied the relationship between religious variables and physical health. Green and Elliot (2010) found that fundamentalist tendencies were related to more happiness but poorer health, while the strength of religious identity was related to better health. Pargament et al. (2004) completed a longitudinal study on people facing chronic illness. They studied both mental and physical health variables in this longitudinal study. They found that positive religious coping was related to better physical health measures, such as better physical functioning and cognitive ability. It was also related to better mental health and lower depression. Negative religious coping was linked to worse health outcomes, such as deteriorating physical functioning and cognitive abilities and increased mortality. People who are religious tend to stay away from alcohol, drugs, and sexual promiscuity (Ellison et al., 2001; Keyes & Reitzes, 2007; Pargament, 1997); this might add not only to mental well-being but also to better physical health.

Oxman et al. (1995) researched mortality in elderly patients undergoing elective open-heart surgery. Mortality correlated to religious variables. Patients who had a higher level of religiosity and who found strength in religion had lower mortality. Also, social-religious attendance was related to lower mortality. Pargament (1997) pointed out the fact that mortality rates of elderly Christians drop around Christmas, and mortality in elderly Jews drop around Passover. Pargament stated that "anticipation of these religious rituals and holidays has survival implications for the individual" (p.174).

The positive effect of religious attendance is thought to be due to the social support people receive from their religious communities (Connor, 2012; Keyes & Reitzes, 2007). However, Green and Elliot (2010) found that religious activities positively affect health and well-being only if there is a belief in those activities, and the type of religious affiliation is not related to these outcomes. Therefore, the strength of religious identity is related to health and well-being,

Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) completed a metaanalysis of high-quality research on religion and psychological adjustment. They found that positive religious coping was related to better mental health and less stress, and negative religious coping was related to more depression and anxiety. Chai et al. (2012) studied previous research to conclude that religion can lower mortality and help reduce blood pressure problems and heart diseases. Also, it might reduce the rates of depression, neuroticism, etc. Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) also mentioned another metaanalysis study completed by Bergin (1983). Bergin found that there were studies that found a positive relationship between religion and mental health. However, there were also research articles exhibiting negative or no relationship between mental health and religion.

Keyes and Reitzes (2007) researched older working adults and retirees and found that those with higher religious identity had better self-esteem. Gebauer et al. (2012) included adults from many countries in their research and learned that believers had more self-esteem than nonbelievers.

Kroger (2007) mentioned that religion may protect adolescents and youth from risky behavior. Kroger added that religious identity increases a sense of purpose and gives a sense of direction in youth. Religious youth also have more concerns for the larger society. Francis et al. (2008) found multiple studies conducted in many countries that found a negative relationship between psychoticism and Christian religiosity. Francis et al. completed research on Hindu

children and young adults living in the U.K. aged 12 to 35 years and found that higher religiosity was related to less psychoticism.

Therefore, religion has positive outcomes for people from various age groups. Most studies on religion and mental well-being have been completed on older individuals and on those who are facing severe illnesses (Chai et al., 2012). Therefore, there is a need for more research on religion and well-being in university students, including international students.

### **Higher Education and Religion**

Religion and spirituality are based on faith and subjective perception. Academics and science stress objectivity and rationality. It is possible that attending college might cause students to challenge long-held religious beliefs or at least change the content of beliefs to a certain extent. It is not an exaggeration to believe that higher education, especially science education, could weaken or change religiosity and religious identity (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; Schwadel, 2016).

In 1985, the U.S. National Academy of Science declared that science and religion exist in separate realms and should not be mixed (Campbell, 2005). Academics, researchers, and social scientists have long overlooked the importance of religion, especially after the Second World War (Osburn, 2005). Secularization theory proposed the fall of religion or at least of the notion of the supernatural (Campbell, 2005). However, this theory is now defunct (Hirschman, 2004; Osburn, 2005).

Mayrl and Oeur (2009) stated that a large percentage of college students in the United States believe in God, however, church attendance had become less frequent than before entering college. In his research, Campbell (2005) found that a large percentage of Canadian students found both religion and science significant to their lives. Many of these students were

religious/spiritual, and there was a low correlation between their beliefs about science and their thoughts regarding religion.

Dalessandro (2016) studied young adults at a public university in the United States. He found that conservative students increased their involvement in church, while more liberal students reported a decrease in their church attendance. Most liberal students used religion to find strength in stressful situations but respected others' choice of religion and lifestyle.

Eckberg and Nesterenko (1985) found that attitude towards creationism did not correlate to education level in conservative Protestants, while in liberal Protestants and Catholics, it was related to education. In fundamentalist (conservative) Protestants, this phenomenon was related to the degree of religiosity. However, in liberal Protestants and Catholics, it was independent of the degree of religiosity (Eckberg & Nesterenko, 1985, as mentioned in Campbell, 2005).

Schwadel (2016) asserted that college graduates were more likely to attend religious services and less likely to dissociate from their religious denomination. However, attending college might weaken key religious beliefs while increasing religious participation (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; Schwadel, 2016).

Religion and college are both very important parts of the human experience; it is equally possible that religiosity might affect student outcomes. Mayrl and Oeur (2009) reviewed previous literature and found mixed results on the relationship between religiosity and academic success. Purnell et al. (2019) found that religiosity did not affect the academic performance of pharmacy students but improved their mental health. Purnell et al. proposed that since mental well-being improves academic performance, religiosity might indirectly improve academic performance.

### **The Intersection of Religion with International Students' Sojourn**

There could be a couple of ways religion, religious identity, and religious beliefs could affect an international student's adaptation to a new country. Similarly, as an international sojourn is a significant life change (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), religious identity and beliefs might also be affected by this experience (Potkar, 2013). Being a higher education student can affect a person's religious values and behavior (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; Schwadel, 2016). Being in higher education is therefore expected to affect international students' religious life also.

However, higher education's effect on international students' religiosity might be more pronounced. Many of these international students come from a religiously homogenous country. In fact, religion might be synonymous with nationality, as there is only one national religion (Bloom et al., 2015; Bulut & Ebaugh, 2014). These students might encounter other religions for the first time. They might also be affected by the secular environment of American campuses. Liberal values might be more shocking to these students as conservative values might have deep religious significance to them (Osburn, 2005).

International students undergo a long and stressful acculturation process to a new country (Berry, 1997; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Mori, 2000; Osburn, 2005; Potkar, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Stress might negatively affect the psychological health of international students. Previous research has found positive effects of religion/spirituality on mental well-being (Connor, 2012; Hsu et al., 2009; Ellison et al., 2001; Green & Elliot, 2010; Koenig et al., 2001). Therefore, it is possible that religious international students might have better mental health despite the stress of acculturation.

Religion and culture are deeply connected (Hill et al., 2000). Both cultures and religions provide underlying assumptions that affect people's worldviews and behavior (Osburn, 2005; Schein & Schein, 2017). Acculturation to a new country requires profound cognitive and behavioral changes (Ward et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2015). These changes might challenge long-

held cultural and religious values and be a source of confusion and stress (Schein & Schein, 2017). Some people can easily change their worldviews, while others find the process challenging (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Ward, 1997). Some people might face severe mental agony in the face of change in cultural expectations and are said to be in cultural shock (Oberg, 1960; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Therefore, religious worldviews can be the very source of stress that religion aims to ease.

People generally assume that their culture and religion are norms that apply globally (Leong & Ward, 2000; Schein & Schein, 2017). Some may also think that their culture and religion are superior to other cultures and religions (Schein & Schein, 2017). People often evaluate their group as better to maintain self-esteem (Zhou et al., 2008). However, in a new country, international students are expected to adjust to a new culture (Lee & Rice, 2007; Wu et al., 2015). This process might challenge students' identity and self-esteem (Ward et al., 2011).

Therefore, having a different religious worldview can lead to mental conflict during the cross-cultural transition (Osburn, 2005; Ward et al., 2011), but religious identity also provides mental stability and improves self-esteem (Subica, 2011). Religious practices provide coping skills to overcome the stress of identity clash (Green & Elliot, 2010). A well-developed religious identity provides a sense of coherence (Green & Elliot, 2010) and a clear direction of behavior (Ward et al., 2011). A sense of coherence improves psychological well-being and enhances coping skills (Green & Elliot, 2010). Ward et al. (2011) found that a sense of coherence was negatively related to identity distress and depression.

People with well-developed identities generally feel more favorable toward another group than people who have not achieved a stable identity. Phinney et al. (2007) found out that Asian American and Latino first-year students who had well-developed ethnic identities exhibited more positive attitudes toward other ethnic groups than those who did not have ethnic identity

achievement. Phinney et al. (2007) also cited a couple of other studies with the same conclusion. However, religious group identity can prevent immigrants from integrating into the host society (Connor, 2014; Garcia-Muñoz & Neuman, 2013).

International students face more physical, psychological, and sociocultural stress than domestic students (Cheng et al., 1993; Furnham & Bochner, 1989; Mori, 2000; Philip et al., 2019; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Religion, spirituality, and religious coping often become important in times of stress (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015; Green & Elliot, 2010; Hsien-Chuan Hsu et al., 2009; Krause, 2004; Pargament, 1997). People often use religious coping in times of stress. Therefore, religion, spirituality, and religious coping might become necessary for international students.

Pargament (1998) enumerated various positive coping strategies like finding greater meaning, having a secure bond with God, and spiritual connectedness to others. Negative coping strategies include the religious struggle to preserve the significance of life, belief in an ominous world, and belief in punishing God (Pargament, 1998, as mentioned in Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015). Abu-Raiya and Pargament explored more than 20 years of research to find evidence that positive coping is related to better physical and mental health, while negative religious coping is related to worse physical and mental outcomes. Therefore, if international students use religious coping, it might negatively or positively affect their well-being.

Religious groups also attract people who are experiencing cross-cultural transition. Temples and churches might provide the feeling of a home away from home (Connor, 2014) and reduce homesickness, which is a significant contributor to acculturation stress (Lee & Rice, 2007; Potkar, 2013; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Yeh & Inose, 2000). Therefore, joining an ethnic-religious group might help the international student overcome acculturation stress.

However, international students might have limited modes of transport. This situation might affect their capacity to benefit from being a part of a supportive religious community.

International students might face discrimination due to their religious identity (Bloom et al., 2015; Norenzayan, 2013). Discrimination increases identity conflicts (Leong & Ward, 2000). Identity conflicts, in turn, can affect international students' psychological well-being and academic performance (Ward et al., 2011). When people face conflict, they assert their ethnic and religious identity even more (Connor, 2014; Leong & Ward, 2000; Subica, 2011). Therefore, this situation might intensify the religious-social identity of international students.

In short, there are multiple possible intersections between the acculturation process and international students' religion and religious identity. Therefore, researchers need to explore this subject.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This study aimed to explore the role of religion/spirituality during female international undergraduate students' adaptation to life in the United States and to examine whether these students' cross-cultural experiences affected their religiosity/spirituality. I was also interested in female international undergraduate students' recommendations on how American universities can support their religious/spiritual needs during their transition. The research questions that guided this dissertation were as follows:

- 1) How do female international undergraduate students discuss the importance of religiosity/spirituality in their lives when describing their adaptation to the new country?
- 2) How do these students narrate any changes they experienced in their religious/spiritual identity, beliefs, and practice during the acculturation phase?
- 3) What are the students' perceptions about the support they received (or would have liked to receive) from the host university for their religious/spiritual needs?

I used a narrative case study design, a qualitative research method, to answer the research questions. Qualitative methodology is a well-established research tool used by researchers in various fields, such as education and health (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Mason (1996) suggested there is no single definition of qualitative research, and there was a debate on whether there should be something "differentiated" (p. 3) into a single umbrella of qualitative research.

Merriam and Tisdale (2016) maintained that qualitative studies differ from other research forms. For example, survey research describes the distribution of a variable in a population; experimental quantitative study focuses on determining the cause-and-effect relationship

between phenomena. Researchers also utilize quantitative studies to predict future events. On the other hand, qualitative researchers are interested in learning about the meaning a phenomenon or an event has for the people involved. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that the same phenomenon could have a different meaning for different people, and the same event might be interpreted differently by various people (Yin, 2011). Since I agreed with these statements, a qualitative study design was used for this study.

Mason (1996) mentioned three commonalities of different types of qualitative research: First, qualitative research is "grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly "interpretivist" in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, or produced" (p. 4). Second, it follows a flexible data collection method and is "sensitive to the social context in which data are produced" (p. 4). The third attribute is that it involves elaborate analysis and tries to understand the "complexity, details, and context" (p.4). This study included all these three characteristics of qualitative research.

While Creswell and Poth (2018) considered multiple methods of data collection as an essential distinguishing factor in all qualitative studies, Mason (1996), Merriam and Tisdale (2016), and Patton (1987) did not mention multiple data collection methods as a requirement for a thorough qualitative study. Patton (1987) stated that multiple data sources might sometimes blur the picture and advised researchers to use multiple data sources judiciously. For this study, I used multiple data sources appropriately and judiciously.

## **Research Design**

Merriam and Tisdale (2016) described the six most frequently used qualitative paradigm designs: basic qualitative research, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and case study. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) stated that other methods of qualitative

study can be combined with case studies (e.g., ethnography, narrative study, and phenomenology). I used a narrative case study design for this dissertation.

A case study is used to inquire about a bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). A bounded system can be a single person, an organization, or a program (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). A case study can be limited to a single case or involve other designs, such as a collective case study and multiple case narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Shekedi, 2005). Since this study was conducted in a single university, it was a bounded system and was eligible for a case study design.

Case studies typically use multiple sources of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). These sources include interviews, observations, documents, participants' observations, and artifacts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I included several sources of data for this study, including interviews, post-interview reflections, member checks, reflexive notes, and reflective notes.

Narrative qualitative study is one of the most frequently used formats of qualitative research. A narrative inquiry is more holistic because the stories often take affective, cognitive, and motivational dimensions into account (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). A narrative inquirer pays attention to linguistics as well as non-verbal communication, such as pauses. The narrative study tells stories about individual experiences.

Narrative research explores experiences as well as the social, cultural, and other institutional contexts of these experiences, and the context of the stories is important in narrative research. The narrative analysis also sheds light on the worldview and identity of the interviewee (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Similarly, the religious and spiritual experiences of international students are expected to be shaped by the university's context and the student's worldview. This is one of the primary reasons for selecting the narrative stance for this study.

Narrative interviews are often transformed into an interesting story with a chronological order of events; special importance is given to times of tension and transitions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry is especially useful for studying the critical episodes of transition, such as retirement, divorce, and college transition (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). International sojourn is a critical life transition that is often also stressful (Furnham & Bochner, 1986); therefore, the narrative stance is well-suited to study experiences during this period.

### ***Research Site***

Qualitative research is aimed at understanding people's experiences; therefore, both the worldview of a person and the context of the experience are vital to this research. I chose female international students from a single university; this condition provided a relatively homogenous university culture and context to all the cases. However, students might have had different microcultures depending on the department they were in and the colleagues they had. Therefore, I collected ample data to describe these differences.

I used the pseudonym "Tall Tree" instead of the actual name of the University. This University is situated in the southern region of the United States and is affiliated with a Christian denomination. According to the Carnegie classification, it is a doctoral university with high research (R2) that enrolls more than 10,000 students. Undergraduates form more than 80% of the total student population. This University has multiple schools and colleges, offering over a hundred bachelor's degree programs, over sixty master's degrees, and more than thirty doctoral degrees, in addition to various certificates.

Although the University is situated in an area with high racial diversity, close to 70% of the students and 80% of the faculty members are White. International students account for nearly 5% of the total enrollment; these students belong to more than eighty countries.

The policy for international admission is inclusive and non-discriminatory. As discussed, the University where this research was conducted is affiliated with a Christian denomination. It has a church and a chapel on campus. However, it is not governed by a religious denomination and does not mandate any religious belief system or practice for its students, faculty, or staff.

