

(dis)Connected: A Podcast Series on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World

By

Jessikah Riley

A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from
the University Honors College

Fall 2021

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Rebekka King, Thesis Director

Dr. John Vile, Thesis Committee Chair

(dis)Connected: A Podcast Series on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World

by Jessikah Riley

APPROVED:

Dr. Rebekka King, Thesis Director
Associate Professor, Religious Studies

Dr. John Vile, Thesis Committee Chair
Dean, University Honors College

Acknowledgments

Thank you, first, to Dr. King. Without your willingness to take a chance on me, your constant encouragement, and your wisdom, this project would never have happened.

To all the wonderful people interviewed in this series, thank you a million times over. I am honored that you shared your precious time, thoughts, and stories with me.

Thank you to Dr. Jamie Burriss and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs for the URECA grant that funded this project and your exceeding kindness.

Thank you to my family. I can never thank you enough. Especially to my mom, who listens to all my ideas and keeps me anchored; I inherited my curiosity from you. Your love has created a steady foundation from which I am able to reach for the stars.

Thank you, at last, to God. I hope this project reflects the light You have poured into my life with a heavy hand and an artist's flair. Thank you for nurturing my dreams and connecting all these pieces and people into a beautiful constellation.

Abstract

This project is an eleven-episode podcast series created to explore the cognitive basis of relationship formation and religious processing. I aimed to address questions revolving around why socialization is important to human beings, what factors contribute to relationship formation, and how we are able to form relationships with invisible supernatural beings. The first part of the series spotlights human connections: why we need them, what factors reinforce them, and what happens when we do not have them to a degree sufficient enough to sustain us. I interviewed experts to gain an understanding of how the brain works and how we form social relationships. In the second part, the neural frameworks that make religion possible are discussed with a scholar of religion and the mechanisms of religious practices with religious leaders. The last four episodes contain individuals' accounts of their own lives, connections, and religious thoughts.

YouTube Channel Link

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLPhmCIEWfXOBxNkeZxTDtQ>

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
YouTube Channel Link.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Methodology.....	4
Preliminary Research.....	5
Interviews.....	6
Episode Recaps.....	7
<i>Ep. 1 “Development” with Dr. Tiffany Rogers.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Ep. 2 “The Senses” with Dr. Jessica Gaby.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Ep. 3 “Distance” with Dr. Barbara Turnage.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Ep. 4 “Technology” with Dr. Eric Detweiler.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Ep. 5 “Invisible Connections” with Dr. Rebekka King.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Ep. 6 “Reality & Lenses” with Duncan Gasson-Gardner.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Ep. 7 “Believing is Seeing” with Fr. John Oliver.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Ep. 8 “Testimonial: Hanan”.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Ep. 9 “Testimonial: Steven”.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Ep. 10 “Testimonial: Nate”.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Ep. 11 “Testimonial: Professor Libby Hinson”.....</i>	<i>15</i>

Result	16
Limitations	16
Conclusion	17
References.....	20
Appendix A.....	22

Introduction

Human beings are all connected. No, I am not referring to a convoluted worldwide six degrees of separation puzzle. I simply mean that human life requires relationships. This goes beyond the convenience of having other people around for things like safety and increased work productivity. It seems that, even beyond the practicalities, humans are “wired to connect” (Goleman, 2007, p. 4). As Daniel Goleman puts it in his book *Social Intelligence* (2007), “Neuroscience has discovered that our brain’s very design makes it *sociable*” (p. 4). We have complex neural networks that allow us to read and feel other people’s emotions (Goleman, 2007) and live in social realities that we have collectively constructed (Barrett, 2020).