### ***Research Population and Sampling***

The research on international students' religious lives and experiences is limited (Osburn, 2005; Philip et al., 2019; Potkar, 2013). The few available studies have divided the students into various groups based on different attributes. Osburn (2005) included only Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist students but excluded Hindu and Jewish students. Philip (2015) included students of multiple religious groups as well as students who were spiritual but not religious; Osburn (2005) did not include students who were spiritual but not religious, while Potkar (2013) included Indian students belonging to various religious orientations, including atheist orientation.

Therefore, researchers have used a schema pertinent to their research questions and context while deciding which religious orientations to include. Since this research is based on international students in a religiously affiliated university, I divided students into Christian and non-Christian groups.

Osburn (2005) included undergraduates as well as graduates and postgraduate students, while Potkar (2013) also included atheists. Both these studies included male and female participants. Broad selection criteria probably complemented the exploratory significance of these studies, as commonalities and disparities could be noted in international students' experience across a wide range of student populations.

Potkar (2013) suggested that future research could use a narrower focus, such as using the undergraduate-only population, to add depth to the understanding of this phenomenon. Following this suggestion, I narrowed the focus to include only undergraduate female

international students from a single university and used the narrative framework to further scholarship on this subject. Also, since most previous studies did not have undergraduates as the only participants, this study might add further depth and dimension to the previous literature.

Graduates are more likely to have an identity-achieved status than undergraduates (Evans et al., 2010; Kroger, 2007). Since religion is a vital dimension of identity (Kroger, 2007; Osburn, 2005), undergraduates' religious experiences may differ from those of graduate students. Religiosity also varies by gender (Pargament, 1997); therefore, female international students' religious experiences could be dissimilar to that of male international students.

I included female international undergraduate students who self-identify as members of an organized religious group. Graduate students and male students were beyond this research's scope. A narrower focus was also more suitable for this study as it uses a narrative case study approach. To add some breadth and dimension to the study, the researcher included female international undergraduate students who came here before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Participant Selection***

Mason (1996) stated that qualitative researchers rarely use probability sampling and adds that qualitative samples should allow a researcher to "understand the process, rather than to represent a population" (p. 97). Qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling to get detailed data, and they are interested in information-rich cases rather than the ability to generalize the findings (Patton, 1987). Patton mentioned criterion-based selection as a valid method for selecting information-rich cases for qualitative inquiry.

A criteria-based approach was used to select participants for this study. The first criterion was that the student should be a female undergraduate international student who self-identified as belonging to an organized religious group. The second criterion was that the student should have spent at least six months in the United States because a student who has just arrived might

not have enough experience in life's religious and spiritual spheres. Third, the student should not have significant previous experience of living in a foreign country. For this study, significant previous experience was defined as more than six months of continuous residence in a country other than the student's home country. The last criterion was that the student should be able to dedicate time to the interviews and a post-interview essay.

### ***Data Collection***

Since this research was a narrative case study, I used multiple data sources and analyzed the data using the narrative framework. Narrative studies generally have fewer participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher planned to include three to six international students for each (Christian and non-Christian) group. In the first step, I reached out to international undergraduate female students and invited them to participate in the research. Emails and flyers were used to invite possible participants. The emails were sent through the international office after obtaining all the necessary permissions. Flyers were left in common seating areas, and noticeboards were placed in the buildings where international students were expected to visit frequently.

When any student reached out to me with the intention of participating in the study, I sent them a document containing detailed information about the research. If the student met all criteria for being part of the interview, I sent a document of consent. This document contained information on the research process. I also answered any questions that a probable interviewee might have. The document of consent was sent and received via email. The next step was to collect data through semi-structured interviews with the selected female international undergraduate students; the interviews were 60 minutes to 90 minutes long and were conducted via Zoom at a time most comfortable for the student. I obtained consent once again verbally

before starting the Zoom interview. The interviews were audio-recorded after obtaining permission from the interviewee.

Information about the demographic variables, such as age and ethnicity, was collected during the interview as needed. I prepared a guide for a semi-structured interview after consultation with the esteemed committee members. These questions were aimed at answering the research questions, and additional questions were asked depending on the context of the interview. Each interview was transcribed within a few weeks, and the audio recording was destroyed. The transcription was under the pseudonym of each student.

I requested the participants to complete post-interview reflections. These reflections included two prompts that were common to all participants. I added some specific questions for a few participants to clarify and add details to their interview data. These prompts helped triangulate the data from interviews. I also utilized member checks to improve the reliability of the results. Eventually, I was able to interview six students, three from each group (Christian and Non-Christian). Five of the students completed post-interview reflections. The following table describes the salient characters of each student; this table uses pseudonyms.

**Table 1**

*Information about Participating Students*

<u>Number</u>	<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age in Years</u>	<u>Home Country/Region</u>	<u>Religion</u>
1	Mia	19	South America	Christianity
2	Kim	20	India	Hinduism
3	Sia	22	India	Hinduism
4	Maria	25	China	Christianity
5	Reeta	22	India	Hinduism
6	Ruth	24	North Africa	Christianity

## *Data Analysis*

Qualitative research data analysis is inductive, meaning that explanations, hypotheses, and findings are created from the data (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Patton (1987) mentions that the "classic inductive approach is goal-free evaluation.... describe what is meaningful and salient without being pigeonholed into standardized categories" (p. 15). For this dissertation, I analyzed data inductively using the constructivist framework. Constructivists believe that social reality is not *out there* to be discovered but is created by social interactions. Qualitative researchers respect multiple and complex worldviews and multiple ways of meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mason, 1996; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

In qualitative research, one tries to understand the perspective of the person who is the research subject. This is called the *emic* perspective (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). However, qualitative researchers do not believe in objective interpretation; therefore, the *emic* perspective is always molded by the biases and the worldview of the researcher. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) explained, "Overall interpretation will be the researcher's understanding of the participant's understanding of the phenomenon of interest" (p. 25).

Qualitative evaluators try to understand the world as seen by the people who are being studied, as well as the researchers' own understanding of the situation (Patton, 1987). Therefore, researchers might also choose to put forward their own interpretations of the participant's experience. This is called the *etic* perspective.

For this study, I aimed first to describe each participant's story of their experiences and their opinions; this was the *emic* perspective. I have also forwarded an *etic* perspective, which analyzed the relation of a person's story to their worldview, heritage-culture, and situational factors. I have examined the change experienced by each person concerning their religious

beliefs and practices and analyzed the points of commonality and differences between research participants' narratives and suggestions. I have also probed the similarities and differences between the narratives of two groups, Christian and non-Christian, especially as they relate to the research questions.

Qualitative data analysis involves examining raw data from interviews, observations, documents, or a combination of these sources. Raw data also includes the researcher's reflexivity memos, other notes, ideas, hunches, etc. (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Patton, 1987). Merriam and Tisdale (2016) advised *coding* data to develop categories and subcategories. A code is a meaning given to a part of data; this part can be a single word or multiple paragraphs.

The coding scheme should agree with the research's philosophical framework and assumptions and be guided toward answering the research questions. Patton (1987) calls the coding process a labeling process. Basically, the categories and subcategories emerge from comparing and connecting the codes or labels (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Patton, 1987).

I followed a rigorous process of coding and recoding. I used hard copies of the interview transcripts and other data and analyzed data without using computerized data analysis software, kept a record of the changing categories, and saved any other data to improve the transparency of data analysis.

### **Trustworthiness of this Study**

The qualitative perspective of research rejects the idea that an investigator can be completely neutral or objective while studying a social phenomenon (Mason, 1996; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016) and "instead the researcher is seen as actively constructing knowledge about the world according to certain principles and using certain methods derived from their epistemological position" (Mason, 1996, p. 36).

Merriam and Tisdale (2016) advised that researchers discuss their epistemological and ontological positions and examine how these philosophical foundations affect their worldviews and the research process. This is a sincere introspection about how researchers' experiences and history affect the way they think and what they believe and value to uncover hidden biases and assumptions (Hendricks, 2017). For this study, I thoroughly discussed their values and life experiences with the dissertation committee members before and during the research process.

Mason (1996) also suggested that a researcher must engage in "critical self-scrutiny" on his biases, assumptions, actions, and methods; this is called reflexivity (p.6). The reflexive process should begin early in the research process and continue during data collection and analysis (Hendricks, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Hendricks (2017) advised researchers to keep a journal for the critical reflexive process. Using these suggestions, I regularly used reflexive and reflective notes. I discussed biases and worldviews before, during, and after each interview through memos and religiously wrote down the ideas and epiphanies that occurred during the research process.

I diligently reached out to all participants for member checks as utilizing member checks is another way to control bias and improve the trustworthiness of the study (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). In this step, the researcher reaches out to the participant to discuss the researcher's interpretations of the interview data. The participant can confirm if the interpretation is truly representative of what the participant said or communicated during the interview (Hendricks, 2017; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

I saved their reflective journal and all written notes on how the data was analyzed and how and why the categories and subcategories were developed. Saving data trails is another method to bolster the credibility of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). I also used multiple data collection techniques for triangulation, which is another strategy to improve the

dependability of qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Hendricks (2017) mentions that using multiple data collection methods gives depth to the data and makes the study more credible.

### **Researcher's Position and Reflexivity**

I feel like an insider as well as an outsider to this research, an insider because I am also an international student, just like the participants of this research. However, each student is different, and international students come from a wide variety of cultures. International students could also vary in their worldviews, situational factors, and life experiences; religious experiences are very subjective and unpredictable; therefore, I am an outsider to someone's personal religious experience.

Before starting as an international student in 2016, I had traveled to the United States twice on a tourist visa to visit a family member, and my overall experiences in the United States were very positive. Since I became an international student, I have had complete support from advisors, professors, and university staff.

Despite all this support and previous travel experience, I had a very stressful transition, especially in the first year, and I gravitated to Hinduism, which is the main religion that my family practiced. I soon became more religious and obsessed with the rituals and cleanliness during the *pooja* rather than praying or experiencing the rituals, but I was able to manage and minimize this habit with time and started relying on meditation and prayer more than rituals.

During this research, I was aware of past experiences and possible biases due to these experiences. This awareness helped limit assumptions and avoid leading questions. I was aware that not all students experience stress during the international sojourn, and therefore, the student participant's experiences related to academic, social, and religious spheres might be very different from my experiences. By using memos and reflexive and reflective notes, I made sure

to avoid asking leading questions to the students and minimized any prejudices regarding students' experiences before or during their international sojourn.

I have been a science student and a skeptic despite believing in various religious traditions and believing in both Hindu and Jain thought processes, especially those related to *Karma* and *Moksha*. My family is Jain, yet they mainly follow Hindu rituals. I was educated in a Catholic private school and have prayed and believed in Jesus since age three.

I do not consider Hindu, Jain, and Christian worldviews contradictory. However, it is possible that the students (participants) found different religious worldviews to be incompatible. Both Hindu and Jain traditions are not very exclusive. Jainism, with its theory of *Anekantwad*, promulgates multiple realities and truths. Therefore, my experience could be very different from that of someone with a monotheistic mindset. Despite all these religious experiences, I favor agnostic thoughts and skepticism, was aware of these biases, and maintained equal empathy toward all participants.

Age and work experience are other identity variables that might have affected my experiences as an international student. I was in my early thirties and had many years of work experience before being accepted as an international student. A student who is younger might be more interested in having friends and belonging to peer groups. Such students might experience the religious environment with a very different frame of mind.

Younger international students might also find it difficult to accept a different point of view. However, it is also possible that younger international students might be more flexible in their thought processes than I am. I experienced significant acculturation stress during my first two years as an international student. It is also possible that some international students do not experience acculturation stress at all.

All through the research process, I was cognizant of the above factors and other personal and cultural differences that might shape students' (participants') international experiences, including those experiences that are significant to this research.

### **Ethical Consideration**

While ethical issues can arise anytime during a study, it is imperative that a researcher is prepared to identify and resolve ethical issues accurately. To prepare, I completed the Collaborated Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training. I had a valid CITI certification before applying for Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission. Before initiating this study, I obtained all necessary permissions, such as IRB permission.

This study involved interviews with international students, and international sojourns are often stressful. The interviews also involved talking about past and present religious experiences and beliefs, which might have caused some additional stress in a few students. Therefore, I provided the participating students with a list of on-campus mental health resources and phone numbers, including emergency numbers.

Before beginning the interview, the participants were informed that they were free to decline to answer a question, and they were free to leave the study whenever they felt like doing so.

The participants' names, ages, and other personal details have not been disclosed anywhere in the research process to protect their identity and privacy. I provided pseudonyms for the participants and kept a single copy of the list of names and pseudonyms on a laptop, which was locked by a password. This password was known only to me.

The interviews were transcribed under the respective pseudonyms, and the audio recording of each interview was destroyed soon after its transcription. During all these steps, the

researcher regularly reached out to the esteemed research committee head and members for guidance to make this research trustworthy, rigorous, and ethical.

### **Limitations**

This research was conducted in a single university. The university is in the Southwestern United States and is affiliated with a denomination but not governed by a religious body. Human experiences are inextricably linked to the context. Therefore, the findings of this study may or may not apply to international students in another university.

This narrative case study depended on interviews and insights from international students about their experiences while on a foreign sojourn. These personal experiences are hard to observe. Therefore, the reliability of this study mainly depended on the correct information provided by the students. People generally remember recent experiences better than the experiences that have occurred in the past. It is possible that some details of past religious experiences might not have been perfectly clear.

This research took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences of international students might have been affected in various ways due to this pandemic. This episode makes the experience of the participating international students unique, and this situation requires careful examination and thought before applying the findings to another time.

The interviews were conducted through the Zoom platform; this might have resulted in missing some of the information that face-to-face interviews could have provided. Finally, this study involved only female undergraduates. The applicability of the finding to another student population cannot be assumed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

In this dissertation, I explored the role of religion/spirituality in female international undergraduate students' adaptation to life in the United States. I also aimed to examine whether these students' cross-cultural experiences affect their religiosity/spirituality. Finally, I was interested in female international undergraduate students' recommendations on how American universities can support the students' religious/spiritual needs during transition.

I completed a narrative case study for this dissertation and triangulated data from interviews, post-interview reflection, and reflective and reflexive notes. I analyzed data inductively using a constructivist framework.

In this section, I first present my findings for separate cases as the students' narratives. I also include my etic perspective for each case at the end of each student's narrative. Presenting the etic perspective below the emic narratives adds to the understanding of the interconnection between the student's narrative, the student's worldview, and the context of the University where this research is based.

I then discuss the similarities between the two groups; this section also includes findings common to most students in both groups. Then, I discuss the differences between the two groups of students. Lastly, I present the students' suggestions for Tall Tree University.

### **First Case: Mia's Narrative**

Mia is a 19-year-old, first-year undergraduate in Computer Information Technology. She is from a small country in South America and came to the U.S. in 2021, about nine months before the interview. Her childhood was comfortable, and she lived with an extended family.

Many relatives lived nearby; she had many friends in school and church. She also has two older sisters.

She always planned to be an international student in the U.S. as her country faces economic, political, and social instability. She explains, "Well, it's not about my childhood but more about my country; my opportunities in my country were not as good as here." She did not attend college in her country and came to Tall Tree University right after high school. She says, "Also, coming here, they require me to have a lot of documents." She explained that the visa interview was quick, but the process of applying for and gathering documents for a student visa was complex and stressful.

She came with her mother and other international students whom she knew back home. Her mother went back home in a few days. At Tall Tree University, friends and seniors from her hometown stayed close to her throughout her adjustment to American life and culture. She is in the second semester of her first year and gets stressed sometimes. She says, "I get stressed sometimes now," and adds, "My first semester was a little rough." She had trouble adjusting to living away from her family when she started university.

She also says, "Food was big," to point out that she was not used to the food available at the university. She says that the food at Tall Tree University is "very different" and requires conscious adjustment from her side. She was also conscious of her English accent in her first semester. She adds, "Like, it was easier for me to talk in Spanish. So, every time I had to talk in English, I ... I didn't feel as confident as I ... as ... every time I spoke Spanish."

She found American culture very different and explains, "Americans act differently; they think differently." This cultural adjustment required a lot of extra effort.

The academic adjustment did not cause her much stress as she studied in an international high school in her hometown to prepare for an American style of teaching and learning.

Therefore, she did not find speaking in class or writing papers difficult.

During times of stress, Mia talks to her compatriot students in the same university, exercises, and calls home. Remembering her first semester, she says, "I talked to my friends. If not, and if I am alone by myself, I did exercises, and it was helpful." She exercises in her room or visits the nearby University Recreation Center.

### ***Religious Background***

Mia belongs to a very religious family. Religious identity is important to her family and Mia alike. She recollects, "I think it had a big impact in a big part in all my family life. For example, my mom, my grandmother, my mom, me, my aunt." Mia adds, "So, every generation every family member had was the most part of a lot I saw in my childhood." She also informs, "I'm a baby; I was baptized. Then I got my first communion, and then I was ... I did my confirmation."

Mia went to weekly Mass and enjoyed sharing religious bonds with her family and friends. She says, "I prayed every time with my family and did everything that was supposed to be part of my religion." She adds that her family taught her "how to go to Mass, how to pray, how to be a good person." Mia's family prayed regularly together.

Christmas was a big celebration for Mia's family. They installed Christmas trees and lights outside their home and prepared food for family and friends. Mia remembers the celebrative spirit of Christmas when she was little.

Mia enumerates the central religious beliefs of her family. These are the belief in a loving God, the afterlife, the ideas of heaven and hell, and the importance of being a good person. One

of her family's beliefs is that good deeds will be paid off in the afterlife. She says, "We need to be good," and adds, "What you did in this world is going to be paid off."

### ***Religion and Acculturation***

Mia does not report any changes in her religious identity or beliefs after coming to the U.S. She says, "I have been very consistent with my beliefs." She feels lucky as she explains, "I never had it ... something that made me doubt ... doubt my religion." She also adds, "I have never had a negative experience with my religion" when asked to describe any negative consequences of her religion on her acculturation and adaptation to life in the U.S.

She attends Mass less often but prays more often than she did back home. She says, "I practice my religion a lot by praying." She mentions, "I used to pray a lot when I was stressed," describing the first few months as an international student. She continues to use praying as a strategy to reduce stress. She reports that praying helps her feel better and study better. The main reason Mia attends Mass less often is a lack of time. She also adds, "I don't have a car. So ... therefore, I have to pay Uber ... then ... it's not ... it's not really easy for me." Mia also agrees that if other students share rides with her to the church, she will feel safer. Mia's church is not very far away, but it takes around 15 to 20 minutes of walking for Mia to reach it.

Mia often seeks support from her compatriots in times of stress. These students share her religion. Some of them came to Tall Tree University with Mia; others are seniors who came to the universities before her. She says, "I have friends who believe in the same things as me, so my friends' support helped."

### ***Suggestions for the University***

Mia is satisfied with the support she received from Tall Tree University for her religious life. Mia suggests that the university could connect students with similar religious needs. She adds that these students can practice religion together and share a ride to church. She also adds

that the university could suggest some good nearby churches so that students need not go too far; she remembers, “I needed help to figure out which church is near my dorm so that I have time for homework.” Mia also mentions WhatsApp groups as a quick means to connect students with similar religious and spiritual needs.

Mia lives around a 15-minute walk from her church. She is not very regular in her church attendance and opines that she will feel safer if another student travels with her in a cab. Mia suggests that the WhatsApp groups could also connect students who want to travel to a particular area, not just for religious reasons.

### ***Etic Perspective***

Mia attends church less often due to a lack of time. She also finds riding an Uber to church very costly. However, she prays more often than she did back home. Therefore, she may be using the religious strategy that is most available to her in the given circumstances.

When stressed, she often reaches out to her community members who are students at the same university. She points out, "I have friends who believe in the same things as me, so my friends' support helped." This could mean that sharing the same religious beliefs could enhance the support provided by compatriots.

Mia does not have many friends from the American community. She also does not socialize with international students from a country other than her own. All her compatriots share her religious beliefs. This fact could be one of the reasons that she never doubted her religious beliefs and identity.

### **Second Case: Kim’s Narrative**

Kim is a 20-year-old undergraduate student pursuing a degree in business information systems and had just completed the exams for the second semester at the time of the interview. She is from a small town in India, from a well-to-do and educated family, and had a happy

childhood. She lived in a multigenerational family with her grandparents, parents, uncle, aunt, and cousins.

She "dreamed" of studying in the U.S. since she was in class 8. Her inspirations were her father and a television series. Her father had a hybrid job in India and the U.S. However, she did not consider being an international student seriously until she was in class 12th. She and her father started researching American universities. She took a gap year during COVID-19 and did not attend any college after the 12th grade but used the gap year to earn a diploma in a business-related subject and make final college choices. She explains that her visa interview was easy; however, obtaining an appointment for a visa interview during the COVID-19 years was challenging.

Kim came to the U.S. in 2021, and no family member traveled with her. The International Office of Tall Tree University arranged a bus to help students reach campus. Initially, the first week was exciting as she explored the campus and met other international students. However, she started missing her friends and family within a few days. She said, "I lived in a joint family and could trust them blindly." At that time, she realized she was all alone and added, "I did not know a single person here and got pretty nervous and like ... scary" to explain her situation at that time.

Kim found adjusting to the American education system difficult. She was used to rote learning and had never written a paper before. She felt too shy to ask for help from American students and was worried about what American students would think of her. She reached out to her professor, and he supported her and helped her to write her first paper. Kim remembers, "I have been adapting to the American system of education. It is a bit difficult ... like ... entirely different from how I used to study back in India."

During this time of academic adjustment, Kim soon started an on-campus job, joined a few clubs, and got overwhelmed. This busy schedule increased her stress again. But she understood her problem, improved her time management skills, and felt better; she explains, "I got the heck of it." She has a meal plan on campus but misses homemade spicy vegetarian food. She adds, "So, most of the time, I am inclined towards spicy food, but then I know that it's pretty difficult here to get something like spicy," referring to the food on-campus meal plan. Therefore, Kim sometimes visits eateries near campus to enjoy salads, smoothies, and spicy Mexican food.

During times of stress, she used to call home and talk to other international students. She still calls home once or twice a day. Sometimes, she discusses her problems with her family back home, and they give apt suggestions. She adds that talking to family makes her feel better, even if she does not discuss her problems. She calls them regularly twice a day.

### ***Religious Background***

Kim is from a Hindu family, and Hindu identity is crucial to her family. She adds, "My grandmom and granddad are super-religious." Her grandmother has a holy shrine with numerous deities. Her grandmother's day starts with a bath early in the morning, followed by religious rituals, praying, and offering sweets to deities. She (grandmother) gets to her morning chores after this routine.

Kim clarifies that not everybody in her family followed this routine and adds, "We all had this ...aa... we all offer like God sweet every single morning. So, whenever my family ... we had the thing in my family where we all used to sit down for breakfast together." Her grandmom also visited nearby temples every Sunday since Kim was little.

Watching these practices was Kim's first introduction to her religion. Kim adds about her grandmother, "She was the one person who introduced me technically to religion because I still remember when, as a child, I had the habit of sleeping to her ... like ... telling me stories about

*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*." Her grandmother also recited folklore and stories about Lord Ganesha and other deities.

*Diwali* was a massive celebration for Kim and her multigenerational family. Many relatives also lived nearby, often visiting during celebration time. Local shops would be stuffed with crackers and other items related to *Diwali Pooja*, people would buy new clothes, and the local environment would be filled with celebrative fervor. *Navratri*, *Shivararti*, and *Holi* were also celebrated enthusiastically in Kim's town.

Despite strong religious beliefs and identity, Kim's family did not force her to follow their religion. Kim has always believed in the existence of God, and Lord Ganesha became her favorite deity. She and her family believe that Ganesha wards off negativity. She recollects, "I always had that belief in my mind that somewhere God exists like God, not in, not as in a statue that we see, but God, as in this powerful aura, that exists." Kim started going to the temple with her grandmother every Sunday. This practice was interrupted by extra classes that Kim had in class 10. Due to a heavy study load, Kim visited the temple irregularly in the eleventh and twelfth grades.

When asked to enumerate the central religious beliefs of her family, Kim identifies two main beliefs. The first belief is that things happen for a reason, and if you do not achieve what you had planned, God has a better plan for you. The second belief is the idea of doing good to others. She explains that one should do good to others without expecting anything in return; one's good will be paid later (*Karma*). Kim was not able to enumerate any other religious beliefs of her family. When probed about the idea of rebirth, she said that his belief was mentioned in her family but did not carry much importance in her family belief system.

### ***Religion and Acculturation***

Kim does not report questioning her religious beliefs or identity after coming to the U.S. by affirming, "I know that I still have my faith, and my beliefs going strong." She does not report any adverse effect of her religious beliefs or practice on her adjustment to the U.S. Kim recounts that she was stressed enough to leave America and mulled returning home a few times. However, her faith in God helped her in those times as she said to herself that God had brought her so far and would show her the right path.

She has brought idols of *Ganesha* and *Mataji* (Goddess) with her and has a small shrine for them. She tries to pray for a minute every day to these deities and to chant Ganesha's name, yet many days, she is not able to practice these due to her busy schedule. Kim remembers that her grandmother used to sing *bhajans* (Hindu devotional songs for deities) back home. She puts these *bhajans* on YouTube when she is stressed or needs motivation. Kim informs, "I play them in the morning, or if I have an interview or something like that, so it calms me down." She rarely did this back home.

Kim has never visited a temple after coming to the U.S. She explains that the temple is a little far away and she does not have enough time. With further probing, she realized that she felt unsafe going far away from the university in a cab, and if a few students accompanied her, she would definitely plan to visit a temple.

Kim is happy that a few Hindu festivals were celebrated at the University last semester. She suggests, "But they're different because of the way you celebrate it with your family, and you celebrate it at your place." She misses the grand festive spirit of the celebrations.

### ***Suggestions for the University***

Kim is satisfied with the University's support towards her religious and spiritual needs. She informs, "I'm in a class which is called World Religion. So, we talk about Hinduism, and my professor always asks me to ... like ... give an input." She suggests that the University needs to

increase awareness about the Hindu religion and culture through curricular and co-curricular experiences. Kim realized that most students in her class and dormitory were unaware of the Hindu religion; she adds, “I have met quite a lot of students who do not even know what Hinduism is.” She, however, applauds American Christian students in her class by saying, “They take information about Hinduism in a very healthy way.”

Kim says about Christian students, “There are a couple of churches nearby, so for them, practicing religion is quite easy.” She suggests that the University can provide a platform to get students with similar needs together, and the University could also provide information about nearby safe temples. Kim opines that if Hindu students share a ride to a temple, they will feel safer while traveling.

### ***Etic Perspective***

Kim tries to pray daily, but it is not always possible due to her busy schedule. She also tries to chant the Holy name of Ganesha once a day. She has never visited a temple since arriving in the U.S. Kim initially cited a lack of time as the only reason; however, later she admitted that she feels unsafe while traveling away in a cab for long distances.

Kim has started listening to *bhajans* online during times of stress, and to improve motivation, she rarely did this back home. Therefore, she uses safer and more practical religious strategies that are suitable for her academic life. Kim does not report any change in her religious identity and beliefs after coming to the U.S. Kim's faith in God has helped her to build resilience and stay in America.

### **Third Case: Sia's Story**

Sia is a 22-year-old undergraduate student pursuing a degree in psychology. She is a sophomore and will soon start her third year. Sia came to a university in Ohio in 2021 and transferred to Tall Tree University in the fall of 2021. She is from a small city in the Gujarat state

of India. She lived in a multigenerational home with her grandparents, parents, brother, uncle, aunt, and cousins.

Sia aspired to study abroad away from her family and become independent. She says, "It was always my dream to study away from my family," and adds, "I always wanted to experience the kind of feeling that what I will do when I am alone, what I can do myself." Sia thought of applying to U.S. universities in class 10, and she started researching the application process in class 12 and preparing for the IELTS exam for English proficiency. Sia was unsure what was needed for the application to the U.S. universities and realized that she also needed to take the SAT exam. This confusion cost her some time and stressed her out. She, however, says that the visa interview was easy.

Sia had attended the first semester online from India due to the COVID-19 pandemic and came to Ohio for her second semester, where her cousin was studying. Sia started feeling homesick after about two months. She also became very conscious of her accent. She recollects, "I would say that language was a really big culture shock that even some international students had an accent ... like ... which I didn't build up." She would stay quiet in class and was afraid to talk to professors. She also felt overwhelmed by her busy schedule; she remembers, "I was really struggling."

Finding vegetarian food was another significant adjustment she had to make; she explains, "The major adjustment was being a vegetarian in the U.S. So, I am like ... since born, I have not tried any kind of meat, not even eggs." Her family also did not eat onions and garlic. Finally, managing her finances was another conscious learning and adaptation on her part; she explains, "So I never did any banking or stuff like I didn't know like have to go to bank what to talk and what not to talk."

The new academic culture was another major stressor for her. Sia was in a class about American culture and remembers, "So it was really hard to ... like, I didn't know that we have participation grades. It was hard for me to answer the questions, which I didn't know, or I didn't know about any culture in the U.S." She was also worried about her English accent and preferred to keep quiet in class.

Sia struggled to write her first few papers; she recollects, "Then I realized that no, it's not an essay. I have to do citations or in-text citations in sources and everything." She explains, "Yeah, because in India, we hardly write a paper ... like we give a question-and-answer paper in tenth and twelfth." She also had never used the APA format before. She reached out to her professors, and her cousin also helped her in mastering the skills to write papers. With time, her stress level decreased.

Sia transferred to Tall Tree University the next (third semester) and had to move away from her cousin. She was shocked by the lack of diverse students and the non-availability of a good public transportation system in the new place. Stress started building up again, and she called her father for advice. Following his advice, she visited the University's mental health support. She learned how to manage her time and stress and feels much better in her fourth semester; she chimes, "There is no pressure, no stress, so it is going well."

When Sia feels stressed, she calls home, visits the Counseling Center, and writes in her gratitude journal. In the first two semesters, she practiced yoga and meditation more frequently to combat stress.

### ***Religious Background***

Sia's family is religious, and religious identity is vital to the family. She informs, "My grandmother and grandfather are really ... really ... like really religious." Her family has a separate room for deities, and the room has a separate fridge, washbasin, and cooking system.

Her grandmother and grandfather start their morning early by doing *pooja* and offering to deities.

Her father visits the temple every day; Sia informs, “My dad goes to the temple every morning; even if it's a good day or bad day, he will go to the temple.” All the family members pay obeisance to the Deities in the morning. Her uncle is a *Shiva* devotee, and he regularly practices yoga and meditation, and performs *Homa*. Her uncle teaches yoga to prison inmates and is involved in other social causes. Sia, her mother, and one cousin regularly practiced yoga, meditation, and pranayama. Her grandmother mainly believes in *Krishna*; other family members also believe in *Shiva* and other Deities.

Sia's family is vegetarian and does not eat onion and garlic. She explains that bringing onion, garlic, or any dish made of these was prohibited at her home by saying, “We follow Vaishnav community. So, it is really strict about the food and some certain things.” Kim had never seen or tasted meat in her life before becoming an international student. Sia considers vegetarian food to be both a religious and personal choice.

Sia's family celebrated *Diwali*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, and *Navaratri*. *Diwali* and *Navratri* were huge celebrations with family and relatives. Sia's family would buy new clothes and make special dinners. The city was festive, and devotional songs were played in every nook and corner.

Sia had a robust Hindu identity but questioned the existence of God and idol worship when she was very young. However, she soon started believing in God and praying to *Krishna* and *Shiva*. She started visiting the temple once a week with her father. Sia's parents advised her to pray, and they explained the importance of regular praying. Sia remembers, “So my uncle, my dad, my brother, and my cousins, all of them became big believers, and they are still big believers of Shiva, and we all started meditating.”