Relationships shape us from the very beginning of our lives. For reasons unknown, we are born with only partially developed brains, and it takes the first twenty-five or so years of our lives for their growth to be completed (Barrett, 2020). Compared to the animal world, this is highly inefficient – baby snakes, for example, are born able to move around independently, their brains already wired to facilitate this action (Barrett, 2020). In contrast, human babies need their caregivers to regulate their environments and bodies to survive (Barrett, 2020). Developing brains also need their caregivers to interact with them in order for the babies to learn how to pay attention, develop their sensory systems, and form memories (Barrett, 2020; Rogers, as presented in Riley, 2021a). They need other people to regulate their emotions and show them how to care for themselves (Turnage, as presented in Riley, 2021c). From the moment babies are born, their interactions with caregivers sculpt their brains, wiring them and setting patterns that last far into adulthood (Barrett, 2020). In fact, this process does not stop at caregivers:

interactions with all humans we meet continue to shape our brains throughout our lives in a process called neuroplasticity (Barrett, 2020).

Neuroscience and psychology have done a great deal to shed light on why we need human connection. At this point, it is less tricky to understand the reasons why we need people. The much more difficult part is to explain *how* we forge connections. Countless factors determine whether we will form a bond with another person, from personality to appearance to timing. We can put names to many of these factors. Many of them depend on sensory input, as that is the medium through which we engage with the surrounding world. For instance, our sense of smell can subconsciously tell our brain the emotions another person is feeling (Gaby, as presented in Riley, 2021b). We need to have direct feedback from other people in the form of facial expressions, words, or actions that allow for a sense of emotional closeness with them.

These cues can come in a variety of forms, some of which have been drastically altered by technology. Since the advent of writing, people have been able to connect with others across the world and even through time. We can only know the words of Plato complaining about how writing would be the ruin of the human connection with knowledge because they were written down and preserved through the years (Detweiler, as presented in Riley, 2021d). When I visited my brother in North Carolina, we saw a star show at a planetarium. The celestial tour guide informed us that the radio waves sent out by newscasters in the 1950s are still traveling through space and have reached past the outer limits of our solar system. What a strange and wonderful thought that, with the right equipment, space people can now hear our first radio broadcasts. Social media and modern communicative technology have, even more rapidly, continued to transform our

communication, altering its frequency, length, and speed (Detweiler, as presented in Riley, 2021d). With the help of technology, our voices and thoughts can carry through the years and continue to influence the thoughts and actions of people long after we are dust.

In addition to changing our channels of communication, technology allows us to form and maintain relationships across distances. What was once a possible but arduous process, carried out through many letters with weeks or months in between, is now as easy as tapping a button to join a FaceTime call. Our ability to form long-distance relationships demonstrates that we are capable of building relationships that lack the fullest measure of sensory details. We rely on the cues that are available to us in the absence of other options. We are capable of navigating the abstract and imbuing it with meaning.

Often, we speak about relationships as if they are objects that we can hold in our hands. When, in reality, they are almost frighteningly intangible. Unreliable. Prone to dissolving in an instant. Yet, they can feel very real to us.

This capacity to perceive the intangible as real comes to its fullest form in the creation of relationships with invisible supernatural beings. These relationships seem to take on an ethereal quality, transcending all our natural instincts and forged in a spiritual realm. They are seen, potentially, as *inherently different* than human relationships and, therefore, it is thought they should function differently. However, our brains develop with a reliance on sensory systems to gauge our environment, physical and social. Bonds with supernatural agents or religious practices may not, then, be as strictly separate as we may think.

People do perceive supernatural beings as real at a neurological level. One study of a group of Christians showed that when they prayed unscripted prayers to God, the same areas of the brain were activated as if they were speaking to a person rather than an abstraction (Schjoedt, et al., 2009). Certainly, from anecdotal evidence, people say that they believe that God is real. These claims lead to questions of how and why.

Those questions are the focal point of this project. How we connect with one another is a fascinating concept. Human relationships and all their variables are complicated enough. Add another layer of complexity by taking away the mechanisms of feedback that we rely on in human relationships, and it leaves an intriguing rift in the reasons that we are able to strike up a connection with a supernatural agent. To take a closer look at that rift and potentially discover some understanding, I made this podcast series.

The initial episodes establish the importance of our human relationships and some of the elements that make them flourish. In the middle, there is a transition into an exploration of the cognitive equipment we have that enables us to believe in and bond with supernatural agents. The final episodes gather perspectives from people who practice a variety of religions in their own ways to fill out the narrative with voices from participants in religions.

Methodology

In the fall of 2020, Dr. Rebekka King came on board as the thesis advisor for this project. In the first few weeks of the process, she suggested reading materials and potential interviewees to contact. Since the content of this project and each of the

interviews is outside of my immediate area of study, the main portion of the initial work was reading books and articles related to each of the topics explored in the interviews.

Interviews were conducted from July to September.

To create a sense of cohesion in the ideas throughout the project, I needed to speak to people with certain knowledge or experiences, so none of the interviewees were chosen randomly. Although a few people were not able to be interviewed, many people were. The series is composed of eleven interviews; the individuals who were involved are noted below in the Episode Recap section. It was recommended that I reach out to Middle Tennessee State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that this project is being handled with the greatest care possible. I received a letter of exemption from Dr. Moses Prabu, an IRB compliance officer, which is provided in Appendix A.

Preliminary Research

This project relies heavily on the expertise and stories of the interviewees. However, in order to ask pertinent and interesting questions, I conducted preliminary research on the topics. To prepare for the interviews covering topics in psychology and social work, I read *Social Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman and *7 1/2 Lessons about the Brain* by Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett. These books gave me a foundation of knowledge in neuroscience and social cognition. I also read interviewees' research articles that were relevant to the interview, such as "Smelling is telling: human olfactory cues influence social judgments in semi-realistic interactions" and "Discrimination between individual body odors is unaffected by perfume," to which Dr. Jessica Gaby contributed. Watching the documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, gave me insight into some of the influences of technology on modern society.

I gained a deeper understanding of cognitive theories of religion and current studies of religion through Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained, the Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* and T.M. Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. I also read passages from *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* by James Fowler and *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion* by James Spickard, Shawn Landres, and Meredith McGuire. To supplement this knowledge, I read multiple academic articles analyzing the neuroscience of prayer and researched basic facts about the religions of the people I was interviewing in the final episodes.

As I prepared for the interviews, I tailored the questions to each interviewee's area of expertise. During the weeks that I conducted interviews, my thoughts on these topics developed and shifted. When I learned new facts from books or interviewees, I incorporated that information into questions in later interviews.

Interviews

Due to the fact that I had to work around the schedules of those I was interviewing, I did not record these interviews in the order in which they appear in the final version of the podcast. In fact, the first episode was the second to last to be recorded. However, this means that I was able to incorporate the information I learned from other interviews into the subsequent ones, which allowed me to tie themes and ideas together through the series.

Prior to the interviews, I communicated with the interviewees through email or phone. I sent them my prepared questions ahead of time and answered any questions they had. All the interviews were conducted individually over Zoom.¹

During the interviews, I tried to keep the conversation relatively close to the questions I had prepared, while also being flexible enough to ask follow-up questions based on the information and stories the person shared. Afterward, I edited the interviews using the software Audacity. Although most of the interviews required extensive editing to compress them down to 20- to 40-minute episodes, I did my best to preserve essential content and only cut verbal disfluencies from those portions for a better listening experience.

Episode Recaps

Ep. 1 “Development” with Dr. Tiffany Rogers

I wanted this series to begin by discussing the psychology of relationship formation with humans to create a basis of knowledge that is built on later in the series. Dr. Tiffany Rogers is a professor of psychology who specializes in behavioral neuroscience and social behavior. In this episode, she elaborates on the ways that socialization impacts children’s development. All children’s care and learning are mediated through social interactions. Learning specifically is made possible by mirror

¹ Once each interviewee was in the meeting, I asked a few preliminary questions. I asked each interviewee to confirm that they were okay with their audio being posted publicly on YouTube and if they had read the questions before the meeting to get a sense of the project. I also went over how I was planning to introduce each person, to ensure that they were introduced appropriately. A couple of the interviewees were hesitant about having their audio posted online, so I offered to send the edited version of the podcast episode to them before posting it, to give them the opportunity to make sure they were comfortable with the content being posted. Each confirmed that this arrangement was acceptable.

neurons, specialized brain cells that allow people to process and mimic others' behavior. These neurons can also help us to have empathy, which, in turn, enables us to connect with other people.