Sia considers vegetarian food as both a religious and personal choice. She explains, "We have a really certain respect towards animals. So, I think that is the point, and also, I mean, we are killing someone just for our hunger." She vehemently opposed the taboos related to menstruation and opposed the practice of restricting menstruating women and girls from entering the kitchen. Sia remembers, "My grandmother believes that it is not good to go into the temple or kitchen when in periods." Sia considers yoga and meditation as both religious and spiritual practices.

### ***Religion and Acculturation***

Sia does not report any changes in her religious beliefs and identity after coming to the U.S. She does not believe that religion had any adverse effect on her adaptation to life in the U.S. She affirms, "It helped me, and I just meant like when I was ... like doing something when I was stressed or ... like when I do chanting, or something it makes me feel good. So, it was never a problem."

She, however, reports, "I don't usually pray ... or I don't get time. So, I think that has changed...I don't pray regularly, but in India, I was a believer. So, I used to pray." In India, she used to go to the temple early in the morning on her birthdays. She remembers, "When it was my first birthday in the U.S., I always, like, felt like I wanted to go a temple, but I don't have transportation, or I don't know what is there around." She adds, "I would say that last year, Tall Tree University helped us with transportation to go to a temple on Diwali. So, it really made me feel better that at least I'm going once a year, that I have my beliefs."

Sia plays *bhajans* online whenever she is stressed. She did not use to do this very often back home. She plays *bhajans* to help her sleep and when she feels very stressed. Sia also practices religious chanting sometimes when she is stressed. Sia meditated and performed yoga frequently to combat stress during her first year. This practice became irregular; she hardly

meditates now and practices yoga rarely. Instead, she writes in a gratitude journal or visits the University Counselling Center. She asserts, “Finding small achievements ... writing a gratitude journal; this thing helped me, and also meditation.”

### ***Suggestions for the University***

Sia is satisfied with the support she has received from Tall Tree University for her religious and spiritual needs. She is especially grateful to the University for arranging for the Hindu students to visit a temple. Although these visits were arranged once or twice a year, Sia explained that this gesture was beneficial in supporting her religious identity and beliefs.

Her main suggestion for the University is to increase awareness about the Hindu religion and culture. Sia informed the researcher that the University also celebrated main Hindu festivals like *Navratri* and *Diwali* and arranged Indian food on these occasions; however, the celebrations were more like a party and did not reflect the spiritual nature of these festivals.

Sia says this about Indian undergraduates: “No one is that much excited for Navratri. Even if I say about Diwali, it ... okay ... this is a festival ... not even ... they were just doing a formality to attending as Indians.” Still, she believes that increasing American students' knowledge of Hindu culture would benefit students like herself.

Sia opined that the University should increase the variety of vegetarian food options. She explained that the vegetarian options available at Tall Tree University were mainly salads and bland vegetable options and added, "So, it's better to keep an option. So, increasing Indian vegetarian food on the menu would be really helpful."

Sia also suggests that the University could bring together students with similar needs. These students could practice their faith together and even share rides to temples. She also suggests that the University could arrange a group visit to a temple more often to support her religious beliefs and practice.

### *Etic Perspective*

Sia has used many religious and spiritual practices to help with stress. She used to practice yoga and meditation during her time in Ohio. After coming to Tall Tree University, Sia listens to *bhajans* online to help her sleep. She tries to pray but often does not find enough time in her tight schedule.

Sia mentions that Ohio had better public transport than the town where Tall Tree University is located. However, she never went to a temple in Ohio. Similarly, after she started at Tall Tree University, she did not visit any temple until the University arranged a bus for students to visit a nearby temple. It is possible that traveling alone is the main reason for not visiting a temple in Ohio or elsewhere.

Sia is very grateful to have visited the temple once a year in a group visit arranged by Tall Tree University; she informs that this visit helped immensely in supporting her faith and identity. Therefore, it is possible that arranging such visits a few times a year could give many Hindu students enough chances to be a part of such a group to strengthen their faith and religious identity.

### **Fourth Case: Maria's Narrative**

Maria is a 25-year-old senior in the music education degree program. She came to Tall Tree University in 2015 as a student in an art diploma program in music. Then, she moved to a one-year English as a Second Language certificate. Maria joined the bachelor's program four years after starting at Tall Tree University.

Maria had a happy childhood with her grandparents and aunts living within walking distance of her house. Maria and her cousins were born during the one-child policy. They were like real siblings. Maria remembers, "So after school, I can just directly walk to my

grandmother's house and eat dinner with them." Grandparents and aunts lived very close to Maria's house and often visited each other's houses.

Maria lived in a small, historic town and moved to Shanghai in middle school. She was applying to universities in China when her high school teacher asked her to apply to Tall Tree University. He connected her to an American-Chinese professor at Tall Tree University. The professor guided Maria in narrowing down universities and in the application process. Maria found the application and visa process easy.

The professor who helped Maria advised her to have a roommate before she landed in the U.S. Maria came to the U.S. all by herself. The University's International Office did not pick her up at the airport. She did not know that any such help existed. Maria's roommate helped by driving her to buy food and other items; Maria remembers, "When I am new, she drives me around to buy food and stuff."

Maria was stressed during her first few months. Firstly, she was shocked by the lack of information about the necessity of having a place to live before landing in the U.S. The University International Center did not clarify this information; if Maria's professor had not helped her find a roommate, she would be in trouble. Additionally, the inability to travel without an Uber affected Maria's mental well-being. She explains, "The public transportation is bad when I come here. I just do not know how to deal ... in Shanghai, you can go to the subway near you."

Maria lived off-campus, and her roommate helped her in shopping for groceries. However, she often did not have all the ingredients for Chinese food. She says, "I suffer about the food." Maria started eating fast food, which was readily available near the university and her residence. She gained 30 pounds in six years. Now, she cooks for her husband and herself at home.

Communicating in English was one of the main stressors for Maria in the first year of landing in the U.S. She says, "First is my language problem... like ...aa... the first year I come, even though I got the TOEFL test like... everything's fine. But, like, I was still afraid to speak English very fluently." She also had problems understanding the American people; she remembers, " I ... I kind of don't understand what ... like ... American people speak. Their speed is kind of fast for me." Interestingly, Maria easily adjusted to the interactive teaching format at Tall Tree University.

Four years later, when Maria embarked on her bachelor's degree, she had to attend many lectures. Maria felt that the professors talked too fast and requested her professors to record the lecture. She remembers, "Their speed is kind of fast, and they used difficult vocabulary, and sometimes, I don't understand." However, one of the professors refused. In the end, another professor with a Chinese background talked on Maria's behalf, and she could record and relisten the lectures.

Maria also needed extra time to finish her papers. The University Learning Center tested her for learning disabilities and refused to support extra time for her. Maria, however, talked to professors and University leaders and explained her problems with English. The Learning Centre finally approved extra time for Maria's exams.

These two incidents left Maria very stressed; at this time, someone informed her about the University Counselling Center. Maria started personal sessions with a psychologist at this center. Her mental health improved, and Maria feels that counseling helped her immensely during stress.

Maria felt better after her marriage in 2021. She informs, "We married last year. So, right now, I'm not alone. I have my husband, and I have one dog and two cats." However, she has been feeling stressed about not being able to visit China since 2017. She planned to visit in 2020,

but flights were canceled, and she could not travel to China until the time of this interview. Recently, she had a misunderstanding with one of her professors and started seeking psychological counseling again.

During times of stress, Maria visits the Counseling Center. In her first year in the U.S., she did yoga, pranayama, and meditation and listened to Buddhist chanting to combat stress. During her first year, she also chanted Buddhist sutras a few times to banish stress. Maria used to call her mother a lot during her first year. She used voice calling as well as video calling to talk to her mother. However, she did not discuss her problems with her mother. She recently started yoga, meditation, and pranayama again.

### ***Religious Background***

Maria's mother became deeply religious Buddhist when Maria was eight. Maria remembers having a holy shrine at home. Her father was not religious. Many family members were atheists. When Maria was in middle school, the family changed cities to move to Shanghai. There were many temples in Shanghai; therefore, Maria visited temples regularly with her mother. Maria used to bow down before Buddha and perform rituals in temples; she remembers, "So, I'm not concerned myself as a Buddhist, but I attend some of the events of Buddhist just like cultural events."

Maria's mother asked her to chant Buddha's name 108 times a day, each morning. She then asked Maria to chant a Buddhist Sutra 1000 times a week. Maria opposed this but continued to visit the temple regularly. Maria's mother also played Buddhist chants regularly. As Buddhists, Maria and her mother believed in the principles of *Karma* and rebirth.

Maria's mother believed that rituals and chanting could benefit them. Maria, however, opposed excessive chanting and rituals. Maria learned yoga, meditation, and pranayama but practiced them only a few times in her life before coming to the U.S. Maria considered these

three practices religious as well as spiritual. Maria considers performing or listening to Buddhist chants as mainly religious.

### ***Religion and Acculturation***

When Maria first came to the U.S., she frequently used meditation, yoga, and pranayama to reduce stress. Sometimes, she also chanted Buddhist sutras and listened to Buddhist chants on YouTube. These practices were interrupted when Maria became a Christian in 2016.

After becoming a Christian, Maria prays regularly. She also attends Mass every Sunday and participates in Bible study regularly. Maria's church often hosts lunches and get-togethers, and Maria attends most of these; she says, "It's very calm to go with the Christian friends, and I love that." When stressed, Maria prays more. She also reads Christian texts irregularly, but especially when stressed. Maria feels a strong connection to Jesus; she remembers, "Good Friday the ... the ... Jesus died on the Cross. That one. I always cry. It's very ... it touched my heart."

As a Christian, Maria believes every human is sinful, and Jesus can "wash" these sins. She believes that Jesus can take a person to heaven after death. Maria, however, does not believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. She also opposes the idea that all non-Christians will go to hell. Maria explains that Christians believe in humans' superiority over animals and plants. She also explains that Christians do not believe in evolution. Maria, however, believes in the evolution and equality of all living beings. She adds, "I still, like, even ... I'm Christian; I still believe in rebirth and *Karma*."

After a recent increase in stress, Maria started meditation, yoga, and pranayama again. She considers other practices like meditation and yoga as spiritual or cultural practices more than religious practices. Maria also put Buddhist chants on YouTube when she got highly depressed about not being able to go home. Maria says that chants make her remember her home and

country. She avoids chanting Buddha's name as she considers this religious Buddhist practice unsuitable for Christians.

### ***Suggestions for the University***

Maria is satisfied with the support she received from Tall Tree University. She also agrees that she did not need much help as her Christian religious community is very helpful. Her community members helped her with transportation and networking. Maria, however, points out that when she was new, she looked for Buddhist communities but could not find any. She remembers, "I just don't have any group to join, and I feel a little bit lonely." Maria suggests that non-Christian students should be given extra help and information to find their religious groups and communities.

### ***Etic Perspective***

Maria's identity changed from a lukewarm Buddhist to a dedicated Christian. Maria retains some of the beliefs of Buddhism, like *Karma* and rebirth. She also opposes some Christian beliefs while believing in other Christian beliefs.

Maria was approached by several Christian organizations when she was a new student. However, she refused. Then, her classmate introduced her to a lady with ethnic roots in Asia. She offered to help Maria improve her English and invited Maria to her home. Maria visited there a few times, and the lady often cooked food for Maria. One day, she asked Maria to read the Bible with her, and Maria started attending Bible study at the lady's home. This lady was not connected to Tall Tree University in any way.

One evening, the lady asked Maria to stay at her home. They talked late into the night, and the lady asked Maria to recite something related to Christianity. Maria remembers, "I was being pushed a little bit that night. So ... just I ... also, I really want to go to sleep. I feel like, okay ... by saying ... okay ... that'll be a good way to let me go to sleep." She also recollects, "I

feel like if I become a Christian ... is kind of ... betrayed my mom or do something bad for my mom."

Maria believes Christianity is better suited for her mental health as it has a personal God to pray to. She also adds, "If you want to be a real Buddhist, you should give up everything. You should not live in this ... this real ... like ... massive world. You should go to temple; you should live in temple." Maria explains that the Christian community is vital to her by saying, "I... I love they are... like... united as a community. I think if you attend church, there'll be more like you can get some community support." However, after further probing, Maria agreed that Buddhism and Christianity are both excellent religions. If she had found community and help from Buddhist students, she would probably think carefully before converting.

International students face more stress (Chai et al., 2012; Dalessandro, 2016). They also do not have family and community support when they leave home. Therefore, community support becomes crucial in this challenging time. Since religious communities offer help and emotional support (Garcia-Muñoz & Neuman, 2013; Green & Elliot, 2010), it is possible that international students are drawn to religious communities that offer more service.

Maria did not initially know the lady's motive was to convert her. This situation worked out well for Maria; however, some other Buddhist students might feel betrayed or stressed by the pressure to convert. Maria also opines that non-Christian students should be given extra help and information to find their religious groups and communities. Maria informs that she helps new students but never forces them to convert.

### **Fifth Case: Reeta's Story**

Reeta is a 22-year-old senior with mathematics as her major. She came to Tall Tree University in 2019. She is from a multigenerational upper-middle-class family in India. She has a younger brother. When she was two, her father got a hybrid job in Australia. After this, Reeta

and her parents lived off and on abroad. Reeta never lived abroad continually for more than six months, and the family visited India many times a year. Reeta's father left the hybrid job when she was around eight, and the family stayed in India.

Reeta never thought about studying in America till class 10. Then, she attended a high school with an international curriculum in India, and her teachers informed Reeta of the opportunities in the U.S. She applied to American universities after class 12 and was selected by a few universities. Reeta felt Tall Tree University had an excellent curriculum and offered generous scholarships. She found applying to American universities a bit "tricky" as different universities needed different essays. The visa interview was quick. However, the process of applying for a student visa was cumbersome; Reeta explains, "Once you've been accepted in your university, there are a ton of documents" and remembers her situation at that time.

Reeta came to the U.S. to a relative's home in another city. She traveled to Tall Tree University within a few days. There, she attended an international orientation session. She explains that this session was beneficial as it informs international students about the resources and help available on campus. After the session, she went to camp with other new students in an off-campus location. She remembers, "Everyone was just so friendly, and there was a lot of inclusiveness." After the camp was over, it was already the third week away from home. Reeta started feeling homesick.

During the third week, Reeta walked around the campus and was shocked by the students' sartorial choices. She remembers, "I was a bit shocked that people were able to dress any way that they wanted because that was definitely something that has a lot of restrictions in India." Reeta worried that other students would judge her for her relatively conservative choice of clothing. Reeta also started experiencing cultural discord between Indian and American cultures beyond clothing choices. She explains, "You know the way people approach you, the

way they, you know, have a conversation with you. It was vastly different from how it's done in India." Reeta informs, "It was a huge culture shock."

Soon, the classes started, and Reeta found the course load very intensive; she recalls, "You know, there would be quizzes almost every week for every class. It's like ... it's like ... you've studied high school, and the entire one year of high school is condensed into one semester of college." Reeta, however, found the interactive teaching method easy to adjust to. She explains that she had similar experiences in Australia, which might have made it easier for her.

Reeta also found it easy to adjust to the food on campus, and she believes that being non-vegetarian helped her. She explained that she did not eat beef for religious reasons, and on-campus food services listed all ingredients and had helpful staff, making it easy for Reeta to avoid certain foods.

When stressed, Reeta calls her mother or aunt. She also plays piano, listens to classical music, or takes long walks around the campus to lessen stress. Reeta informs, "I'm very fond of classical music, so mostly Beethoven, you know, a bit of Chopin." She makes a to-do list to manage her time. This strategy helps reduce her stress levels.

### ***Religious Background***

Reeta belongs to an open-minded religious Hindu family. Religious identity was essential to her family. However, they were open-minded regarding their beliefs. Reeta's grandfather performed *pooja* every day at home. The family revered Lord *Vishnu* and Lord *Ganesha* and had a shrine with many deities, including these two. On special occasions, like *Diwali* and *Holi*, the family performed *pooja* together. Reeta's family is non-vegetarian but avoids beef.

The family celebrated *Diwali*, *Holi*, and other Hindu festivals. *Diwali* was very special; Reeta's family invited over a hundred guests for an elaborate dinner. She remembers, "During *Diwali*, we had huge family gatherings...and it'd be like it's a little...It's a little awkward to have

100 people in your... in your drawing room.” During *Diwali*, her family bought new clothes and decorated their house with earthen lamps.

Since Reeta lived in Maharashtra, *Ganesh Chaturthi* and *Janmashtami* were also celebrated with special festivity. The city would be filled with a celebratory mood and decorations during *Diwali*, *Holi*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, and *Janmashtami*. Reeta recollects, "It was all over in the streets. So, that itself was a celebration."

Reeta's family discussed the *Mahabharat* epic with the kids at dinnertime. The legend involves Lord *Krishna* talking about *Karma*. The family also discussed rebirth often. Reeta openly asked questions about religious practices; for example, she questioned the practice of moving the *pooja* plate in a clockwise direction. She adds, “My, I mean, my family is very open about religion, so they didn't really mind me asking too many questions.” Reeta, however, had a robust Hindu identity and revered the philosophical teachings of *Geeta* and *Mahabharat*.

Since early childhood, Reeta used to pray every day and she prayed more during exams. She did not perform *pooja* every day. She also regularly visited the temple each Thursday since she was in primary school. This practice remained regular even in the busy life of high school, except for a few days around exams. Reeta has read *Geeta* and *Mahabharat* many times since she was little.

### ***Religion and Acculturation***

Reeta does not report any adverse effect of her religion on her adaptation to the new country. She uses the religious teachings of *Geeta* and *Mahabharat* during times of stress to keep studying hard. After becoming an international student, Reeta did not question her religious beliefs or identity. She did not have any new questions on religious practices either.

Reeta prays in the same way and frequency as she did back home. She had not visited any temple by herself since coming to the U.S. in 2019. Reeta says her busy schedule and the

COVID-19 pandemic were the main reasons for not visiting a temple. When Tall Tree University organized a group visit on a bus to the temple in 2021, she went along with other Hindu students.

Reeta misses the grandeur of the celebration of Hindu festivals. She also misses her family, helping with decoration, food, and shopping. She especially feels this on *Diwali*; she explains, "Suddenly, all of it is not there ... what you have celebrated with family for years."

### ***Suggestions for the University***

Reeta is satisfied with Tall Tree University's support of her religious and spiritual needs. She informs us that the university has many organizations for different cultures and religions. She especially appreciates the religious advisory council for supporting international students' religious needs.

Reeta reports, "If someone wants to observe any day, like *Ganesh Chaturthi*, then they are then, they are allowed to go to the professor and say I... I need an off for this day because I am fasting." She affirms, "That is definitely allowed, and the religious office takes care of, you know, explaining what it is. They even put it out on the syllabus itself." Reeta explains that she feels supported and valued due to these initiatives.

Reeta has a few suggestions for Tall Tree University. She recollects that Hindu festivals like *Diwali* and *Navratri* were celebrated on campus. However, they were more like parties, far from their spiritual and religious significance. Reeta has also noticed that not many American students participate in these celebrations. She adds, "American students...now many of them may not be...so acknowledging about the existence of other religions." She hopes that American students will try to be more cognizant of international students' religion and culture. She, however, does not have many suggestions as to how the university can achieve this objective.

Reeta also suggests that Tall Tree University could invite Hindu students together in a group, such as a WhatsApp group. These students can practice religion together and even travel

together to a temple. She also suggests increasing university-organized visits to nearby Hindu temples.

### ***Etic Perspective***

Reeta had lived and studied in Australia; she even had an accent. She, however, met all criteria for being part of this research. Still, the researcher expected her experience to differ from that of other Hindu students. Interestingly, her experience was quite similar to that of other Hindu students. She, however, found the adjustment to food easier as she is a non-vegetarian. One other student pointed out that non-vegetarian food had more savory options than vegetarian food at this university. The other two Hindu students played *bhajans* online for stress reduction and sleep. Reeta did not do this. She used the philosophical teachings of the Hindu religion, especially *Geeta* from the epic *Mahabharata*, to keep working hard. Reeta informs that in Holy *Geeta*, Lord *Krishna* admonishes *Arjuna* to keep performing his duties without worrying about the outcome or expecting any benefits or applause.

### **Sixth Case: Ruth's Narrative**

Ruth is a 24-year-old Junior at the College of Liberal Arts majoring in economics. She is preparing to declare her minor. Ruth is from a North African country; she came to the U.S. in the fall of 2020 and started her third year in 2022 at the time of the interview. Ruth is from a loving joint family, and her cousin and aunts used to live with her. She says, “I’d say my mom always encouraged us to do well in school and go get a better education.”

Her family faced multiple challenges. Firstly, her country has been struggling with economic and political instability. Secondly, Ruth's father passed away when she was twelve. The family has faced financial challenges since then. She has one younger brother and sister who recently came to the U.S. as international students.

Ruth says that growing up, she always heard people wanting to go to the U.S. for higher education. Her mother and movies also inspired her decision to apply to American universities. She recollects, "I grew up watching those movies, and right the U.S. looked like a heaven." She further explains, "Coming from a country where they create this food insecurity, there's political instability... like no freedom of speech and watching movies, or you know, like how life is in the United States."

While in high school, she competed to be part of a program that helped students find options in developed countries. The program was very competitive, and only 20 students were chosen from a pool of more than 1,500 applicants. The program directors helped students explore and narrow down universities, application, and visa processes. Ruth found applying to American universities easy; however, she found it hard to obtain a visa interview date as offices were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She says, "I'd say maybe the barrier was mainly because of COVID." Ruth further informs that after some months of COVID restrictions, students were given exceptions to COVID-19 rules, and she was able to interview.

Ruth traveled to the U.S. with other students in the program; however, no other student came to Tall Tree University, and she parted with them at the Chicago airport. The International Office sent an Uber to pick her up. Ruth was very excited to be on campus and in her dorm. She adds, "After two to three weeks, I started realizing things I never thought of. You know, like, I started feeling a little bit lonely."

While Ruth was exploring everything at Tall Tree University, seniors from the same program from her country contacted her and helped her learn how to use air conditioning, washers, and dryers. They took Ruth along to the on-campus food service. Ruth also joined a church-based help group for international students. These students helped her prepare for winter by taking her shopping for jackets and shoes.

After the first two or three weeks, Ruth started missing her family. She also found adjusting to food difficult. She recollects, "I came here to ... go ... to the cafeteria, and it's like, I'm ... like, what strange ... what's that. So, I don't know, like, what's that ... I've never tasted that." She found food good on a few days and not on other days.

The academic culture was another shock to Ruth; she remembers, "My first year was not as good as I expected." Ruth was not used to talking in the classroom; she informs, "So yeah, like after the first year, that's when I got more comfortable asking questions, especially when I started realizing that I could score higher." Ruth says she did not know that she could ask the professors for help or how to use library resources; she also did not know how to manage her workload in American academic culture.

Adjustment to American culture was also tricky. Ruth remembers that fellow students asked too many personal questions and had a very individualistic lifestyle. She felt alone in the classroom. She states, "I realized that I was Black, and I was like, what's this ... It's kind of created ... I don't know; I was not freely interacting with people as I wanted because of finding myself looking different." Ruth hoped to be friends with an American Black student at assistantship work. However, this student was angry at Ruth for not picking up racist clues in comments made by other people in the office.

English was another stressor for Ruth in her first few months. She says, "My English wasn't perfect, still not perfect." Remembering the first few months at Tall Tree University, Ruth says, "I started feeling a little bit lonely. I missed my family, you know. The food was not as good as I wanted, and classes started to get hard." Ruth says she went into a "shock" for many months.

When Ruth was stressed in the first few months, she watched comedy or science fiction movies. She says, "I had to engage with the character and to kind of forget my life for a bit, live

just as the character is living for the story, and that's how coped up with stress like a little bit." She never discussed her problems with her family and called home rarely. However, she discussed her issues with her program seniors and church members, and this reduced her stress. Ruth states, "Now when I'm stressed, I enjoy spending time alone. Like, I'll just go to my place and maybe pray a little bit. Just you know, practice gratitude."

### ***Religious Background***

Ruth and her family identify as Protestant Christians. Her father was a Catholic, and Ruth visited Catholic and Protestant Churches until the age of twelve. Ruth was a lukewarm Christian initially; her father passed away when she was twelve, and she went into a severe depression. At this time, believing in Jesus and praying to God helped her manage her studies and overcome depression.

Ruth explains that religion was important to her and her family. Ruth recollects, "To my family, being Christian was the only way of having hope in this life, especially coming from a very, very poor country. You praise that God can ease your pains, you know, especially when you see people struggling."

Ruth started attending Mass regularly, and she prayed a lot. Ruth's mother suggested that Ruth should pray for financial security and a good marriage in the future. The main Christian belief of her family is seeing Jesus as Savior. Ruth adds, "You accept Him as your Saviour; you shall not die or shall not perish. I mean, like you die. But, then you... you... would be... you will resurrect."

Ruth's mother also taught her that praying helps to remove problems and bring a better future. Ruth's family celebrated Christmas and Easter with enthusiasm. They made good food, bought new clothes, and relatives visited each other.

### ***Religion and Acculturation***

Ruth says that her religion helped her after becoming an international student; she affirms, "It helped me... aa... keep hope when things got hard or like be patient when I was stressed out. So, it really helped me, and also, being able to just pray and have hope and faith." When stressed, Ruth prays and puts on gospel music online. She says, "Like if I'm really feeling down, gospel music helps, you know, go back to my feet." She maintains a strong Christian identity and beliefs.

Ruth prays irregularly after coming to America. She went to church regularly for the first few months of Fall 2020. Churches were closed due to COVID-19, and the weather got freezing in 2021. She started attending church regularly again in 2022. Ruth has increased listening to gospel music after coming to the U.S. In her home country, she listened to gospel music at high school morning assembly and church. She listens to gospel music while stressed and while writing papers.

With further probing, Ruth reported uneasiness with the fact that good people from other religions and her atheist professor might go to hell. Ruth's sister came to the U.S. in 2021, and her brother arrived a few months before this interview. Ruth recently learned that her brother had become an atheist and her sister a spiritual, non-religious person. When Ruth met her siblings, she avoided thinking about this issue as it stressed her out.

Ruth also experienced increased stress when she did something that a Christian should not do, like being jealous. However, she adjusted some of her practices without much stress, like starting to wear shorts, drinking alcohol, and having a boyfriend.

Ruth has not questioned what she considers significant Christian beliefs. However, she has questioned some minor beliefs and practices. She questioned the controlling nature of church back home. Ruth informs that her church controls the lifestyle choices of members and discriminates against LGBTQ people. She explains, "Actually, God calls... tells us to love each

other, no matter what." Ruth also remembers that her religious community back home describes God as furious, who will punish even minor mistakes. She says, "If you ever find yourself in a situation where you ... you really know ... where you don't act as a Christian, then you always seek forgiveness. You know you got this is your Father, and He understands you."

Ruth misses celebrating Easter with family as Easter is not a very prominent celebration in her Church at Tall Tree University. She informs that Christmas celebrations were elaborate at her church and the Tall Tree University Campus, and she celebrated Christmas with friends and a host family. She misses her family a little bit during Christmas.

### ***Suggestions for the University***

Ruth is satisfied by the support she receives from Tall Tree University for her religious and spiritual needs. Her church is within walking distance from her dorm; therefore, she never needs a ride.

With further probing, she realized that her religious community and seniors from her hometown have helped her transition to life in the U.S. Ruth suggests that if this group exists for students of other religions, these groups can be beneficial in a successful transition to life as an international student. She mentions using technology such as WhatsApp groups to connect students with similar religious and spiritual needs.

Ruth joined the Religious and Spiritual Life at Tall Tree University. She says, "It's more of finding your community. We read books, and we share, you know, we embrace vulnerability and share. So just being a part of this group had helped me give my identity." Ruth explained that only a few new international students knew about this office.

Ruth suggests that this group should be heavily advertised. She adds, "Everybody is welcome in this group. So, I feel like if international students ... you ... discover that ... that those groups exist and they are there just all, you feel much better."

### *Etic Perspective*

Ruth attends an inclusive church near her dorm. She has started questioning the belief in a punishing God. Instead, she now feels God is forgiving. She also questioned the exclusion of LGBTQ from her church back home.

Ruth now feels that God is accepting and full of empathy and forgiveness. She also remembers that the church in her hometown used to interfere with followers' personal lives. Ruth has started questioning this behavior, as she has noticed that the churches in America do not practice or support this interference.

Ruth believes that she has become more accepting of other religions and values after coming to the U.S. This change might be the effect of attending an inclusive church. Also, Ruth shares time and space with a few non-Christian friends in class and outside class. Ruth did not interact much with non-Christians back home; sharing bonds with non-Christians could be another reason for Ruth's increased tolerance.

Ruth, however, avoids discussing religion with these friends. She explained that she does not share beliefs with other religions and that it is best to avoid discussing the differences; instead, Ruth wants to discuss common issues. Ruth is probably trying to avoid cognitive dissonance and stress by avoiding discussing religious differences.

### **Common Themes in the Students' Narratives**

There were many similarities between the two groups and between students from the same group.

### *The Hidden Curriculum of Religion*

Elders in Christian and Hindu students' houses perform rituals with discipline despite bad weather or adverse situations. Visiting temples or churches is a part of this routine. The idea of maintaining a routine during harsh times provides a hidden meaning behind many religious

rituals. Belief and dedication to God or deities in difficult times might foster hope and build resilience. Practicing religious rituals, such as offering sweets to the deities or praying together, might help in family bonding.

### ***Religion and Student Life***

In the researcher's view, religion did affect these students' choices in life after becoming international students, for example, not drinking, not eating meat, avoiding jealousy, and not wearing revealing clothes. The students, however, did not believe the above statement. The students mainly narrated the stress-busting aspects of their religion in life after coming to America.

Religious practices and belief in God reduced stress and enhanced hope in these students' busy lives. Both Christian and Hindu students used belief in a deity or God to reframe the stress of being a university student. They depended on God to be patient and build resilience. The students said to themselves that God had brought them so far, and they must not give up so easily.

One of the Christian students, Ruth, put gospel music on YouTube while writing papers. This student also used gospel music when she was so severely depressed that she could not even get out of her bed. One of the Hindu students, Sia, listened to *bhajans* to sleep. She had grown up in a joint family and felt afraid alone in her room. Another Hindu student listened to *bhajans* when she was stressed enough that she was not able to finish her chores.

Students from both groups aimed to be more regular in religious practices like attending Mass, visiting the temple, reading religious texts, or praying. However, busy student life kept them away from this goal. The students, however, understood the importance of their education and were not stressed due to their irregular practice.

Interestingly, all students agreed that their religion had become more significant to them after becoming international students, and they added that they did not expect religion to be so important in their international journey. These students used their belief in God and religious practices to calm their stress and to build hope and resilience.

### ***Religion During Stress***

Belief in God and deities helped the students through difficult times. One of the Hindu students, Kim, was overwhelmed by her busy schedule. She was preparing to go back to India when she said to herself, “God sent me from India to America. He would actually give me, or like, show me the path to go ahead, and I do not have to give up.” Ruth, a Christian student, said, “Because I’m an international student, I don’t get accepted into jobs and stuff. But then, being Christian, let me lean on God. I am very hopeful that God will find out something for me.”

Hearing *bhajans* or hymns online helps many students reduce stress. One of the Hindu students listens to *bhajans* to sleep. Another Hindu student listens to *bhajans* when she is stressed. Hearing Buddhist religious chants also calms the Buddhist student, Maria, who converted to Christianity. This student has been unable to visit family in China due to COVID-19. Buddhist chants help her feel closer to home. Ruth, a Christian student, listens to gospel music while writing papers. She also listens to gospel music when stressed enough not to get out of bed.