It seems that with these neural capabilities, we are intended to be social. Children as young as nine months old can understand other people's intentions, which requires relatively complex cognitive processing. When children do not receive sufficient socialization, they experience increased stress and are more likely to have trouble with language learning, interpreting social situations, and mental health issues. In general, social interactions are interpreted as rewarding in the brain. There is a specific area of the brain that encodes faces and associates them with emotions, creating emotional bonds. In addition, helping other people causes a combination of positive neurochemicals to be released in the brain, which lowers stress. These factors show that socializing is an important element in the early stages of life, not only because it teaches us how to interact with others but because it fulfills emotional and mental needs.

Ep 2. "The Senses" with Dr. Jessica Gaby

It is an obvious statement that we interact with the world and other people through our senses. However, most of the sensory information that we take in is processed at a subconscious level. Dr. Jessica Gaby is a psychology professor who has studied olfactory perception, which is the technical term for our sense of smell, and the ways those perceptions affect social judgements. In this episode, she talked about how, although smell perceptions go under our conscious radar most of the time, they can have an important impact on our relationships.

From smells, people have the ability to detect another's gender, their age, whether the person has an illness, and their emotions. Particularly related to the detection of emotions, smells can cause what is known as "emotional contagion," which is where we are able to feel what other people are feeling – at a diminished level, but still noticeable. We only have three cones in our eyes to detect color, but we have over 350 olfactory receptors. Not every person has every receptor, and patterns of perception vary, which causes people to react differently to certain smells. Interpretation of smells in the brain can reinforce strong emotional bonds, like those between babies and their mothers, and make memory impressions. Because of these associations, people have specific emotional responses to certain odors: odors associated with positive relationships can decrease stress, while those associated with negative relationships have the opposite effect.

Ep. 3 "Distance" with Dr. Barbara Turnage

From the first two episodes, we see that relationships are important for us in a variety of ways, and they are created and reinforced through our senses. This episode explores the impact that physical distance from other people can have on us. Dr. Barbara Turnage is a professor of social work and the associate dean of the College of Behavioral and Health Sciences at MTSU. Dr. Turnage elaborated on the difficulties that people can face in isolation in this interview. She noted that, while we all need socialization, a lack of interaction can be especially challenging for the elderly and people who live with mental health conditions. These individuals may depend on other people to move around in the world or stay mentally stable, so distance can be devastating.

Children, who learn through social interactions, need people to be present with them to gain an understanding of the world. She highlighted the fact that not only is it

vital for children to have parental attention, but it is also important for kids to learn from their peers. From other children, they learn the fundamentals of sharing and communication. However, negative impacts on children from a lack of socialization – given that it is not due to neglect but simply distance from others – can be reversed when they are introduced to people later on.

Different personalities react differently to decreased socialization. An easy example is a comparison between introverts and extroverts. Extroverts need to talk to other people to process information and thrive. Introverts need less interaction to be fulfilled. However, across the board, using technology, sending letters, listening to music, and reading books can help us feel connected to people when we cannot be with them. Dr. Turnage also discussed the significance of replenishing one’s own batteries by spending time alone so that a person can give proper care and attention to others. She ended the conversation with a reminder of how powerful our words of encouragement can be for other people.

Ep. 4 “Technology” with Dr. Eric Detweiler

Technology has become a primary way for us to communicate in the modern world. Dr. Eric Detweiler, a professor of English with expertise in rhetoric and digital communication, explains the ways that technology has changed communication in this episode. He starts by discussing the way that writing was not initially embraced by everyone when it was invented but is now an integral part of our lives. Modern technology helps us connect in quicker ways. He says that the main impact of technology is on the rhythms of communication: the length and frequency of our communication changed with the advent of different forms of technology. Although there may be a

concern that technology changes the depth of our conversations, this is not necessarily the case. It all depends on our use of the technologies.