Meditation supported well-being and reduced stress for some of these students. Sia, a Hindu student, meditated a few times to reduce stress. She also practiced yoga and pranayama in her first year. Maria practiced yoga, meditation, and pranayama regularly in her first year as an international student. These practices stopped when she converted from Buddhism to Christianity. Maria recently faced a high level of stress, and she started practicing yoga, meditation, and pranayama again to reduce stress levels.

Reading religious books and scriptures relieved stress for some students. Two Christian students and one Hindu student used this strategy to calm their stress. The Hindu student read *Geeta* to motivate herself to do her duty, which is studying diligently without worrying about the outcome.

### ***Changes in Religious Identity, Beliefs, and Religious Practices***

Religious identity remained stable for Hindu and Christian students. One of the Christian students, Maria, was a lukewarm Buddhist when she came to the U.S. and was offered help to improve her English by a lady with Asian roots. This student initially felt “pushed” by this lady to convert. She is now very much connected to her church community and has a strong Christian identity. Maria states that having a personal God is important during her international sojourn.

None of the students questioned what they considered the central beliefs of their religion after coming to the U.S. Hindu students found it hard to identify the central beliefs of their religion during the interview. For Christian students, seeing Jesus as Saviour was the most important belief. They also believed in the power of prayer and the sinful nature of humans.

Religious practice changed for all students due to their international educational journey. Hindu students stopped visiting the temple. There is one temple in the town of Tall Tree University, and several temples are within an hour’s drive in nearby towns. However, the students did not visit any of them until Tall Tree University organized a group visit. The students initially stated a lack of time as the main reason for not visiting any temple. With further probing, all three Hindu students agreed they would feel unsafe traveling alone away from the campus.

Christian students reported attending church less often than they did back home. Christian students, however, visited the church more often than Hindu students attended the temple. One of the students, Ruth, lives within minutes of her church. Another student, Maria,

received much help from her church community. Maria got married a year before this interview, and her husband owns a car, so she no longer needs help attending Mass. These two students were regular in their Mass attendance. Mia, another Christian student, lives around fifteen minutes from her church. She has not been very regular in attending Mass. Mia initially stated the high cost of a cab as the main reason for not attending church very often, then she realized that she felt unsafe in a cab alone.

Most Hindu and Christian students reported praying less often than back home. One Christian student, Mia, reported praying more often than she did back home. Reeta, a Hindu student, reported no change in the praying pattern. Hindu students also reported a reduction in *pooja* rituals after coming to the U.S. Some Christian and Hindu students used the YouTube platform to hear hymns or *bhajans*. These students rarely listened to *bhajans* back home. Therefore, this practice increased after coming to America.

One of the Christian students, Ruth, questioned the beliefs and practices of the church back home. Her church excluded LGBTQ people and intruded into the personal lives of church members. Ruth's church also promoted the idea of an angry and punishing God. After becoming an international student, Ruth attended an inclusive church in America. She started supporting the idea of a loving God and questioning the exclusive and intrusive behavior of her church back home.

### ***Using Easily Available Resources***

The students used the religious resources that were most readily available to them. For example, one of the students who lived far away from the church prayed more often. Hindu students stopped going to the temple as it was pretty far away, and they bowed before the deities in their personal shrines or chanted holy names.

### ***Celebrating with Family and Friends***

All students from both groups missed their families dearly during religious celebrations. They missed shopping, preparing food, and decorating homes with family members. Students, especially Hindu students, missed their hometowns and friends and relatives during religious festivals. Hindu students missed the festive spirit of their towns during religious festivals, especially during *Diwali*.

Christian students reported feeling lonely during festivals. Hindu students also reported feeling lonely more often during festivals and agreed that visiting the temple during festivals will help ease that feeling to some extent.

### **Differences Between the Groups**

None of the students interviewed reported any adverse effect of religion during acculturation. When probed, however, two Christian students reported uneasiness with the fact that good people from other religions, including their professors, might go to hell. Hindu students did not report this issue, probably because Hinduism does not mandate any belief and does not presume permanent heaven or hell (Malhotra, 2009).

One of the Christian students, Ruth, came from an African country; this student's brother and sister had both left Christianity. This student avoided thinking about this issue as it stressed her out. Ruth also reported an increase in stress when she did something that a Christian should not do, like being jealous. However, she changed some of her habits without much stress; for example, she started wearing shorts and drinking. She also had a boyfriend; this was not typical back home. None of the Hindu students reported similar issues as a reason for increased stress.

Christian students practiced their religion a lot through prayers; they used personal prayers in which they talked to God about their recent problems and requested solutions. Hindu students did not have the habit of such prayers. For Hindu students, "praying" meant a short chanting or bowing down before the deities.

Hindu students found it more challenging to enumerate their families' central religious beliefs than Christian students. Seeing Jesus as savior was a common belief for all Christian students, while *Karma* was the central common belief amongst Hindu students.

Christian students attended Mass more than Hindu students visited the temple. In fact, all three Hindu students stopped visiting the temple after arriving in America. Only when Tall Tree University arranged a group visit by bus did these students visit a temple.

Two of the three Christian students, Mia and Maria, mostly socialized with other Christian students and friends. Only one of the Christian students, Ruth, had a few non-Christian friends. She avoided discussing religion with them.

Hindu students had many friends from other religions. However, Hindus were a small minority at this university. Most of the students are Christians, followed by Buddhists. Therefore, it is possible that Hindu students had no choice but to have friends in other religions.

Hindu students liked to discuss other religions and had no issues with atheists or agnostics. These students asked their elders many questions before accepting their families' religious beliefs. It is possible that Hindu students were more mature in their religious identity path (Evans et al., 2010) and, therefore, less threatened by an opposite view.

### **Suggestions for the University**

All students expressed satisfaction with the support they received at Tall Tree University for their religious and spiritual needs. They also supported the need for a platform connecting students with similar religious and spiritual needs. Students from both groups suggested connecting students with similar religious needs via WhatsApp groups.

Many students thought Tall Tree University could suggest safe churches and temples nearby. Although these students agreed that such places could be searched on Google or any

internet-based search engine, they still believe that the University could help by having a list of safer places that have existed for a longer time.

Students also felt safer sharing rides with other students to visit church or temple rather than traveling alone in a cab. Hindu students greatly appreciated the group visit to their temple. They suggested having such trips more frequently and having similar services for students of other religious groups.

Students from both groups felt that the Religious Life Office and its weekly meetings were beneficial to international students' religious and spiritual well-being; they believed this platform was not advertised enough, and many international students did not know about it. These students suggested that every international student be given information about this opportunity.

Hindu students felt the need to make American students aware of other cultures and religions, including Hinduism. Hindu students noticed that American undergraduates take very little interest in knowing about Hindu philosophy and festivals, and they hardly attended any multicultural events.

Hindu students rejoiced when *Navarati* and *Diwali* were celebrated on campus. However, students soon realized that the celebrations were more like parties and lacked the spirituality of the occasion. These students supported preserving the spiritual nature of Hindu celebrations.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

The population of international students continues to increase year after year (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Tremblay, 2005). However, the research related to international students' experiences is relatively new (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Quality research is needed to explore every aspect of the international student experience, including academic, vocational, personal, social, and spiritual.

One area that needs more research is international students' religious and spiritual experiences (Osburn, 2005; Potkar, 2013). Religious and spiritual experiences have profound effects on people, especially those experiencing life transitions (Keyes & Reitzes, 2007; Pargament, 1997). Becoming an international student is a significant life transition that often involves stress (Berry, 1980; Chai et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 1993; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Religious beliefs and identity might accelerate or prevent successful adaptation to a new country (Connor, 2014; Osburn, 2005; Potkar, 2013; Schein & Schein, 2017). University counseling centers need to understand international students' religious and spiritual needs to provide them with inclusive care (Chai et al., 2012; Pargament, 1997, 2002). Such a significant topic needs proper evaluation; this dissertation aims to extend the meager research on this topic.

This study explored the stories of six female undergraduate students from a single university using a narrative case study design, which is a type of qualitative research. The

participants were chosen using a criteria-based method. The researcher triangulated data from interviews, post-interview-reflections, and reflexive and reflective notes to answer these questions:

1) How do female international undergraduate students discuss the importance of religiosity/spirituality in their lives when describing their adaptation to the new country?

2) How do these students narrate any changes they experienced in their religious/spiritual identity, beliefs, and practice during the acculturation phase?

3) What are the students' perceptions about the support they received (or would have liked to receive) from the host university for their religious/spiritual needs?

I analyzed data inductively to develop and redevelop categories and subcategories to answer the research questions. Etic and emic perspectives were presented for each case. The central findings are presented below.

### **Main Findings**

In this section, I present the main findings in the same order as my research questions. I mention findings from previous similar research, along with the findings of this study, to note similarities and differences.

#### ***Religion and Spirituality are Significant for International Students' Transition***

In this study, all students agreed that religion has become more important in their lives after they became international students. Students explained that religious and spiritual practices positively affect their well-being by reducing stress.

In a similar research, Philip (2015) also interviewed religious international students, who reported that religion had become more important in their lives after becoming international students. In the same study, Philip interviewed one Hindu student who left Hindu identity and idol worship and another Hindu student who gave up idol worship. Both these students reported

heightened use of the spiritual aspects of Hinduism when they faced acculturation stress and other difficulties.

Previous research shows that religion becomes more important for immigrants, especially if they belong to a minority group in the new country (Osburn, 2005). Connor (2012) found that religious participation enhances the mental well-being of immigrants across various countries such as the US, Australia, and Western Europe.

Students relied on their faith in God and the deities to ward off the stress of being international students. Faith helped students maintain hope and build resilience while facing adverse situations, like not finding a job or being overwhelmed by the demands of higher education.

In a similar study, Potkar (2013) mentioned that Hindu students rely on their belief in God to maintain hope during times of stress. Similarly, Philip (2015) talked to a Christian student from Ghana who used his belief in God to maintain hope during difficulties. This student was facing racism, cultural shock, and academic difficulties. In fact, after interviewing many international students from different religions, Philip declared religiosity and spirituality as psychological resources that ward off the harmful effects of acculturative stress in international students' lives.

One of the Hindu students, Sia, lived in a large multigenerational family, and she felt afraid in her dorm room, especially at night. She started listening to religious songs, *bhajans*, to help her sleep. A Christian student listened to gospel music when she was so depressed that she could not walk out of her bed. Even the Buddhist student who converted to Christianity listened to Buddhist chants when she missed home.

Reading religious texts in times of stress helped students from both groups. Philip (2015) reported a similar case of a Muslim student from Turkey who read Kuran during stress Kuran

and many Christian students who read the Bible when stressed. Osburn (2005) interviewed Buddhist students; many of these students read scripture to reduce stress and improve academic performance.

Meditation, yoga, and pranayama also helped reduce stress for one Hindu student, Sia. Maria, who converted to Christianity, left these practices after her conversion. However, after facing COVID-related and other stressors, she recently started these practices again. Similar narratives are found in the studies completed by Philip (2015); Philip interviewed many students who practiced meditation and yoga to diminish stress.

Students aimed to be more regular with their religious practices, like visiting a church or temple or praying more often. However, busy student life often prevented them from doing so. The students were not stressed due to these irregularities, as they understood that classes, doing well in exams, and cocurricular activities were their priorities.

Students did not report any adverse effect of religion on their lives as international students. With further probing, two Christian students reported uneasiness with the fact that good people from other religions, including their professors, might go to hell.

In her dissertation, Potkar (2013) reported that few students felt distressed when being in a new country interfered with their religious rituals or practices. Potkar included Hindu, Jain, Atheist, and Zoroastrian students from India. Osburn (2005) reported that Muslim and Christian students felt an increase in stress when they were drifting away from their religious values.

Students from both groups reported missing their families more often during the major festivals of their respective religions. Potkar (2013) also reported similar findings with Hindu and Zoroastrian students; students missed family, social gatherings, and the celebrative spirit of their festivals. Potkar mentioned that students lacked the resources to celebrate their religious festivals properly.

### ***International Transition Can Affect Religious Identity***

Religious identity remained stable for Christian and Hindu students. One student, Maria, who was a lukewarm Buddhist, converted to Christianity. Maria values the community of her church and believes that having a personal God is better for her mental health. Even this student tried to find social support from Buddhist organizations and resisted the offer to become a Christian.

The other five students consisted of three Hindus and two Christians who maintained a strong religious identity after becoming international students. Most members of these students' families also had a strong religious identity. The elders of these families instilled pride in their religious identity and taught them religious practices, such as *pooja* or praying, from a very young age. These students also celebrated their religious festivals with their families, friends, and relatives.

In the case of the Buddhist student, Maria, most of her family, friends, and relatives were atheists, and her mother became Buddhist when she was eight years of age. Also, Maria lived in China and had experienced anti-religious policies. Maria also believed Buddhism to be very strict; she said, "If you want to be a real Buddhist, you should give up everything. You should go to temple; you should live in temple." All these factors may have added to her weak religious identity.

Potkar (2013) interviewed graduate students from India in a study that included Hindu and Zoroastrian students. Potkar did not report any significant change in students' religious identities. Osburn (2005) reported that four students converted to Christianity after becoming international students. These students were Buddhist, Muslim, or atheist before converting to Christianity.

Philip (2015) completed a study with international students. One Hindu student, Angels' father, passed away when she was a new international student. Her father was a devout Hindu, and Angel lost her interest in Hindu rituals; she changed her identity from Hindu to spiritual. Angel still believed in God and the law of *Karma*. In the case of Maria, she did not face such acute situations, yet she remembers feeling lonely and needing a community before she converted to Christianity. Osburn (2005) interviewed 11 Christian international students; four of them were converts. Osburn noted feelings of loneliness as a common factor that predicted conversion to Christianity.

### ***International Transition Affects Minor Religious Beliefs***

None of the students questioned what they considered their religion's main beliefs. The central belief for Christian students was viewing Jesus as a savior, and the chief belief of Hindu students was the law of *Karma*.

Even the Buddhist student, Maria, who converted to Christianity, did not challenge the validity of central Buddhist beliefs. In fact, she still maintained a few Buddhist beliefs, such as the law of Karma. She accepted some Christian beliefs, for example, believing in Jesus as a savior. She questioned a few other Christian beliefs she did not consider central to Christianity. Another Christian student, Ruth, questioned the intolerant and discriminatory behavior of the church back home. She also questioned considering God as angry and punishing; instead, she started seeing God as loving and forgiving.

Potkar (2013) found that religion is highly private and complex. Maria seems to have developed a personal belief system by including beliefs from both the religions, Buddhism and Christianity. Potkar (2013) did not report any student questioning central religious beliefs.

Interestingly, Philip (2015) reported that many international students questioned significant/major beliefs and practices of their religion after becoming international students.

Philip interviewed a Christian student from South Korea who questioned her faith in God due to her STEM-based major. She also had many atheist professors. Then, she went through a period of stress, and this incident revived her faith in God. In this study, two Hindu students questioned idol worship and rituals.

### ***International Transition Affects Religious Practice***

Religious practice changed for all students. Christian students attended Mass less often. Hindu students stopped visiting temples after becoming international students. These students visited a temple only when Tall Tree University arranged a group bus to visit the temple. Therefore, a lack of transportation in a new country caused this change. Potkar (2013) reported similar findings in her research with Hindu students. These students rarely visited a temple after coming to the U.S.; some students stopped going to a temple.

Most students prayed less often than they did back home. One Christian student, Mia, reported an increase in prayer frequency. A Hindu student, Reeta, reported no change in prayer frequency or pattern. Students mentioned lack of time as the leading cause of this change.

Two Christian students and two Hindu students reported increased listening to religious music. Christian students listened to hymns and gospel music, and Hindu students listened to *bhajans*. These students used the YouTube platform to listen to religious music to reduce stress and motivate themselves. One of the Hindu students listened to *bhajans* to help her sleep.

Philip (2015) interviewed a Hindu student from India. This student started questioning the practice of idol worship after coming to the U.S. as he joined a science-based program. This student maintained his Hindu identity and retained some spiritual beliefs, including *Karma*. Philip also interviewed a Christian student who temporarily lost faith in God and stopped visiting a church at that time.