Technology can help people form relationships across the globe and connect about interests that people within a person's immediate surroundings do not share. There are some downsides, such as companies not moderating social media users' harmful behavior. Also, technology can change our perceptions of people in many ways. People can seem different over text than over the phone, and video chats can be exhausting because we tend to overanalyze our own appearance and actions. Ultimately, technology presents a major opportunity for people to form connections and stay in contact over time and distance. It is a different experience than being in-person with another individual but communicating via technology can lead to deeply meaningful interactions.

Ep. 5 "Invisible Connections" with Dr. Rebekka King

This episode is the bridge between analyzing human relationships and discussing supernatural relationships. Dr. Rebekka King, a professor of religious studies, has expertise in the intersection between contemporary Christianity and North American society. In this episode, she analyzes the cognitive basis of religion and why relationships with invisible supernatural beings are possible for humans. According to one scholarly theory about religion, our brains are hardwired to imagine invisible beings because doing so is helpful for survival. However, there are some ideas about these agents that are more "cognitively contagious" than others. Invisible agents that are human-like in some way, such as being logical or having a memory, are more likely to be thought of as real and possible to connect with.

Dr. King details that the limits of our human capabilities cause us to imagine beings that transcend those limitations. Our brains are able to think abstractly, as evidenced by the social constructs that we have created cooperatively and operate within daily. This ability to believe in a supernatural being, however, does not determine that we *will*. The modern era, with its emphasis on individualism and freedom of choice, allows people to choose a religion or a blend of many. This choice, even with its freedom, is rooted and shaped by the family ties and cultural norms they have grown up in. Changing one's religion is often not radical but based on a sense of familiarity or practicality.

Even with the potential to establish a relationship, it can still be difficult for religious people to believe in an invisible agent. There is a lack of concreteness in these relationships. Although people have been suspicious of religious objects in the past, they can give us a tangible something with which we can associate that agent. Having some sort of personally meaningful religious icon can help a person make their stake in the story of a large world religion.

If we can compare long-distance human relationships to relationships with invisible supernatural beings, we see some similarities. Long-distance relationships can anchor our identities, reflecting to us a version of ourselves for which we long. The reason we carry on long-distance relationships is that those connections give us something that we lack in our immediate context. Religious relationships can fulfill that same role. Just as technologies have changed our human relationships throughout history, they have also changed the constructions of religions and continue to do so in ways yet unseen.

Ep. 6 “Reality & Lenses” with Duncan Gasson-Gardner

This episode marks the transition from the study of religion into the study of religious practice. Duncan Gasson-Gardner is a Zen Buddhist chaplain at the Vanderbilt Hospital. His practice is centered around focusing and meditating on reality and deconstructing the lenses we place on reality and why we do so.

He came to Zen after being introduced to it in college; it truly resonated with him and took root after he lost his father. Although community and objects, such as incense and drums, can be useful in his practice, he says that these things are not necessary. He says that his Zen practice has changed the way he interacts with other people, as it has taught him to be more present with them and more intentional about listening to others.

Ep. 7 “Believing is Seeing” with Fr. John Oliver

Fr. John Oliver is an Orthodox priest who ministers at the St. Elizabeth Orthodox Church in Murfreesboro. He believes in the Christian God. He explains that his family set his religious foundation and his father inspired in him a curiosity that led him to question the world around him. After exploring many religions in his college days and experiencing personal suffering, he returned to Catholicism because its structure gave his life much-needed stability.

He finds that fostering a relationship with God is like a dance, where God initiates, and a person responds. The structure of the church (e.g., regular prayers, readings, and services), staying open to the divine, and going into nature help him feel connected to God. He says he is able to connect with God because of the love that God has shown him, and his personal experience confirms God’s existence to him. Tangible

objects, such as icons and rosaries, help, but they are not needed. Rather, they are like icing on a cake; they augment the overall experience, but it is still sweet without them.

Ep. 8 “Testimonial: Hanan”

Hanan graduated from MTSU with a dual degree in religious studies and global studies. She considers herself spiritual, rather than religious, and most closely associates with Islam. She says that encounters with organized religion, such as going to a Christian school, pushed her away from religion, but family ties brought her closer to Islam. She believes in God based on the design of the world and the faith that she saw in her uncle.

In the interview, she said that human relationships are important, and technology has helped her sustain them. However, she finds that maintaining relationships only over technology causes them to fade out more quickly than those where she can interact with the friend in-person. For her, long-distance relationships are comparable to a relationship with God, but there is something essentially different. She holds her Quran as precious because of its significance as God’s word, and she sees it as her connection to God. Her spirituality causes her to treat people with more kindness and gentleness since they are also created by God.

Ep. 9 “Testimonial: Steven”

Steven graduated from MTSU with a Master of Science in biotechnology, and he is working toward becoming a doctor. Steven agreed that socialization is essential, and he met his closest friends at school. He finds that when maintaining long-distance relationships, being intentional about staying in communication sustains them. Regarding the role of technology, he says that the only way long-distance relationships are feasible

is through technology. Even with technology, however, one can miss social cues that are important to create confidence in one's connection with another person.

Steven is a Catholic Christian who believes in one God. His family introduced him to Christianity and his mom, especially, influenced him to believe what he does. He said that personal trials and being rewarded for his faith reinforced his beliefs. Although God does not respond audibly to his prayers, Steven says that prayer is the main way he stays connected to God, and his answers come in the form of blessings. Reading the Bible and taking communion also help him connect with God. Knowing that God is real, for him, is an inexplicable feeling akin to knowing you have chosen the right person with whom to share your life.

Ep. 10 "Testimonial: Nate"

Nate is a sophomore at MTSU, majoring in philosophy. Although he is not particularly social, he acknowledges that socializing is very important. He has two close friends, both of whom he met in high school. Nate went from being on the fast-track to the Episcopal priesthood to being an atheist majoring in philosophy in the past couple of years. He says that his family had a strong influence on his religious beginnings, and a handful of influential people he met along the way propelled him to become a priest. However, once he started reading philosophical texts and taking religious studies courses, he became an atheist, concluding that religion is simply a social construct.

Nate says that he wanted to take an unbiased look at his religious beliefs and the new literature he was coming across. From the ideas he gained, he decided that people believe in God because of their own emotional projections and that there is no purpose in

life. Although he believes there is a need for an authority in the world, he argues that other things, such as government, can fill that place and that the idea of God is not a requirement.

Ep. 11 “Testimonial: Professor Libby Hinson”

Libby Hinson is a professor in the video and film production department at MTSU. In concordance with the others interviewed, she agrees that being social is vital to human health. She met most of her close friends in college, which she attributes to the proximity of dorm life and the shared struggles of students. She says that technology helps her connect with friends and family, and although it would be difficult to form a relationship with someone online without a common bond already established, it is not impossible. However, there is something about being in person which creates the potential for a closer bond.

In sharing her religious beliefs, Professor Hinson discussed each of her parents’ beliefs and the influence their beliefs had on her. Although her family was never extremely religious, they followed Jewish customs and observed traditional holidays. She, in turn, is not particularly religious, but she follows the customs because of the personal importance they have acquired over time. Professor Hinson described two religious experiences she had: one during a foggy morning at a French cathedral, the other at Shakespeare’s grave. Both moments made her feel the presence of God. She has chats every once in a while with God and celebrates Hanukkah and Yom Kippur. For the holidays, her family’s traditions are non-traditional and highly personally meaningful. For example, at Hanukkah, they bring out the “menorah-saurus,” a dinosaur-shaped menorah that has become a staple in their holiday celebrations. She said that these objects

have developed significance over time in her family and are, therefore, extremely comforting. She said that she hopes her religion helps her approach people with kindness because that should be the main purpose of religion.