Therefore, religious practices are affected by a lack of time, a lack of external resources, external influences, and changes in beliefs.

### ***Religion/Spirituality Has a Shared as Well as Personal Meaning***

In the case of Mia, a Christian student from South America, she shared her Christian identity as well as her beliefs in her church and friends. She discarded the beliefs that her church did not accept. Maria, a Buddhist student who converted to Christianity, shared her Christian identity with church members; however, she kept believing in some Buddhist principles and accepted some Christian beliefs while rejecting others.

Philip (2015) wrote about a student from a Hindu family who identified as spiritual, not religious. He followed many Hindu traditions and festivals, calling them spiritual practices. Potkar (2013) asserted, “Religion is a highly personalized and complex concept” (p. 45).

### ***Using the Easily Available Resources for Religious and Spiritual Needs***

Students used the religious resources that were quickly available and safe. For example, Hindu students increased their listening to bhajans, and Christian students increased their listening to gospel music. Hindu students stopped going to the temple because it was far from campus, and Christian students attended Mass less often than they did back home.

Potkar (2013) interviewed many international Hindu students from India and reported that the students stopped visiting the temple or visited the temple less often after becoming international students. Potkar found that these students chanted and prayed during difficult times.

### ***Students’ Suggestions for the University***

Students from both groups were satisfied with the support they received from Tall Tree University for their religious and spiritual needs. The students’ main suggestion was to have a platform to connect students with similar religious and spiritual needs.

Hindu students suggested that Tall Tree University should find ways to improve American students' knowledge about foreign religions and cultures, especially Hinduism. Potkar (2013) and Philip (2015) mentioned similar suggestions from international students.

Hindu students opined that Hindu festivals were celebrated on campus, but the celebrations were like a party, lacking the spiritual spirit. These students suggested that the University maintain spiritual aspects of the Hindu religion. Philip (2015) and Potkar (2013) mentioned that their interviewees gave the same suggestion.

In the previous research by Philip (2015), students suggested utilizing religious and spiritual assessment in counseling services and having a meditation/yoga center on campus to improve mental health.

## **Conclusion**

In this dissertation, I studied the role of religion/spirituality in female international undergraduate students' adaptation to life in the United States. I also explored whether these students' cross-cultural experiences affect their religiosity/spirituality. Finally, I was interested in female international undergraduate students' recommendations on how American universities can support the students' religious/spiritual needs during transition.

For this dissertation, I completed a narrative case study and triangulated data from multiple sources. I analyzed the data using the constructivist framework and presented findings for separate cases as well as common themes.

There are many important takeaways from this dissertation. Students agreed that religion and religious and spiritual practices became more relevant after coming to a new country. These students used religious and spiritual practices to diminish acculturation stress and stress of student life. This finding is essential for counseling centers. Counseling centers that help international students should assess the religious and spiritual needs of the students.

In this study, students explained that religious and spiritual practices improve their resilience to stress. However, many students had to change religious practices due to limited resources. Traveling to a temple or church that is far away from campus was a notable issue for many students. Students stated that they would feel safer if they traveled with other students. Universities can assess international students' religious and spiritual needs and provide resources for unmet needs.

Lastly, students suggested that universities could provide a platform to connect students with similar religious or spiritual needs. Universities can easily use technology such as WhatsApp to build such platforms.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This research is helpful to researchers who are interested in the international student experience. Religion and spirituality are essential aspects of human lives and need more research. In this research, I narrowed the study to include only female undergraduates from a single university. However, this area of research is still nascent, and studies with both broad and narrow selection criteria are needed.

Future researchers might also use another research framework, such as phenomenology, to study this subject. Since this research area is still exploratory, using multiple case narrative design might also be suitable to bring out common themes from a large number of interviews to build a hypothesis.

This research might also be useful to people studying acculturation, international students, social identities, religious beliefs and identity, religious experiences, and religion. Although I was not aiming to understand the intricacies and variables of religion, the similarities and differences between religious identity, beliefs, and practice intrigued me.

In this study, Hindu students had a strong sense of religious identity in childhood. They, however, openly questioned their religious beliefs. These students subscribed to Hindu beliefs later in life and did not question them after becoming international students. On the other hand, if a student had a strong religious belief, it was often translated into religious practice. For example, if a student truly believes that praying is the way to ask for God's help and resolve problems, they will pray or at least try to pray often. Therefore, religious beliefs and practices are more congruent for these students than religious identity.

### **Limitations**

This study depended heavily on the interviews and information provided by undergraduate students. Students might have forgotten some incidents related to the research questions.

This research was conducted with female undergraduate students from a single university. The application of the findings to a different age group or a dissimilar environment should be approached with caution.

This study was conducted during the COVID pandemic, and the application of the findings to another time cannot be assumed.

## REFERENCES

- Abbott, A., & Silles, M. (2016). Determinants of international student migration. *The World Economy*, 39(5), 621–635. doi:10.1111/twec.12319
- Abu-Raiya, H., & Pargament, K. I. (2015). Religious coping among diverse religions: Commonalities and divergences. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 7(1), 24–33. doi:10.1037/a0037652
- Akanwa, E. E. (2015). International students in Western developed countries: History, challenges, and prospects. *Journal of International Students*, 5(3), 271–284.
- Allport, G. W. (1961). *The individual and his religion: A psychological interpretation*. Macmillan. (Original work published 1950)
- Almurideef, R. (2016). *The challenges that international students face when integrating into higher education in the United States* (Order No. 10190410) [Doctoral dissertation, Rowan University]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global.
- Altbach, P. G. (2004). Higher education crosses borders: Can the United States remain the top destination for foreign students? *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 36(2), 18–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091380409604964>
- Ano, G. G., & Vasconcelles, E. B. (2005). Religious coping and psychological adjustment to stress: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(4), 461–480. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20049>
- Anson, M. L. (2011). *Campus influence on international students' perceptions of the United States* (UMI No. 3504336) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri-St. Louis]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global.

- Archeological Survey of India. (n.d.). Excavated site, Nalanda. In *Archeological Survey of India website*. Retrieved January 25, 2021, from <https://asi.nic.in/excavated-site-nalanda/>
- Armes, K., & Ward, C. (1989). Cross-cultural transitions and sojourner adjustment in Singapore. *Journal of Social Psychology, 129*(2), 273–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1989.9711728>
- Association of International Educators. (n.d.-a). *The history of NAFSA*. Retrieved August 1, 2020, from <https://www.nafsa.org/about/about-nafsa/history-nafsa-association-international-educators>
- Association of International Educators. (n.d.-b). *What we stand for*. Retrieved August 1, 2020, from <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/what-we-stand-for>
- Association of International Educators. (2016). *Economic Value Statistics report*. Retrieved August 1, 2020, from <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2>
- Association of International Educators. (2018). *Economic Value Statistics report*. Retrieved August 1, 2020, from <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2>
- Association of International Educators. (2020). *Economic Value Statistics report, 2019–2020* [Annual report]. Retrieved August 1, 2020, from <https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/isev-2020.pdf>
- Aydin, N., Fischer, P., & Frey, D. (2010). Turning to God in the face of ostracism: Effects of social exclusion on religiousness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 36*(6), 742–753. doi:10.1177/0146167210367491

- Baumeister, R. F. (2011). Self and identity: A brief overview of what they are, what they do, and how they work. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1234(1), 48–55.  
<https://doi:10.1111/j.1749-6632.2011.06224.x>
- Beine, M., Noël, R., & Ragot, L. (2014). Determinants of the international mobility of students. *Economics of Education Review*, 41(1), 40–54.  
<https://doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2014.03.003>
- Bloom, P. B., Arikan, G., & Courtemanche, M. (2015). Religious social identity, religious belief, and anti-immigration sentiment. *American Political Science Review*, 109(2), 203–221.  
<https://doi:10.1017/S0003055415000143>
- Berry, J. W. (1980). Acculturation as varieties of adaptation. In A. Padilla (Ed.), *Acculturation: Theory, models, and some new findings* (pp. 9–25). Westview.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5–34.
- Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697–712. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013
- Berry, J. W. (2008). Globalisation and acculturation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 32(4), 328–336. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2008.04.001
- Berry, J. W., Phinney, J. S., Sam, D. L., & Vedder, P. (2006). Immigrant youth: Acculturation, identity, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 55(3), 303–332. doi:10.1111/j.1464-0597.2006.00256.x
- Bevis, T. B. & Lucas, C. J. (2007). *International students in American colleges and universities: A history*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Birman, D., & Trickett, E. J. (2001). Cultural transitions in first-generation immigrants: Acculturation of Soviet Jewish refugee adolescents and parents. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 32*(4), 456–477. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022101032004006>
- Bulut, E., & Ebaugh, H. R. (2014). Religion and assimilation among Turkish Muslim immigrants: Comparing practicing and non-practicing Muslims. *Journal of International Migration and Integration, 15*(3), 487–507. doi:10.1007/s12134-013-0301-9
- Calleja, D. (2000). The world at your door. *Canadian Business, 73*(20), 108–109.
- Campbell, R. A. (2005). Students' views on the relationship between religion and science: Analyses of results from a comparative survey. *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, 42*(3), 249–265.
- Chai, P. P. M., Krägeloh, C. U., Shepherd, D., & Billington, R. (2012). Stress and quality of life in international and domestic university students: cultural differences in the use of religious coping. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 15*(3), 265–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2011.571665>
- Cheng, D., Leong, F. T. L., & Geist, R. (1993). Cultural differences in psychological distress between Asian and Caucasian American college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 21*(3), 182–190. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.1993.tb00598.x>
- Church, A. T. (1982). Sojourner adjustment. *Psychological Bulletin, 91*(3), 540–572. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0033-2909.91.3.540>
- Clothey, F. W., Pintchman, T., & Penkower, L. L. (2014). *Hindu ritual at the margins: Innovations, transformations, reconsiderations*. The University of South Carolina Press.

- Connor, P. (2012). Balm for the soul: Immigrant religion and emotional well-being. *International Migration*, 50(2), 130–157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2010.00623.x>
- Connor, P. (2014). *Immigrant faith: Patterns of immigrant religion in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe*. New York University Press.
- Connor, P., & Koenig, M. (2013). Bridges and barriers: Religion and immigrant occupational attainment across integration contexts. *International Migration Review*, 47(1), 3–38. doi:10.1111/imre.12012
- Cornish, M. A., Lannin, D. G., Wade, N. G., & Martinez, M. (2017). Can use of positive religious coping predict greater distress? An examination of army soldiers on deployment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(3), 302–309. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000200>
- Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE publications.
- Dalessandro, C. (2016). "I don't advertise the fact that I'm a Catholic": College students, religion, and ambivalence. *Sociological Spectrum*, 36(1), 1–12. doi:10.1080/02732173.2015.1068141
- Davis, T.M. (1997). *Open doors report*. Institute of International Education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED417651>
- Demes, K. A., & Geeraert, N. (2015). The highs and lows of a cultural transition: A longitudinal analysis of sojourner stress and adaptation across 50 countries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109(2), 316–337. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000046> doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2014.03.003

- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2008). *The landscape of qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Du Bois, C. A. (1956). *Foreign students and higher education in the United States*. American Council on Education.
- Duru, E., & Poyrazli, S. (2011). Perceived discrimination, social connectedness, and other predictors of adjustment difficulties among Turkish international students. *International Journal of Psychology, 46*(6), 446–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207594.2011.585158>
- Ellison, C. G., Boardman, J. D., Williams, D. R., & Jackson, J. S. (2001). Religious involvement, stress, and mental health: Findings from the 1995 Detroit area study. *Social Forces, 80*(1), 215–249. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2001.0063>
- Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). Ganesha. In *Encyclopedia Britannica website*. Retrieved January 1, 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ganesha>
- Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). Navratri. In *Encyclopedia Britannica website*. Retrieved January 1, 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Navratri>
- Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). Diwali. In *Encyclopedia Britannica website*. Retrieved January 1, 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Diwali-Hindu-festival>
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Ezeofor, I. (2016). *A social cognitive approach to coping with acculturative stress in international students* (Order No. 10159086) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global.
- Francis, L. J., Robbins, M., Santosh, R., & Bhanot, S. (2008). Religion and mental health among Hindu young people in England. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 11*(3), 341–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670701292094>

- Furnham, A., & Bochner, S. (1986). *Culture shock: Psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments*. Methuen.
- Garcia-Muñoz, T., & Neuman, S. (2013). Bridges or buffers? Motives behind immigrants' religiosity. *IZA Journal of Migration*, 2(1) 1-23. doi:10.1186/2193-9039-2-23
- Geeraert, N., & Demoulin, S. (2013). Acculturative stress or resilience? A longitudinal multilevel analysis of sojourners' stress and self-esteem. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 44(8), 1241–1262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022113478656>
- Ghaffari, A., & Çiftçi, A. (2010). Religiosity and self-esteem of Muslim immigrants to the United States: The moderating role of perceived discrimination. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 20(1), 14–25. doi:10.1080/10508610903418038
- Ghebrekidan, S. (2018). *Acculturation and belongingness: The keys to international student satisfaction* (Order No. 10981602) [Master's thesis, South Dakota State University]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global.
- Green, M., & Elliott, M. (2010). Religion, health, and psychological well-being. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 49(2), 149–163. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-009-9242-1>
- Hendricks, C. (2017). *Improving schools through action research: A reflective practice approach* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pearson.
- Hill, P. C., & Pargament, K. I. (2003). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of religion and spirituality. *The American Psychologist*, 58(1), 64–74.
- Hill, P. C., Pargament, K. I., Hood, R. W., McCullough, M. E., Swyers, J. P., Larson, D. B., & Zinnbauer, B. J. (2000). Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points of commonality, points of departure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30(1), 51–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5914.00119>

- Hsien-Chuan Hsu, P., Krägeloh, C. U., Shepherd, D., & Billington, R. (2009). Religion/spirituality and quality of life of international tertiary students in New Zealand: an exploratory study. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 12(4), 385–399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670902752920>
- Institute of International Education. (2017). *Project Atlas report*. Retrieved October 25, 2020, from <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Project-Atlas/Explore-Data>
- Institute of International Education. (2019). *Open Door report, fast facts*. Retrieved October 25, 2020, from [https://opendoorsdata.org/fast\\_facts/fast-facts-2019/](https://opendoorsdata.org/fast_facts/fast-facts-2019/)
- Institute of International Education. (2020a). *Enrollment Trends*. Retrieved October 25, 2020, from <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/>
- Institute of International Education. (2020b). *Open Door report*. Retrieved October 25, 2020, from <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/>
- Institute of International Education. (2020c). *Our Vision*. Retrieved October 25, 2020, from <https://www.iie.org/Why-IIE/Our-Vision>
- Johnson, M. (2015). Developing college students' civic identity: The role of social perspective taking and sociocultural issues discussions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(7), 687–704. doi:10.1353/csd.2015.0074
- Jung, E., Hecht, M. L., & Wadsworth, B. C. (2007). The role of identity in international students' psychological well-being in the United States: A model of depression level, identity gaps, discrimination, and acculturation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 31(5), 605–624. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2007.04.001>
- Kashima, E. S., & Abu-Rayya, H. M. (2014). Longitudinal associations of cultural distance with psychological well-being among Australian immigrants from 49 Countries. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 45(4), 587–600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022113519857>