Result

This project's final product is an eleven-episode series that delves into and knits together concepts in psychology, sociology, technology, religious studies, and religious practice. Rather than being a high-level discussion that only experts could engage, I wanted this podcast to be an approachable way for anyone to learn about complicated and multi-faceted processes like relationship formation and neuroscience. Because I am a novice in all these fields, this is the perspective I took into these interviews – all the listener needs is curiosity to understand the content.

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be pointed out. The first is that the discussions around forming relationships with supernatural beings are heavily Judeo-Christian leaning. This is due mostly to the contacts I was able to make and partially to the second limitation of the time constraints of this project. I could only interview so many individuals before my deadlines, so I had to choose based on who was willing and available at that time. By no means do I regret choosing those I interviewed. They were all incredibly kind and made wonderful contributions. However, there are many more viewpoints to be considered that were not featured in this series, so the conclusions presented are limited to those given.

Most of the individuals I spoke with either believe in, or have been influenced by, monotheistic religions. If I were to continue this series, I would be interested to hear from people in polytheistic or ancestral religions. In that same line of thought, it would also be interesting to speak with people who do not participate in the major world religions (i.e., Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Confucianism). Additional interviews could broaden the applicability of the conclusions from this project and the understanding of listeners, including myself.

Conclusion

People are messy, complicated, and unpredictable. Our relationships, even more so. This complexity does not evaporate when the relationship happens to be with an invisible supernatural agent, even if the relationships differ. However, we need these relationships.

Everything that human beings learn comes from other humans. We hold the keys to each other's emotions and memories. As we speak in our mutually made-up languages and respond with expressions that echo in each other's minds, we shape the realities of everyone with everyone we encounter. We keep one another stable, hopeful.

Although relationships with supernatural beings seem otherworldly, I do not think they transcend our physical reality quite as much as we may think. In the latter episodes in the series, each of the people I spoke with noted that family members were monumentally influential in their religious journeys. Although they explained that religious objects, such as the Quran Hanan held with reverence or incense Duncan burned

at a Zen center, are not strictly necessary, they certainly elevate their experience of religion. These objects take on a significance of their own sometimes. A “menorah-saurus” can create cherished family memories (Hinson, as presented in Riley, 2021i). The stories of previous disciples can restore our fortitude (Steven, as presented in Riley, 2021h). A waterfall can provide a reminder of divine genius (Oliver, as presented in Riley, 2021f). However, all these things are “like fingers pointing at the moon... If you take the finger as the thing, you’ve missed the moon, you’ve missed the point. But that doesn’t make the finger unimportant” (Gasson-Gardner, as presented in Riley, 2021e). These religious objects can be important, but their purpose is not for the believer to focus on them – they are simply meant to be a telescope.

Religious objects or icons, then, are not imperative for a supernatural relationship. Other people are also not paramount. Certainly, if the religious being is believed to be extremely powerful, there is no need for human intercession.

Peel back all the layers, and we are left with the same factors that so uncertainly determine human relationships. Personality, perspective, timing. A million unknowable details in between. As the Zen proverb goes, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear” (Oliver, as presented in Riley, 2021f). When the believer is ready, the supernatural, in some way or another, will appear.

References

- Barrett, L. F. (2020). *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Boyer, P. (2001). *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Fowler, J. W. (1995). *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the quest for meaning*. New York, NY: HarperOne.
- Goleman, D. (2007). *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*. New York, NY: Bantam Dell.
- Gaby, J. M., & Dalton, P. (2019). Discrimination between individual body odors is unaffected by perfume. *Perception*, 48(11), 1104-1123.
- Gaby, J. M., & Zayas, V. (2017). Smelling is telling: human olfactory cues influence social judgments in semi-realistic interactions. *Chemical Senses*, 42(5), 405-418.
- Gasson-Gardner, D. (n.d.). *The Man in the Tree*. Harvard Divinity Bulletin. Retrieved October 25, 2021, from <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/the-man-in-the-tree/>.
- Gordon, R. L., & Magne, C. L. (2017). Music and the Brain: Music and Cognitive Abilities. In: Richard Ashley and Renee Timmers (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Music Cognition* (pp. 49-62). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Luhrmann, T. M. (2012). *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

- Newberg, A. B., Wintering, N. A., Yaden, D. B., Waldman, M. R., Reddin, J., & Alavi, A. (2015). A case series study of the neuropsychological effects of altered states of mind during intense Islamic prayer. *Journal of Physiology-Paris*, 109(4-6), 214–220. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jphysparis.2015.08.001>
- Orlowski, J. (2020) *The Social Dilemma* [Film]. Exposure Labs.
- Riley, J. (Host). (2021a). Ep. 1 Development featuring Dr. Tiffany Rogers [Audio podcast episode]. In *(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World*.
- Riley, J. (Host). (2021b). Ep. 2 The Senses featuring Dr. Jessica Gaby [Audio podcast episode]. In *(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World*.
- Riley, J. (Host). (2021c). Ep. 3 Distance featuring Dr. Barbara Turnage [Audio podcast episode]. In *(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World*.
- Riley, J. (Host). (2021d). Ep. 4 Technology featuring Dr. Eric Detweiler [Audio podcast episode]. In *(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World*.
- Riley, J. (Host). (2021e). Ep. 6 Reality & Lenses featuring Duncan Gasson-Gardner [Audio podcast episode]. In *(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World*.
- Riley, J. (Host). (2021f). Ep. 7 Believing is Seeing featuring Fr. John Oliver [Audio podcast episode]. In *(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World*.

- Riley, J. (Host). (2021g). Ep. 8 Testimonial: Hanan [Audio podcast episode]. In *(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World*.
- Riley, J. (Host). (2021h). Ep. 9 Testimonial: Steven [Audio podcast episode]. In *(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World*.
- Riley, J. (Host). (2021i). Ep. 11 Testimonial: Professor Libby Hinson [Audio podcast episode]. In *(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in the Modern World*.
- Schjoedt, U., Stødkilde-Jørgensen, H., Geertz, A. W., & Roepstorff, A. (2009). Highly religious participants recruit areas of social cognition in personal prayer. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 4(2), 199–207.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsn050>
- Spickard, J. V., Landres, S., & Maguire, M. B. (2002). *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Appendix A

Middle Tennessee State University IRB Exemption Letter

IRB
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



IRBN014 – NON-RESEARCH DESIGNATION NOTICE

Thursday, April 29, 2021

Contact Person	Jessikah Riley (Student)
Faculty Advisor	Rebekkah King
Co-Investigators	NONE
Investigator Email(s)	<i>jdr8p@mtmail.mtsu.edu; rebekkah.king@mtsu.edu</i>
Department	Religious Studies
Proposal Title	<i>(dis)Connected: A Series of Interviews on Society and Spirituality in Modern World</i>
NEW IRB ID	21-0169 NR
OLD IRB ID	NONE

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). Based on the information provided to the IRB, this study either does not involve the data collection from living human subjects, or your proposed data collection is not done using a systematic approach to derive generalizable knowledge, or both. The proposed study does not fit the definition of human subjects' research as stated by OHRP (45 CFR 46.102). Since the protocol only involves reflection on religious experience generally qualifying under "oral history" with limited systematic data involvement (45 CFR 46.102d - Research definition), it is therefore EXCLUDED from IRB review and oversight.

Although this study is excluded from the IRB's oversight, we encourage you to adopt best practices in your research, which includes: informed consent; autonomy to participate or decline or to withdraw without retribution; and the right to remain anonymous, for all those who interact with you during this study.

We appreciate your time and we wish you very best with your research.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University