- Kashima, E. S., & Loh, E. (2006). International students' acculturation: Effects of international, conational, and local ties and need for closure. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30(4), 471–485. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.12.003>
- Kayanan, P. J. (2017). *Relationship between college student identity development and readiness for change* (Order No. 10618650) [Doctoral dissertation]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis database.
- Keyes, C. L. M., & Reitzes, D. C. (2007). The role of religious identity in the mental health of older working and retired adults. *Aging & Mental Health*, 11(4), 434–443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607860601086371>
- Kim, S. (2011). Predictors of acculturative stress among international music therapy students in the United States. *Music Therapy Perspectives*, 29(2), 126–132. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mtp/29.2.126>
- Kirkwood, T. F. (2001). Our global age requires global education: Clarifying definitional ambiguities. *The Social Studies*, 92(1), 10–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377990109603969>
- Kohli, S. (2014). *Looking for the girl on the lion: My spiritual journey of unearthing the intrinsic goddess Durga* (Publication No. 10241805) [Doctoral Dissertation, Sophia University, California]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (2089678369).
- Krause, K.W. (2004). An introduction to research on religion, aging, and health: Exploring new prospects and key challenges. In K. W. Schaie, N. M. Krause, & A. Booth (Eds.), *Religious influences on health and well-being in the elderly* (pp. 1–19). Springer.
- Kroger, J. (2007). *Identity development: Adolescence through adulthood* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Lee, J. J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, 53(3), 381–409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3>
- Leong, C., & Ward, C. (2000). Identity conflict in sojourners. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 24(6), 763–776. doi:10.1016/S0147-1767(00)00030-4
- Li, G., Chen, W., & Duanmu, J. (2010). Determinants of international students' academic performance: A comparison between Chinese and other international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(4), 389–405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309331490>
- Luo, J., & Jamieson-Drake, D. (2013). Examining the educational benefits of interacting with international students. *Journal of International Students*, 3(2), 85–101.
- Malhotra, R. (2011). *Being different: An Indian challenge to Western universalism*. HarperCollins.
- Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3(5), 551–558. doi:10.1037/h0023281
- Mason, J. (1996). *Qualitative researching*. SAGE Publications.
- Mayrl, D., & Oeur, F. (2009). Religion and higher education: Current knowledge and directions for future research. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48(2), 260–275. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01446.x>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mori, S. C. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78(2), 137–144. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2000.tb02571.x>

- National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Digest of education statistics*.  
[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17\\_310.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_310.20.asp)
- Ngo, C. V. (2014). *A longitudinal comparison of international student enrollments in 4-year institutions of higher education in the United States* (UMI No. 3620834) [Doctoral dissertation]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global.
- Nguyen, M. H., Hahn, E., Wingenfeld, K., Graef-Calliess, I. T., von Poser, A., Stopsack, M., Burian, H., Dreher, A., Wolf, S., Dettling, M., Burian, R., Diefenbacher, A., & Ta, T. M. T. (2017). Acculturation and severity of depression among first-generation Vietnamese gout patients in Germany. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 63(8), 708–716. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764017735140>
- Norenzayan, A. (2013). *Big Gods: How religion transformed cooperation and conflict*. Princeton University Press
- Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7(4), 377–182.
- Osburn, R. (2005). *Religious experiences of Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian international students: A case study at the University of Minnesota* (Order No. 319332) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global.
- Oxman, T. E., Freeman, D. H., & Manheimer, E. D. (1995). Lack of social participation or religious strength and comfort as risk factors for death after cardiac surgery in the elderly. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 57(1), 5–15.
- Padilla, A. M. (1980). Introduction. In A. M. Padilla (Ed.), *Acculturation: Theory, models, and some new findings* (pp. 1–8). Westview.

- Pan, S. Y. (2013). China's approach to the international market for higher education students: strategies and implications. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*, 35(3), 249–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2013.786860>
- Pargament, K. I. (1997). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. Guilford Press.
- Pargament, K. I. (2002). The bitter and the sweet: An evaluation of the costs and benefits of religiousness. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13(3), 168–181.
- Pargament, K. I., Koenig, H. G., Tarakeshwar, N., & Hahn, J. (2004). Religious coping methods as predictors of psychological, physical and spiritual outcomes among medically ill elderly patients: A two-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 9(6), 713–730. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105304045366>
- Pascarella, E. T., Martin, G. L., Hanson, J. M., Trolan, T. L., Gillig, B., & Blaich, C. F. (2014). Effects of diversity experiences on critical thinking skills over 4 years of college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 55(1), 86–92. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2014.0009>
- Patton, M. Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. SAGE Publications.
- Peek, L. (2005). Becoming Muslim: The development of a religious identity. *Sociology of Religion*, 66(3), 215–242. <https://doi:10.2307/4153097>
- Philip, S. (2015). *International Students' Religiosity/Spirituality and Acculturative Stress: A Phenomenological Inquiry*. (Order No. 3700850) [Doctoral dissertation, Regent University]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global.
- Philip, S., Neuer Colburn, A. A., Underwood, L., & Bayne, H. (2019). The impact of religion/spirituality on acculturative stress among international students. *Journal of College Counseling*, 22(1), 27–40. doi:10.1002/jocc.12112

- Phinney, J. S. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 499–514. <https://doi:10.1037//0033-2909.108.3.499>
- Phinney J.S. (1993). A three-stage model of ethnic identity development in adolescence. In M. E. Bernal & G. P. Knight (Eds.), *Ethnic identity: Formation and transmission among Hispanics and other minorities* (pp. 61–79). State University of New York Press.
- Phinney, J. S., Cantu, C. L., & Kurtz, D. A. (1997). Ethnic and American identity as predictors of self-esteem among African American, Latino, and White adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 26(2), 165–185. <https://doi:1024500514834>
- Phinney, J. S., Horenczyk, G., Liebkind, K., & Vedder, P. (2001). Ethnic identity, immigration, and well-being: An interactional perspective. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(3), 493–510. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00225>
- Phinney, J. S., Jacoby, B., & Silva, C. (2007). Positive intergroup attitudes: The role of ethnic identity. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 31(5), 478–490. <https://doi:10.1177/0165025407081466>
- Phinney, J. S., Ong, A. D. (2007). Conceptualization and measurement of ethnic identity: Current status and future directions. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 54(3), 271–281. <https://doi:10.1037/0022-0167.54.3.271>
- Potkar, K. (2013). *Adaptation to the U.S. and religion/spirituality: Experiences of Indian international students* (Order No. 3587715) [Doctoral dissertation, Brigham Young University]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global.
- Poyrazli, S. (2003). Ethnic identity and psychosocial adjustment among international students. *Psychological Reports*, 92(2), 512–514. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.2003.92.2.512>

- Prazeres, L. (2017). Challenging the comfort zone: self-discovery, everyday practices and international student mobility to the Global South. *Mobilities, 12*(6), 908–923. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2016.1225863>
- Purnell, M. C., Johnson, M. S., Jones, R., Calloway, E. B., Hammond, D. A., Hall, L. A., & Spadaro, D. C. (2019). Spirituality and religiosity of pharmacy students. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 83*(1), 6795–6800. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe6795>
- Rector, N. A., & Roger, D. (1997). The stress-buffering effects of self-esteem. *Personality and Individual Differences, 23*(5), 799–808. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869\(97\)00095-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(97)00095-0)
- Redfield, R., Linton, R., & Herskovits, M. (1936). Memorandum for the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist, 38*(1), 149–152. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/662563>
- Sandhu, D. S. (1994). An examination of the psychological needs of the international students: Implications for counselling and psychotherapy. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 17*(4), 229–239. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01407739>
- Sandhu, D. S., & Asrabadi, B. R. (1994). Development of an acculturative stress scale for international students - preliminary findings. *Psychological Reports, 75*(1), 435–448.
- Schein, E. H., & Schein, P. A. (2017). *Organizational culture and leadership* (5th ed.). Wiley.
- Schwadel, P. (2016). Does higher education cause religious decline? A longitudinal analysis of the within- and between-person effects of higher education on religiosity. *The Sociological Quarterly, 57*(4), 759–786. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tsq.12153>

- Searle, W., & Ward, C. (1990). The prediction of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14(4), 449–464.
- Sen, B., & Knottnerus, J. D. (2016). Ritualized ethnic identity: Asian Indian immigrants in the Southern plains. *Sociological Spectrum*, 36(1), 37–56.  
doi:10.1080/02732173.2015.1084251
- Shekedi, A. (2005). *Multiple case narrative: a qualitative approach to studying multiple populations*. John Benjamins Publications.
- Singh, S. (2017). *The educational heritage of ancient India: How an ecosystem of learning was laid to waste*. Notion Press.
- Smart, N., (1996). *Dimensions of the sacred: An anatomy of the world's beliefs*. University of California Press.
- Smith, C. (2016). International student success. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, 4(2), 61–73. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sem3.20084>
- Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretive phenomenological analysis: Theory, methods, and research*. SAGE Publications.
- Smith, R. A., & Khawaja, N. G. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(6), 699–713. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004>
- Subica, A. M. (2011). *Investigating ethnic identity, acculturation, self-esteem, trait anxiety, and depressive symptomatology across biracial Asian-White and monoracial Asian American and White American individuals*. (Order No. 3502203) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Hawai'i at Manoa]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global

- Tabariasl, K. (1987). *History of international students at Ball State University, 1945-1980* (Order No. 8806488) [Doctoral dissertation, Ball State University]. ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global.
- Taušová, J., Bender, M., Dimitrova, R., van de Vijver, F. (2019). The role of perceived cultural distance, personal growth initiative, language proficiencies, and tridimensional acculturation orientations for psychological adjustment among international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 69, 11–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2018.11.004>
- Timotijevic, L., & Breakwell, G. M. (2000). Migration and threat to identity. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 10(5), 355–372.
- Tremblay, K. (2005). Academic mobility and immigration. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9(3), 196–228. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315305277618>
- Trice, A. G. (2003). Faculty perceptions of graduate international students: The benefits and challenges. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 7(4), 379–403. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303257120>
- Turnbull-Reilly, A. (2015). *Internationalization: Utilizing the university museum* (Order No. 1586762). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- United Nations. (2017). *International migration report*. [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017\\_Highlights.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf)
- Valentine, S. (2006). Hispanics' self-esteem, acculturation, and skepticism of women's work. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(1), 206–221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-9029.2006.00058.x>

- Vermeer, P. (2015). Plurality and the future of interreligious conflict in the Netherlands: a sociological exploration. In C. Sterkens & P. Vermeer (Eds.), *Religion, migration, and conflict* (pp 1–13). Lit Verlag.
- Walden, J. W. H. (1909). *The universities of ancient Greece*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Ward, C. (1997). Culture learning, acculturative stress, and psychopathology: Three perspectives on acculturation. *Applied Psychology, 46*(1), 58–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026999497378539>
- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1993a). Psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transitions: A comparison of secondary students overseas and at home. *International Journal of Psychology, 28*(2), 129–147.
- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1993b). Where's the culture in cross-cultural transition: Comparative studies of sojourner adjustment. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 24*(2), 221–249.
- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1994). Acculturation strategies, psychological adjustment, and sociocultural competence during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18*(3), 329–343.
- Ward, C., Stuart, J., & Kus, L. (2011). The construction and validation of a measure of ethno-cultural identity conflict. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 93*(5), 462–473. [doi:10.1080/00223891.2011.558872](https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2011.558872)
- Ward, T., Jacobs, J., & Thompson, R. J. (2015). The number of international students. *College and University, 91*(1), 3–10.
- Wei, H. (2013). An empirical study on the determinants of international student mobility: a global perspective. *Higher Education, 66*(1), 105–122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9593-5>

- West, D. M. (2011). *Brain gain: Rethinking U.S. immigration policy*. Brookings Institution Press.
- World History Encyclopedia. (2009-2024). Shiva. In *World History Encyclopedia website*. Retrieved January 1, 2024, from <https://www.worldhistory.org/shiva/>
- World History Encyclopedia. (2009-2024). Vishnu. In *World History Encyclopedia website*. Retrieved January 1, 2024, from <https://www.worldhistory.org/Vishnu/>
- Wu, H., Garza, E., & Guzman, N. (2015). International student's challenge and adjustment to college. *Education Research International*, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/202753>
- Yeh, C. J., & Inose, M. (2003). International students' reported English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, *16*(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951507031000114058>
- Yin, R. K. (2011). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford Press.
- Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K., & Todman, J. (2008). Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *33*(1), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701794833>

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Flyer/Newsletter

#### Attention International Students!



I am an international graduate student at the \*\*\* College of Education, and I welcome you all to participate in research about international students' experiences.

Your participation in this research might help to improve the experience of future international students. Please consider being part of this research if you are a female international student and an undergraduate, 18-26 years of age, you self-identify as belonging to an organized religious group, and have been in the U.S. for at least six months.

Prior to becoming an international student, you have not lived in a foreign country (other than your home country) for more than six months.

Participation in this research is voluntary.

If you choose to participate, your identity will be protected, and your data will be under a pseudonym. If you are chosen as a participant and you complete the research process, you will be offered a 25-dollar Amazon gift card!

Please reach out to me for more details at:

Name of Researcher

Email of Researcher; Phone Number of Researcher

## Appendix B

### General Interview Guide

I am from India, and I was a doctor in India

#### Checklist

Consent Form

You do not have PR or Citizenship; you are on F1

Past Foreign Experience

You identify as belonging to a religion

Six months in the U.S.

#### University Resources

**Religious and Spiritual Life:** Phone Numbers

**University Crisis Helpline:** Phone Numbers

**University Non-Crisis Support:** Phone Numbers

**University Campus Life:** Phone Numbers

Put on Recording

Put On Live Transcript

Put on recording 2

**Hello,** thank you for being a part

Thanks for signing the **Consent Form**

#### Interview Questions

**Thank you for signing the consent. You know, we will talk about your experiences in the U.S. and your religious and spiritual experiences. You are free to stop participating in the**

**interview at any time. Please feel free to let me know if you do not understand a question; I will reword it for you. Let us start by going through the formal research purpose of this study (I will read out the formal research purpose and research questions).**

Now, let us start the interview:

What school or college are you in? What is your major?

How are your studies going on?

How do you describe your adjustment to American culture at this point?

Tell me about your decision to come to the U.S. as an international student.

**Probe:** Who or what influenced your decision to come to the U.S. as an international student?

**Probe:** What obstacles, if any, did you encounter when becoming an international student?

Describe your first few months as an international student in the U.S.

**Probe:** How were the first few months of adjustment to life and culture in the United States?

**Probe:** How were the first few months of adjustment to academic life at this university?

If you encountered any obstacles, to whom or to whom did you turn to cope with the obstacle?

**Probe:** What did you find to be the most successful strategy to cope?

**So, I am trying to understand the religious/spiritual experiences of international students. I am also interested in changes occurring in this area.**

What are your personal beliefs about the difference between religion and spirituality?

What changes, if any, did you experience in your religious beliefs and identity after coming to the United States?

**Probe:** How would you describe your childhood memories of religious experiences?

**Probe:** What were your family's religious beliefs?

**Probe:** How important was religious identity for your family?

**Probe:** How similar or different were you from your family in religious beliefs and identity.

**Probe:** In previous research, some students reported questioning their native religious beliefs after becoming international students. How similar or different was your experience?

How would you describe the major changes, if any, in your religious practice after coming to the United States?

**Probe:** What was the frequency of your religious attendance in the few years before coming to the United States?

**Probe:** How would you describe your religious rituals and practices before moving here?

**Probe:** How would you describe your family's religious practice?

**Probe:** What are the important religious days/celebrations you observed before coming to the United States?

Did religion affect your adjustment to life in the United States?

**If Yes - Probe:** Can you describe further the effects of religion on your adjustment?

**Probe:** What effects, if any, did religious ritual/practice have on your adjustment?

How can this university better support a student with similar religious/spiritual experiences?

**Probe:** How successful was this university in providing this support to you?

**This was an enlightening discussion. Thank you for your time and effort. I will get back to you with the post-interview reflection and member checks. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions.**

## VITA

### Seema Jain

- 2005 M.B.B.S., Dr. S.N. Medical College, Jodhpur. University of Rajasthan
- 2011 M.D. in Radiodiagnosis, JLN Medical College, RUHS.
- 2024 Ed.D. in Higher Education Leadership

### Publications

Jain, S. (2011). *CT and ultrasonographic findings in various chest radiographic opacities and credibility of ultrasonography chest* (Doctoral dissertation). Rajasthan University of Health Sciences, Jaipur, India.

Jain, S. (2024). *Faith in a foreign land: Acculturation and the religious and spiritual experiences of international students* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, U.S.

